



Fairness: In Accordance with the Rules and Standards

Rev. Sharon Dittmar

First Unitarian Church of Cincinnati

536 Linton Street

Cincinnati, Ohio 45219

513.281.1564

June 5, 2016

FAIRNESS IS THE FINAL RESULT OF YEARS OF EFFECTIVE EFFORT
COMBINED WITH THE EXPERIENCE OF DIVERSITY

This was the quote I found at a recent cultural competency training I attended with other members of First Unitarian Church of Cincinnati.

FAIRNESS IS THE FINAL RESULT OF YEARS OF EFFECTIVE EFFORT
COMBINED WITH THE EXPERIENCE OF DIVERSITY

We were instructed to count the number of letter "Fs" in this sentence, but like a good minister I was far away chewing on the content.

Is fairness the final result of years of effective effort combined with the experience of diversity?

While other people were standing in place by a sign that marked the number of possible "Fs" in this sentence, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 A colleague and I stood and debated the merits of fairness. Does it happen? With diversity? With effort?

I counted 6 "Fs" in that sentence, and that was incorrect. The sentence itself is a fascinating study of how different people see/perceive/read differently. To this day, if shown the same sentence, I undercount the number of "Fs," which is in and of itself an interesting reflection of how different people see and observe differently

But, more importantly for me, I thought the sentence as a whole, was not true. I said as much to my colleague who looked interested. He said "I want to hear that sermon." So this sermon, is for my colleague Seth, and my ongoing existential query about fairness.

True, this sermon has nothing to do with the topic of "Revelry!" Our theme for the month

of June, but it burned in my soul as a question to hold, explore, and wrestle with here with you.

I think the average middle class or upward American would believe "Fairness is the final result of years of effective effort combined with the experience of diversity." I know that I probably did 10 years ago, and I definitely did 30 years ago. I wanted to believe that life was good and fair, possibly even benevolent, with maybe even like a "God" bestowing order. My "core values" as recently as 5 years ago were compassion, curiosity, and fairness.

My breakdown began slowly. First I had to leave the comfort of my middle class, white world. When I was thirteen I drove through downtown Chicago and saw a man sleeping on a park bench under newspapers that served as his blanket. Yes, I had seen people who were probably "poor" before, but this vision resonated with me. What did it take to call a park bench your bed and newspapers your blankets? I remember exclaiming as we drove by. My parents told me to stop pointing.

The world in which I was raised, Boardman, Ohio, was in retrospect, shockingly homogenous. I only saw "people of color" in the city of Youngstown and they were like foreigners in a foreign land to me. I would see them when I went to ballet lessons, and sometimes at the city YMCA. But my only relationships were with people who were white, my family, friends, and neighbors. For me, diversity was my friendship with my next door neighbor, Ann, a Catholic. Both my mother and my grandmother were discouraged from dating Catholics, so this was diversity in my world. In junior high my best friend, Myra, was Jewish and that was a totally different world too.

In my ballet class my sister and I befriended an African American girl who was, in many ways, very similar to me. I remember the day I asked this girl about her ethnicity, from where did her family come? My older sister was appalled. But I insisted, her family came from somewhere. In my naïveté I had no idea of the power and pain in this question.

I did not meet or see anyone Hispanic or South East Asian, or African until I moved to Chicago. In a suburb outside of Chicago, I started to meet the world. My father dubbed my new friends "the international club." I know that I still saw the world in terms of good and bad, right and wrong. There was no grey. In fact, so little grey, that I have no memory of my good friend Mohan asking me to prom, and of me saying, "No," and then asking another boy, Caucasian, to prom. In retrospect I know that racism was involved in my decision. There is nothing fair about racism. And while I worked hard at being good, right, and even fair, I had no notion of my own limitations. I officially apologized to Mohan last year.

Which leads me to my first revelation, the challenge fairness is revealed when we walk into and remain in the grey, turn the world we know upside down and ask questions about standard notions of good and bad, right and wrong.

Everything is fair right up until the point when it is not fair and that point is different for every person, sort of like the number of "Fs" in that sentence.

In college I still believed in fairness, though I was sorely pained by learning about human rights abuses. I still thought they were clear aberrations. Torture is unfair.

Then came seminary and I took a class on theodicy, "belief in God in the face of suffering and evil." Well, if somewhere I had previously believed that some benevolence existed in the universe, this course was the end of that assumption. Bad, hurtful and random things happen, routinely, unevenly. God was not in charge. There is no referee on the playing field of life.

As your minister I became active in justice work, something else that occupied my time in seminary. "Justice" work exists because there is injustice. Now, not everyone agrees on what is unjust, correct? Some people think marriage is just between a man and a woman. Some people think that our criminal justice system is great because it locks away dangerous people. Some people still believe we should just say no to drugs and that abstinence is the key to preventing teen pregnancy. I note that this is very right or wrong, black or white thinking. No grey. So I became dismayed with the people who did not agree with me. What was wrong with them? This world should be fair!!

Everything is fair right up until the point when it is not fair and that point is different for every person.

