

A PATHWAYS PERSPECTIVE COMMENTARY: WHAT IS “SOCIAL JUSTICE”?

WHAT IS “JUSTICE?”

When we hear the word ‘justice’ different ideas may come to mind. Most commonly perhaps, one may think of *compensatory justice*, where the blind scale of justice metes out what’s determined to be “fair” between two parties, ideally without prejudice. This can include the offending party and “victim”. Often these days, the arguments over this kind of justice have to do with personal injury, the debate over frivolous lawsuits and the call for tort reform.

Then there’s *retributive justice*, a form of compulsory penance, where the offender is required to repay their “debt” to society. This is what is commonly called the criminal justice system, and it’s hard to channel surf your TV without running into episodes of *Law & Order* or reality shows about cops on the beat or prison life behind bars, presented as entertainment.

Both of these kinds of justice are extensions of regulatory justice, the manner in which our civil society establishes and maintains order. There’s even a Department of Justice, to oversee and defend the law of the land; while courts are clogged with a backlog of cases, and the supply of over-crowded prisons can’t keep up with the demand.

Social justice, however, has to do with *something more* than rules and regulations, compensation or retribution.

SOCIAL JUSTICE IS ALWAYS *MORE*

Social justice is always about something more. It tempers, even compromises, the hard edges of what is otherwise black or white, right or wrong, guilt or innocence; with consideration given to what may be “right,” when what may be right may be more than simply what is “fair.”

It is about *distributive* and *restorative justice*, where the *common good* is advanced; with a kind of redemptive redress that seeks balance where there is imbalance in the social order. There is a moral imperative; as well as an indefensible component, often simply defined as a sense of *compassion*. It is that empathic response that stirs a *social conscience* that compels the work of social justice.

Social justice always has this *more* element. And the task for those who would undertake to raise a call for *social* justice is not to simply prosecute or defend one side or another; but rather to discern and present the “back-story” behind the headlines.

Here are some current examples:

Example 1: Health Care

The Story

On the surface, the story is about the reform of a health care *industry*, spiraling health care costs and insurance premiums, the debate over government-mandated coverage, bureaucratic waste, and arguments over a “public option.” Almost muffled by the din of these debates remains the whole quandary over medical ethics, modern-miracle technology surpassing affordability and sustainability, and a kind of unmentionable triage process.

The Back-Story

The back-story goes deeper, asking what place there should be for a compassionate response to health care as a basic human need. How are the dynamics of the debate shaped when health care is primarily seen to be “managed” as a regulated “industry?”

When is reckless generosity ever appropriate (e.g. a Good Samaritan delivers health care, Luke 10:25-37)? What is the onus of “socialization” all about?

More so, when and how is the relationship between health and wholeness ultimately understood as something more than curative treatment at unaffordable costs and unattainable means (hence, palliative care)?

Ultimately, health care is about life care. It deals with the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual aspects of living and dying. *Social* justice as a back-story to the health care debates asks how can we have a conversation about these fundamental human necessities.

Example 2: The Economy

The Story

The story is all about the projected slow pace of a recovery, the threat of a double-dip recession, deficit spending, stimulus strategies and resistance to increased revenue (taxes).

It's about "class warfare" and the widening chasm between the elite and powerful and the disenfranchised and marginalized poor, the vanishing middle class, disconnect between Wall Street and Main Street.

It's about the threat of fiscally-bankrupt government entitlement programs, volatility in global markets, too-big-to-fail bailouts, perceived corporate greed, trade deficits, and partisan politics over statesmanship.

The Back Story

The back story has to do with a "recovery" that will not return to anything like what came before. And, it has to do with the tension of certain conflicting human values.

On an individual level, it has to do with generosity and greed, fear and hoarding or abundance.

On a communal level it has to do with the social "compact," the role of corporate social responsibility in free-market models, and its relationship to the corporate bottom line.

Social justice seeks balance in a restorative and distributive economic model that is sustainable, reciprocal and mutually beneficial social entrepreneurship.

Example 3: The Unemployment

The unemployment story has to do with a jobless recovery, the growing ranks of chronic unemployed and under-employed, the reluctance of the employers to hire, the courtship of business by government with incentive, the threat of cheap foreign labor and "unfair" competition.

