

“We Are the 99 Percent!”

Why Egalitarian Societies Fail, and Why This Time Might be Different

By

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There’s an old joke that if given the choice between going to Heaven and attending a lecture about Heaven, Unitarian Universalists are more likely to choose the lecture on Heaven. I think I’m one of those. Sometimes, when I’m enraptured by beauty, for example, especially the beauty in nature, I start pondering the meaning and experience of beauty itself. Why do some scenes strike me as beautiful, while others seem grotesque or ugly? What is beauty? What is ugly? Is our sense of beauty learned? It is a cultural response? Is beauty really in the eye of the beholder, or do most people share the same innate sense of beauty?

I’ve come to believe, in my musings, that human beings do have an innate aesthetic sense; that we are naturally moved by the experience of beauty. And though beauty may be a unique experience for each of us, the nature of beauty is universal. Beauty, in my opinion, is what justice looks like. Beauty is the sensation of justice. It’s what justice feels like.

To understand what I mean by this, it’s necessary to first understand what I mean by justice. Justice, for me, is synonymous with words like, harmony, peace, balance, homeostasis, equilibrium, equality, sustainability, and fairness. This is why Lady Justice carries a pair of scales in her hands. Justice has something to do with balance and equality. It is the just distribution of wealth in economic matters. It is sustainability in environmental matters, and equality in regards to ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. Justice is the state of homeostasis science tells us all things seek. It is peace in interpersonal and international relations. It is harmony in music, and moderation in our everyday lives. And, in art and nature, we call justice, beauty. Even the beauty of asymmetrical art is measured by the concordant relationship of its dissimilar parts. Somehow, as different as its parts might be, it works as a whole, just as the different instruments in an orchestra blend together to make one harmonious sound.

So when I drive through the glorious mountains of Montana and find myself astonished by their beauty, what I’m really experiencing is justice, what it looks like when everything before me—the sky, the sun, the rain, the mountains, animals, trees, and even the hidden microorganisms and molecules—are harmoniously working together. Should I drive into Butte, however, and see the toxic lake at the bottom of its barren copper mine, I have a different sense, just as I do when I cross the decapitated hills in Kentucky’s coal country. These sights are not so pleasant to behold because the balanced, sustainable forces of nature are no longer at work. They are an affront to our senses.

So the experience of beauty is to experience justice on some level. To paraphrase Keat’s, “Beauty is *justice*, *justice* beauty—that is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.” This is a rather lengthy way of getting at the point I really want to make, that I believe most people, if not all people, have an innate sense of justice—that we are, by nature, a just species, because, like all organisms, we strive to find that state of rest, of contentment, peace, balance, evenness that is also called *justice*. But if this is so, why is there so much injustice in the world? Hasn’t history proven the opposite, that most people are basically unjust?

This might be so, but I would counter that most injustice is carried out in the name of justice. The problem is not so much that people don’t want justice, but that we don’t understand justice. Too many of us strive for justice, strive to satisfy our innate desire for it, without having first attended the lecture on justice. For, as a moral term, justice comes to mean different things at different stages of life, and the innate longing for justice in each of us must be encouraged to evolve as we mature. If not, if we should maintain the experience of justice we had as a toddler, when justice means having everything I want right now, or at an elementary age when it means something like “an eye for an eye,” then we shall never experience justice as the beauty, worth, and dignity of every person that it ought to grow into.

In his book, *The Evolving Self*, for example, Robert Kegan includes a cartoon of a young boy going back and forth in his head about visiting a friend. “I can’t go to Jimmy’s house because it’s Jimmy’s turn to come to my house,” he says, “because I went to Jimmy’s house last time. But I like to go to Jimmy’s house, and Jimmy doesn’t like to come to my house. But if he won’t come to my house, I can’t go to his house. Because fair’s fair! So I won’t ever see Jimmy again. Boy is seven hard!”¹

Notice this little fellow has an innate sense that justice, at least rudimentarily, has something to do with balance and equality. “Fair’s fair,” he says, implying that it is only right that friends take an equal number of turns visiting each other’s homes. His primitive notion of justice, however, tit for tat, and eye for an eye, if carried to its logical conclusion, will actually destroy his relationship. So we can see from this little anecdote that just intentions don’t always lead to just outcomes.

The problem isn’t that the boy doesn’t want justice, but that his notion of justice isn’t fully formed yet. It’s too small. The notion that the scales of justice are balanced by taking an eye for eye, or a tooth for a tooth, or a visit for a visit, is immature. Jesus understood this when he said, “You have heard it said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if someone strikes you on one cheek, turn the other also.”² Gandhi understood it when he said, “An eye for an eye only makes the whole world blind.”

¹ Kegan, Robert, *The Evolving Self*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MS, 1982, p. 49.

