

Justice, Equity and Compassion

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I had to chuckle when I was thinking about what to say about the second principle. It strikes me that it's so Unitarian to start off with the big words and then get simpler and more direct. JUSTICE! Equity! Compassion...

Who really knows what justice means even though we talk about it so often. Then comes *equity* which we might mix up with equality, but it simply means fairness, and that's easier. And then we get to compassion: the only one that refers to a feeling, meaning it's more immediate. I think that we wrote this backwards. It should read, "Compassion, equity, and justice in human relations." Because that's how we move from this principle about the individual person (compassion), to how we want to behave in our relations with others (equity) even on a social scale (justice).

When we begin to live on the basis of our *first* principle, the inherent worth and dignity of every person, then – at least when we have the time – we begin to develop a sense of connectedness, of fellow feeling, of empathy and even sympathy with each person we come across. We begin to look past the obvious differences, and even to imagine how we would be in the other person's position. By doing this we are drawn into living according to the *second* principle, if we think of it as beginning in compassion.

The way we want to be in our relations with other people begins with the impulse to feel compassion, to recognize others as more like ourselves than different; this impulse becomes infused with our gratitude for all that we have and that we desire for others. Then it overflows; we begin to feel compassion for many others and to feel strongly about the welfare of the group, bringing us to the ideal of equity. And when we look beyond the group to the masses, the values of compassion and equity expand into the even higher level of justice. As The Rev. Dr. William Schulz puts it: "Spirituality is the inspiration for all politics that redeems. For once I have looked on the abundance of creation, I cannot rest while others, caught up in its flaws, are deprived of the view."¹

I try to imagine the second principle through the eyes of children, hoping that by doing so I can understand it at the simplest level. Human development studies now show us that as infants we are born with the innate capacity for compassion, in the sense that we naturally respond to the expressions of other people by imitating them. And we also

¹ Gilbert, Richard S. "Justice, Equity and Compassion in Human Relations," in *With Purpose and Principle: Essays about the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism*. Edward A. Frost, ed. Skinner House: Boston, 1998. p34.

know that facial expressions connect directly to how people feel so that, just by adopting the expression on someone else's face, we actually start to feel how they feel. As a social species, evolved to cooperate in groups, it's not surprising that we have these innate behaviours to connect with others, to feel as they feel, even to understand them. Although for a number of years we as children are also instinctively selfish in our own drive to survive, I imagine that even as young children, when we feel secure that our own needs will be met, and the atmosphere around us isn't frightening for any reason, our first response to another child who is suffering is to feel with him or her, sometimes even acting to comfort or soothe the other. While reading for this talk, I almost went down a rabbit hole googling images of infants and toddlers showing compassion... Click: Awwwww! Click: Awwwww! Click: Awwwww! Do try this at home, boys and girls!

By the age of seven, it's clear that we start learning to be fair and to know what fairness is. At this age we become very invested in games with rules to be followed. Negotiating and defining these rules becomes part of the game itself. While serving North Shore Unitarians in West Vancouver, the Director of Religious Education lets our children develop the tradition of playing flashlight tag as one of their first activities during the various class sleepovers in the church itself. Every time, the first thing they do is to define who will be It; what role if any is there for those who are found; how long the count is – and then Lynn also sets the parameters for where is off-limits – such as the pulpit. If she hadn't, in trying to hide, I might have gotten myself stuck under *that* instead of under the coat rack; speaking of compassion, a few of the kids helped me get out! Even in the middle of the game! Remember Fantasia with the hippos wearing tiny tutus? That's me hiding under a coat rack.

When I think back to my eight-year-old play with other kids, I remember how often one of us is shouting, "No fair! No fair!" This might be because someone is actually cheating, but sometimes it's about something vaguer than that, even something unintentional that just doesn't seem, well, fair. At this age, we also start learning how to share fairly, the "I cut, you choose" rule for instance. We begin understanding that sharing is a good thing: not just for me, but for you and others, too. Compassion has grown to include this sense of fairness and impartiality which is a sense of what equity is.