Fast forward to meeting my husband Earl who says things like "The reason Justice is blindfolded is not because she is impartial but because she doesn't care," and "Government is organized crime, legalized." Never in my life had I met someone who distrusted the police and government as much as my husband. And then I started to see the world through his eyes, and eyes of his friend and family.

There is the family member who relies on Medicaid, and at times, welfare, to survive and would not think of voting for a Democrat. There is the friend who murdered someone, and years later, was himself brutally murdered. There is the cousin who was abused in foster care. There is the uncle who died in his chair before age 50. The great grandfather who grew weed in his back yard.

Fair? It's really not even applicable. Nothing is fair and everything is fair at the same time. These people are like a study of the social epidemic of generational poverty in America - lack of physical and mental health care, teen pregnancy, high school dropout, etc. There is something known as "criminogenic markers," that is signs of potential criminal activity. It includes things like growing up in poverty, substance abuse, spending time with people engaged in criminal activity, etc. So which came first the chicken or the egg? Did great grandpa grow weed because of where he was raised, or was it just in his nature? Did the friend murder someone because of where and how he was raised or was it in his nature? I don't know.

In a black and white world, someone would give you a definitive answer. Clearly, the person who committed murder was morally unsound. But having grown closer to this world, sat at the table and listened to the stories, I can tell you the man who committed murder and then was murdered, loved his children, had dreams for the future, was profoundly talented, and wanted to protect his family.

What's fair? What is the rule and standard here? Someone might tell you that if you murder

someone, you deserve to be murdered. You know, an eye for an eye. Someone probably did the happy dance upon learning that this man was murdered, because he had murdered their loved one. But you know what is really staggering, the friend who committed murder and was murdered, his family was devastated by his murder, emotionally and financially. Those children he loved grew up in relentless poverty exposed to more criminogenic factors.

Fair, fair? There is no fair. There has been effort, there has been some diversity. There is no fair.

In a random, unscientific survey I have been conducting in the last few months, my observation is that the more money and social power people have, the more they think life is fair. The more they do not have money or social power, the less they think life is fair. Take for example, the man I met in line at the court house. He was a war veteran with PTSD filing for custody of his children. I asked him if he thought life was fair. He gave me the "are you on crack" look. "No," he said, "life is not fair."

But perhaps the most interesting conversation on fairness I had was with Rabbi Barr. I asked him if he thought life was fair and he informed me that I was looking at it all wrong. I am paraphrasing here, but he said something to me along the lines of "Fair assumes someone is in charge or control, watching out. Life just is. It just is. There is no fair. There is life. It is what it is."

I desperately want life to be fair, so that people who suffer can be saved, so that wrongs can be righted, Justice can triumph. And yes, so things can improve. One hundred years ago I couldn't vote. Two hundred years ago in another country I couldn't own property. So yes, things can improve, over time.

But without a referee, on a day to day or lifetime basis, things can go horribly awry for a person, family, community, country, or generation. There are vast swaths of injustice going nowhere. As long as I have served as your minister, the State of Ohio has had an unconstitutional funding system for public education because it relies on property taxes, and poor areas have less money from property taxes and therefore less money to educate students. The Ohio Supreme Court ruled that this system is unconstitutional before I ever became your minister, in violation of our core American principles, and yet, it is the law of the state, rolling onward after twenty years.

I am not sure Americans want "Fairness." It would really disrupt our current capitalist structure. It would disrupt racism and classism, heterosexist, religious and ethnic intolerance, sexism, ageism, but then again, whose standard for fair is really fair? I have stopped believing that I have THE solutions for fairness.

Ironically, Justice work has taught me to live in the grey areas. I have worked next to the kindest person who formerly committed murder; I have watched a formerly incarcerated person with addiction issues lead innovative city programming. I have sat with a wonderful police officer who used to hate the police because they were not good to him as a child. One of my best collegial friends used to be the poster child for Article XII, which upheld discrimination against GLBTQ citizens who worked for the City of Cincinnati.

It is very grey out there. There is no referee.

So if I don't believe in fairness. People can make the world more fair over time, but there is not fairness today, and I don't believe that the world will ever be fair for everyone. Random, uncontrollable, and awful things happen. I have stopped believing I fully know how to "solve" the problems of this world, or that I can. My core values are now compassion and curiosity.

Here is what I do believe in, relationships. Long term relationships, asking open and honest questions, meeting people, especially ones unlike myself, and listening very closely. The world keeps revealing itself to me in unexpected ways. The world is and was. I see, know, and understand only in part. And I am convinced that positive change only happens when we truly listen to our neighbors, particularly the ones we don't understand, don't like, or think are not like us. In this way we can be "Fair," not as in Justice, but as "earth made fair and all her people one." We can be beautiful when we listen and care and this motivates us to create a space for all. This my friends, is as good as it gets.

For some of you this might not be enough, so here is some hope in a quote by Sydney Lovett -

“Every now and again take a good look at something not made with hands - a mountain, a star, the turn of a stream. There will come to you wisdom and patience and solace and, above all, the assurance that you are not alone in the world.”