² Matthew 5:38-39

Another of Kegan's anecdotes includes the story of *The New Kid*, written by Murray Hayert in a 1944 edition of *Harper's Magazine*. The story centers around a boy named Marty who happens to be a rotten baseball player. As a result, he's picked on and ridiculed by all the other boys. Then one day a new kid shows up in the neighborhood who's an even worse player than Marty. The irony of the story is that Marty ends up humiliating the new kid worse than anybody. This seems strange from our adult perspective, but from the point of view of most children Marty's age, the outcome seems just. Kegan actually asked a class of 12-year-olds what they thought of the story and their response was something like this:

The story is saying that people may be mean to you and push you down and make you feel crummy and stuff, but it's saying things aren't really that bad because eventually you'll get your chance to push someone else down and then you'll be on top.³

Kegan was surprised by this response, and so pressed further, "Do you really think it was okay the way Marty acted?"

It was more than okay [they responded]; it was the right thing to do.
It was the only thing to do.

Look, we were sixth graders last year, right? —the oldest in the school. We pushed little kids around. Now we're the little kids and we're getting pushed around. Wait till we're seniors! Fair is fair!⁴

My personal feeling is that this is precisely the immature notion of justice that pushed the U.S. into the war with Iraq after the tragedy of 9-11. Even though Saddam Hussein and his country had nothing to do with the terrorist attacks, there was a mentality among millions of people that somebody, anybody, had to pay for what happened. Fair is fair! So long as this remains our limited understanding of what justice means, fair is fair, we'll continue to end up, as we have largely throughout history, with just intentions and unjust results.

Nevertheless, there have also been numerous attempts throughout human history to create societies based upon a truly egalitarian notion of justice. A notion that understands justice does not mean *do unto others as has been done unto you*, but, *do unto others as you would have done unto you*. It understands that justice is not something we bring people to, but something we bring to people. In modern times figures like Gandhi and Martin Luther King were moderately successful in promoting such notions of justice, though, unfortunately, their good work did not prevent us from eventually defaulting to the less evolved idea of an-eye-for-an-eye-fair-is-fair kind of justice. Today we admire them more often than we emulate them.

³ Kegan, *ibid.*, p. 47.

⁴ *Ibid.*

But, during times of extreme inequity, when an elite few take so much that there’s nothing left for anyone else, nothing left to lose, then new demands for true egalitarian justice erupt. We have seen this most recently in the Middle East where the peoples of Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Bahrain, Iraq, Algeria, Morocco, Jordan, and Oman, are demanding an end to systems that benefit only an elite few. Their desires are the same as the now millions of people involved in this nation’s Occupy Wall Street movement, summarized by the slogan, “We are the 99%!” This statement epitomizes an economic imbalance that gives the richest 1% in the world 40% of its wealth, the top 10%, 85 percent of its wealth, and the bottom 50%, less than 1 percent of global wealth.

But such movements, again, aren’t new, and have been sporadically happening for thousands of years. They may achieve some short term success, by toppling a dictator, or establishing Civil Rights laws, but, eventually society reverts to its old ways, an elite few rise to power again, and other groups emerge who must struggle for equal rights. So what’s happening? If, as I propose, we are an essentially just species, if we really want balance and beauty in the world, why can’t we establish just societies that last?

Before responding to these questions, it might be helpful to briefly outline what has historically been the power structure in agrarian societies like our own. “In essence, advanced agrarian societies were two-tiered,” explains theologian William R. Herzog, “

The top tier was occupied by the ruler, the ruling class, retainers, and a few merchants. The bottom tier was occupied by peasants, artisans, merchants, the unclean and the degraded, and, at the very bottom, the lowest of the lows, the expendables...⁵

The “expendables” can be likened to the “untouchables” in Hindu society, and, perhaps, to the homeless, or jobless, or incarcerated, in our own. “Typical ranges for each group are as follows,” he goes on to say, “ruling class, 1 to 2 percent of the population; retainers, 5 to 7 percent; merchants, 5 percent; artisans, 3 to 7 percent; peasants, 70 to 80 percent; unclean and degraded, 5 percent; expendables, 5 to 15 percent.”⁶ Those at the top tier of agrarian society usually control somewhere between 50 and 70 percent of the wealth.