I have a harder time figuring out what a child's understanding of justice might be. First, I bet we learn it more easily in its absence, and that likely begins when we start to recognize unfairness at a larger level than our own lives. This probably happens at a wider variety of ages, depending on what we are exposed to, and on how adults around us think and feel, but also no doubt simply on circumstances. Maybe there's one student in a classroom that is too frequently criticized, and we start to see power being

unfair. Maybe this is a first hint about what justice is. Disadvantaged children learn about injustice a lot faster than privileged ones, if those learn about it at all.

For me, it begins around the age of ten or so when I first hear about the Holocaust and the Civil Rights movement in the American South. My family is good friends with quite a few Jewish people and know some others who are African Canadian, but I know this isn't about *them* exactly; it's a much bigger thing and therefore unbelievable and outrageous even in a ten-year-old way.

Eventually though for all of us, the playing fields get bigger and bigger. Competition overtakes compassion and becomes serious enough that the skilled and the less-skilled aren't treated equitably anymore. The rules are set by others without negotiation; vested interests start to have more say than regular people. Insecurity about resources leads some to grab and keep more than their fair share. The insecurity can be buried so deeply that greed and acquisitiveness become habits and only the powerful can set the rules about what's fair.

Somewhere along this route towards societal complexity, not only fairness but justice too is lost. What that means is truth and reason, too, start to be ignored. Certain facts are overlooked, distorted or compartmentalized; reasoning becomes rationalization. What's more, not everyone is aware of the values we hold fundamentally so we can think we're arguing about facts when we really are expressing different values, ones that, if we could make them explicit, we could understand if not agree upon. It all can go so very wrong.

The last time I spoke here I observed that justice, as we seek it in our legal systems, is often a very narrow arrow aiming to identify a single point, sometimes a number of single points. Our justice system doesn't bring about justice; it exercises ideas of right and wrong, reward and punishment. So many powers, influences and factors vibrate around those narrow arrows, but can only rarely have any effect on outcomes. In Canada, now, we are striving to make some corrections to this, such as moves towards using restorative justice approaches for both young and Indigenous offenders. Something to be proud of is that the use of this kind of justice is far more advanced in Canada than in most western countries. Still, even being good enough, let alone perfect in this area isn't even near the horizon.

In writing about this second principle, "Justice, equity and compassion in human relations," The Rev. Richard Gilbert observes that "the spiritual life must express itself ethically." (31) He looks back at history to see the very high standard of this concept that the proto-Unitarians in Poland in the 16th century adhered to. This Minor Church of Poland, as opposed to the major church which was and remains Catholic, stressed the

idea of covenant, meaning the behavioural promises made between believers, the “practical applications of religious principles to daily life.” (32) Each person was called to account every three months; each was interviewed personally so that faults and errors could be clearly identified and appropriate confessions and real repentance made. How would that be for a requirement of membership!?

Gilbert goes on to quote another UU minister, Harry Meserve, who asked, “If you were arrested for being Unitarian Universalist, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” (32) The point Gilbert is getting to is that our principles must be seen as calls to action and not as mere concepts or lofty standards to sit back and admire. To be spiritual in the light of this principle includes feeling some pull towards outrage that calls us to transform our compassion into work towards equity and justice. I admit that many of you are far more spiritual in this sense than I. My spiritual pull is, I humbly hope, towards inspiring, educating, maybe triggering others to find their own spiritual pull. I admit this is an easier way for me, not the hard way that many of you are devoted to.

In a bit, we’re going to sing about the kinds of people we are and hope to be in the face of inequity and injustice, and we need to sing about it. Despite the news and the issues, despite the outrage that our spiritual values and principles rightly trigger in us, despite the battles that slope up steeply in front of us – it is crucial that we hold onto the hope and motivation that come from singing of a better world. When we see the challenge so clearly, it is vital that we are reminded that, bit by bit, our compassion can bring about more equity and justice in all human relationships.

Let me reiterate our Opening Words:

“When all the people of the world love,
 Then the strong will not overpower the weak.
 The many will not oppress the few.
 The wealthy will not mock the poor.
 The honoured will not disdain the humble.
 The cunning will not deceive the simple.” (Singing the Living Tradition #601)

May we make it so.

(Besides Richard Gilbert’s essay on the second principle cited above, I was also inspired by Emily Gage’s piece in *The Seven Principles in Word and Worship*, Ellen Brandenburg, Ed. Skinner: Boston, 2007.)