But the back-story has to do with the subtler long-term ramifications of decline and decay in communities, neighborhoods and households. The long term effects of the unemployment "epidemic" can have far-reaching consequences. Self-identity, self-esteem, self-worth, meaning and purpose are closely tied what one does for a "living." The common characteristics of traumatic stress syndrome can be found at job fairs and along the unemployment lines.

British epidemiologist and the co-author of "The Spirit Level," Richard Wilkinson chronicles a strong correlation between wealth inequality and poor health society-wide. When does such a prevalent social malaise become a matter of social justice?

Example 4: The Housing Crisis

The housing crisis is a story about record foreclosures, irresponsible lending practices, default credit swaps, etc.

The back-story not only raises the problems of affordable housing and homelessness to a whole new level, with the displacement of entire families; but strikes at the heart of the American dream of home ownership, as well. A roof over ones head represents a sense of adequacy, sufficiency and security. As the ancient prophet envisioned it,

"They shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree; and none shall make them afraid." (Micah 4:4 – English Revised Version)

Home is also both literally and metaphorically a place of return from journey, even exile. When a sense of home is no longer even a matter of shelter, and housing is reduced to a matter of default, foreclosure and eviction process on such a massive scale as today's lingering crisis, there is something more fundamentally out of whack than a poorly regulated lending and credit industry and irresponsible consumers buying more than they can afford.

Social justice can give voice to the back-story.

Example 5: The Economy

The story of immigration reform has to do with illegal aliens, border security and law enforcement. If we can't substantially arrest the flow of illegal drugs into this country, then we should at least ensure the drug war violence does not creep across the border.

But the back-story is much more complex. It is about more than the underground economy of cheap labor, or market we provide for illegal drugs. It is about how we regard, engage and treat the one who is both a stranger *and* our neighbor. In the biblical world, hospitality was a test of one's openness to the possibility of a divine presence; represented by the appearance of the unknown stranger at the door. In the modern world, we build walls and rely on technology to avoid the possibility of such an examination and encounter.

SOCIAL JUSTICE IS ALSO ALWAYS ABOUT *HOPE AND CHANGE ...*

Everything must change
Nothing stays the same ...
The young become the old
And mysteries do unfold
Cause that's the way of time
Nothing and no one goes unchanged

Everything must change, Lyrics by Bernard Ighner

Change is the one constant, and arguably the one thing we most often resist; especially if things seem to be going from good to bad, or from bad to worse. So it is with health care, the economy, and even American “exceptionalism.” The young become the old and frail. Economic bubbles burst. What goes up, must come down. That’s the way the story goes.

But that’s not the whole story. We have a choice. Change has a way of irrepressibly moving us from where we are to somewhere else. When it comes to social change, nations and peoples successively rise and fall, totalitarian regimes eventually tumble. But then what? Just more of the same?

There is in any *progression* (even recession), an evolution of social consciousness that awakens and waits. There is an “arc of the moral universe that is long,” as Martin Luther King put it, “but it bends towards justice.” Oppression and bondage *can* lead to exodus and liberation. There is possibility here.

Moments of opportunity arise with inevitable, predictable regularity. As the poet’s line goes, “In my end is my beginning.” (T.S. Eliot) People of faith sometimes affirm it is how hope and promise of new life can arise out of the dust and ashes of destitution, despair, even death. It is sometimes a matter of putting faith into action.

There is in any progression (even recession), an evolution of social consciousness that awakens and waits. ... There is possibility here. It is sometimes a matter of putting faith into action.

Social justice is that agent that takes us from the way things are to the way things might be. It provides the inertia that helps to *bend* what is inevitable change in a certain direction. That direction is what is sometimes called the common good.

To achieve the common good there must first be common ground. No one is seldom absolutely right or wrong, and the truth that the voice of social justice seeks common ground. But there is an unmistakable agenda and unwavering conviction to the fundamental principles of distributive and restorative justice.

When inevitable change occurs, such an understanding of social justice can not only provide spirited conversation, but a vision of the way things might be.

© 2011 by John William Bennison, Rel.D.

All rights reserved.

This article should only be used or reproduced with proper credit.

To read more Words & Ways commentaries, click on the Archives menu at <http://www.wordsnways.com>