



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Seeing What Blinds Us”

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Centering Thoughts

They do not know, nor do they comprehend; for their eyes are shut, so that they cannot see, and their minds as well, so that they cannot understand. Isaiah 44:18

There are two ways to be fooled. One is to believe what isn't true; the other is to refuse to believe what is true. Søren Kierkegaard

What we see depends mainly on what we look for. John Lubbock

Sermon

I want to begin by reading a poem by Paul Laurence Dunbar, born in 1872 to former slaves, yet he grew up to become a well-respected American author. This is titled, “Justice”:

Enthroned upon the mighty truth,
Within the confines of the laws,
True Justice seeth not the man,
But only hears his cause.

Unconscious of his creed or race,
She cannot see, but only weighs;
For Justice with unbandaged eyes
Would be oppression in disguise.

In this poem Dunbar expresses his understanding of what justice should be once the Civil War had ended. He wrote to remind America that neither race nor creed should be the cause of unequal treatment under the law. Sadly, the hope he expressed has not been realized. Lady Justice, the blindfolded goddess with balanced scale and sword, is often blind to what is just, allowing oppression despite her good intent.

Examples of this truth feature in Michelle Alexander’s book *The New Jim Crow*. She reveals statistics that prove the incarceration rate of black males is significantly greater than that of white males committing similar offenses. Another example is Peggy McIntosh, whose metaphor

of the backpack of privilege that white people carry reveals another inequality that allows oppression to exist. For instance, I, a white person, do not fear being suspected of shoplifting when I go into a store. Nor do I need fear being suspected of being a terrorist, an undocumented alien, or a likely threat to an officer of the law if I'm stopped for a traffic violation. Pointing out the ways I'm privileged removed the blinding band from my eyes. I see what I couldn't see before.

Long before I knew anything of Alexander or McIntosh's work, I believed interest in social justice topics in congregational life was something I didn't need to pay attention to. My interest has always been in worship and religious education, not social justice. In part, it was my power and privilege as a white, middle-class, educated, and employed person that allowed me to think it was almost like a hobby, but not of vital interest to religious communities. How blind I was.

Fortunately, I began to examine my beliefs and our shared values more deeply and I realized how my understanding of what is moral or good is woven into what is just and fair. And if I see in public life that something isn't good, just, or fair, I should act to make it so. As a citizen in a democracy, I believe it is my duty to speak out and make sure that our laws are fair and equal. And if, as our constitution outlines, every one of us should be free to seek happiness, that happiness will not come if Lady Justice is blind to oppression.

But determining what is good, fair or just for our society isn't so easy. It isn't as obvious as knowing enslavement is wrong. Harvard professor and author of *Justice: What's the Right Thing To Do?*, Michael J. Sandel, offers some help with this. He suggests we can determine if a society is just by, quote:

... how it distributes the things we prize – income and wealth, duties and rights, powers and opportunities, offices and honors. A just society distributes these goods in the right way; it gives each person his or her due. The hard questions begin when we ask what people are due, and why (page 19).

Using his criteria, do you think America is just? Do we distribute these prizes the right way? And do we know what people are due?

Personally, I don't believe all Americans have equal opportunity to the few basic things I believe they are due, such as safe, affordable housing, excellent education, equal treatment under the law, or even healthy food and water, as problems in Flint, Michigan, clearly illustrate. I don't believe we are a perfectly just society, though we are more just than many.

Sandel's suggested assessment of a just society appears early in his book. Later, he raises more difficult questions – as if the earlier ones weren't hard enough. He asks: Do we prize the right things? Is there something else we should want?

He believes so. He argues that the common wants or prizes named earlier are too individualistic and show no regard for the common good or society as a whole. He believes we value these things to our detriment. Sandel writes:

If a just society requires a strong sense of community, it must find a way to cultivate in

citizens a concern for the whole, a dedication to the common good. ... It must find a way to lean against purely privatized notions of the good life, and cultivate civic virtue (page 263).

Our 7th UU Principle states we are part of an interdependent web of existence. Accepting this as truth, I aim to cultivate a concern for the common good. I know that when one life is improved, all lives are improved. (When black lives matter, all lives will matter.)

Sandel responds to his cultural criticism by asking us to rethink how we value key social practices, such as military service, child-bearing, teaching and learning, criminal punishment, the admission of new citizens, and more. He claims we're currently "marketizing social practices that may corrupt or degrade the norms that define them" (page 265). In other words, we're allowing a marketplace mentality to intrude into all aspects of our lives. We buy and sell everything and anything.

I believe this consumerist mentality has impacted religious life as well. I think it is evident in the way some choose to donate to their religious community, including this Fellowship. I think some make a payment for what they think they're getting back. To determine an appropriate pledge, for example, some weigh the value of their involvement as if they're paying for a club membership or buying a concert ticket.

When in fact you're not just a consumer here. Your giving helps to realize our pluralistic UU values in the world and helps make the world a better place for us to live in. How do you put a price tag on that? Sure, you get something out of your involvement, but more than that, it's about giving something of greater value to the world. In a culture that monetizes everything from embryos and wombs to prisons for profit, it's no surprise religious communities become monetized, too.

This individualism and lack of concern for the common good Sandel believes contributes to the increasing gap between the rich and poor in the United States. He claims this gap:

...undermines the solidarity that democratic citizenship requires. ... As inequality deepens, rich and poor live increasingly separate lives. The affluent send their children to private schools (or to public schools in wealthy suburbs), leaving urban public schools to the children of families who have no alternative. A similar trend leads to the secession by the privileged from other public institutions and facilities (page 267).

We know many different ways the rich segregate themselves from the poor. Sandel mentioned the rich send their kids to private schools, they also buy houses in rich communities and buy cars that allow their independence from public transportation. As a result, public services deteriorate because those with the money don't use them, don't care about them, and don't support them. What's worse, this division or segregation makes it difficult to cultivate solidarity with each other. Inequality, Sandel argues, is corrosive to civic virtue. Lady Justice remains blind.

To help her see, we must discuss what it means to lead a good life especially with people who come from different backgrounds or hold different views from us. If we don't engage in these important discussions, we'll likely continue to focus on the scandalous, the sensational, and the

trivial. We might as well be blind if that's all we see.

I hope that questions of inequality will be discussed here and elsewhere. I'm glad current presidential candidates are raising these issues, even if their solutions differ. I want America to be a just society – one that is fair for all her people. We've seen how detrimental segregated communities have been in the past. Separate but equal we cannot be.

Let us work together to dismantle the inequality that exists as we work to better understand what is fair, equitable and just for all. Let us ascribe worth to the common good, for it will not be good if equality is not available for all. Let us help each other to remove the blinds from our eyes so that we can see what is hidden from us now.

Let it be so.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Share or reflect on a time you became aware of a personal blindness. How did this revelation change you or your behavior?
2. If justice and fairness are understood differently by different people, what guides your own understanding of what is just, right, or fair? How do the UU Seven Principles aid your thinking?
3. Have you tried to improve or change an unjust situation? How did that work out or affect you?