This was the case 2000 years ago when Jesus began advocating on behalf of the poor, the outcasts, and women in his society. Later on, his successor, Paul, began preaching, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”⁷ And so the 1st century Christians set up a

⁵ Herzog, William R., *Parables as Subversive Speech*, (Westminster/John Knox Pres, Louisville, KY, 1994) p. 59.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Galatians 3:28

communitarian society in which, according to *Acts*, “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all as any had need.”⁸ In fact, the early Christians took Paul so literally, that some of the men and women began cross-dressing during church services. We know this is true because the controversy it caused is addressed in *I Corinthians*, “Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head.”⁹

These words are believed to have been falsely ascribed to Paul, who more authentically said, “All things are lawful for you.”¹⁰ Paul wouldn’t have minded the cross-dressing because, like Jesus, he taught there is no difference between the genders. But the point that is not to be missed here is that shortly after the death of Jesus, and less than 30 years after Paul tried to structure an egalitarian community without ethnic, economic, or gender barriers, the movement defaulted to the familiar hierarchical structure typical of agrarian societies. His authentic writings were usurped by letters falsely ascribed to him, countering his actual teachings, with elitist statements like, “Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church,”¹¹ or, “Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting to the Lord... Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord... Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything...”¹² As Erich Fromm so succinctly explained, “Christianity did not change essentially, as long, that is, as it was made up of poor, oppressed, uneducated people feeling common suffering, common hatred, and common hope.”¹³ But once it became popularized as the official religion of the ruling elite, “Christianity, which had been the religion of a community of equal brothers, without hierarchy or bureaucracy, became ‘the Church,’ the reflected image of the absolute monarchy of the Roman Empire.”¹⁴

So here we are once again, finding ourselves at a pivotal place in history wherein millions around the globe are demanding their fair share. The cry, “We are the 99%” is a cry for justice, for true justice, for the just distribution of wealth and for a sustainable economy. But what can we do to help assure this time might be different? How, after the best among us have tried and failed, can we once and for all establish lasting equality and justice? How can we be sure that even if the demands of the 99% are met for a while, that in a few years or decades we won’t find ourselves right back we started?

⁸ Acts 2:44-45

⁹ I Corinthians 11:5

¹⁰ I Corinthians 10:23

¹¹ Ephesians 5:22-23

¹² Colossians 3:18-22

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

I will submit that such a hope might be well founded, at last, in a unique reality of our modern era—globalization! Not only does this term refer to the world economy, but to our increasing awareness of one another. In this age of almost instant mass communication, there can never be another “iron curtain” that we cannot peer through. The world just got smaller, and our neighborhood has expanded to include the peoples of every nation on Earth. Thus, it is increasingly difficult to deny our connection to others, or that what we do has a global impact. In an age of globalization it is no longer so easy to dismiss the humanity in the faces of our neighbors, and our neighbors are everywhere and everyone. And genuinely seeing the humanity in others necessarily moves us to compassion. It could be argued that justice itself requires a global mindset before it can truly be achieved.

One of our Unitarian Universalist principles, one we don’t mention too often, perhaps, because it has seemed so much like a pipe dream, now seems to be coming true: “The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.” We may still have to work on the peace, liberty and justice part, but it seems fair to say the “world community” part is more true today than ever before, and when we can no longer deny our interdependence, peace, liberty, and justice must follow. Today we can easily and instantly connect with our neighbors across the globe through digital communications and mushrooming social networks. The traditional boundaries and borders that have kept us separated, or, at least, enabled our false sense of separateness, are coming down faster than the Berlin wall did in 1989.

Dr. King once dreamed that, “Every nation must now develop an overriding loyalty to [humankind] as a whole in order to preserve the best in their individual societies. This call for a world-wide fellowship that lifts neighborly concerns beyond one’s tribe, race, class and nation is in reality a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all [people]... I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life.”¹⁵ This is not unlike what the great Universalist preacher, Olympia Brown was getting at when she said, “Every nation must learn that the people of all nations are children of God, and must share the wealth of the world.”¹⁶ Today their shared vision may be on the verge of finally coming true.

Today the harsh realities of living on a small, overpopulated, misused planet can no longer be denied, and we’re all being forced to admit what the mystics have been saying to us for centuries—we are One. We are so aware of this, in fact, that today, for the first time in history, it is possible for local demonstrations, like the Occupy Wall Street movement, to not only spread across the nation, but like wildfire across the world, in places like London, Australia, Spain, Indonesia, and South Korea. But our concern cannot settle for but 99%, lofty a goal as this seems. Justice is holistic, and that means it cannot be fully achieved until it is achieved for everyone.

¹⁵ King, Martin Luther, Jr., *A Testament of Hope*, Harper, San Francisco, 1986, p. 242.

¹⁶ “Words and Deeds of Prophetic Women and Men” (Living Traditions we Share, Part 2) Rev. L. Mills, Jr. Presented before the UUTC Congregation, October 16, 2005.

"We Are the 99%!"

We cannot be sure our just intentions will result in just outcomes, until this happens, until justice matures in our own hearts. Fair is not fair if it is not extended to all people and all beings. And today, as our communication technologies allow us to so easily connect with others near and far, we are rapidly moving toward the age of post-nationalism that figures like Martin Luther King and Olympia Brown have envisioned. We are moving toward the reality of one world with peace, justice, and liberty for the 100 percent that Unitarian Universalists long for. We are moving toward a world that is just and beautiful for everyone.