

## **When There Is No One Left To Put Down**

Reading:

Inequality makes loving relationships or mutual cooperation impossible.

The converse may also be true:

Equality makes loving relationships and mutual cooperation possible.

Sermon:

On a fine April Saturday for softball in Ellensburg, Washington, the Western Oregon University women took the field against Washington State. At the top of the second inning, with two runners on base and the game still scoreless, Oregon's Sara Tucholsky stepped to the plate. Tucholsky, a senior, and not known for her batting, drew some heckling. But she powered her second pitch over the center field fence. On her home run trot the overly excited Tucholsky missed first base. She reversed direction to tag the bag, and her right knee gave out. She fell into a heap between first and second.

According NCAA softball rules her teammates could not intervene, except to substitute her with a runner at first, giving her then a single, not a home run. As her team prepared the substitution, the Oregon coach heard a Washington fielder, Mallory Holtman, ask, "Excuse me, would it be OK if we carried her around and she touched each bag?" The umpires were consulted and agreed that the fielding team could do that.

Holtman and shortstop, Liz Wallace, lifted Tucholsky off the ground and began a slow trip around the bases. Holtman recalled, "We all started to laugh at one point, I think when we touched the first base. I don't know what it looked like to observers, but it was kind of funny because Liz and I were carrying her, and we'd get to a base, and Sara would gently, barely tap her left foot, and we'd all of a sudden start to get the giggles a little bit."

Holtman continued, "It's one of those things that I hope anyone would do for me. She hit the ball over her fence. She's a senior; it's her last year... But I think anyone who knew that we could touch her would have offered to do it, just because it's the right thing to do. She was obviously in agony."

Finally reaching home and, accompanied by a standing ovation from the fans, Holtman and Wallace passed the home run hitter into the arms of her teammates, and returned to their positions, where they resumed trying to win the game.

Sports is usually a game of I win, you lose. It represents an example of one way the world is organized, that being the survival of the fittest. Competitors line up in a hierarchy. The most fit wins the gold medal.

The other way the world is organized involves the theme of we're in this together, and we survive by cooperating and collaborating. In this softball game, usually a survival of the fittest competition, they paused from competing and for a few minutes were together supporting each other.

Nature has both. Within any species, individuals compete to determine which is the strongest, most robust, and most qualified to survive and pass along their genes. So two male elk crashing antlers somewhere in the mountains are negotiating who is most fit to win the waiting harem of females and father of the next generation of elk. And offspring compete, the oldest and most robust pup of a litter pushing aside the weaker for access to mother milk. It is tough, but the survival of the fittest offers a benefit: species vitality.

Also in nature, the aggregate of all interdependently related species on earth form a we're-in-this-together world. For example, when wolves were reintroduced into Yellowstone, the elk, which had been congregating by the creeks, retreated to the mountains. Fewer elk browsing on creekside willows allowed those willows to grow and attract beavers who would feed on them. More beavers meant more dams creating a mix of still and flowing water in streams, supporting more fish, amphibians, and birds. In effect, when all the species interact, now including wolves, all species benefit, and nature thrives with its multiplicity of life.

People also have both the survival of the fittest and we're in this together. Regarding the survival of the fittest, human beings were not gifted with fast legs and fangs, so to survive in a tough world our vitality was necessary. So we emphasized competition, making war amongst ourselves, such that during prehistoric times a third of human beings died by violence. We also competed with other species, hunting many of which to extinction. The Americas, for example, used to be home to herds of elephants, camels, and horses, pursued by lions and cheetahs, all going extinct around 11,000 BC, as hunters migrating from Asia found them and found them susceptible to human predation. Even within a family, as with other species, often the most support, and material wealth, goes to the oldest child. And it worked, so that now there are almost 7 billion of us, many of us enjoying long, comfortable lives.

To some extent hierarchies continue. Ideally, in the competition of ideas, the best win; we have capable leaders, and vitality. But the survival of the fittest begins to pinch. The individual has to survive by being fit, without flaw, the alpha, and that's a lot of work. In the hierarchical system, we have a superior, powerful deity, a creator, an alpha god, who decrees some are saved, others suffer. We have a widening disparity of wealth; Caucasians reaping more benefits than African Americans; heterosexuals enjoying more rights than homosexuals; men dominating women; adults dominating children; humanity dominating nature; arguments couched in righteousness; differences addressed with pressure, problems resolved through violence; and winners and loser, the losers to blame for losing. In the end hierarchies impede love and cooperation. Adler says it: "Inequality makes loving relationships or mutual cooperation impossible." Love does not move up

and down the rungs of a hierarchy. I survive, you don't, and, too bad. An opposing player crumpled on the basepath, who cares?

In the alternative we're-in-this-together world, what affects one, affects all. We live together as equals supporting each other. Personal flaws, oh well. We all have flaws. Spiritual experience involves union. Salvation for all; respect for the worth of everyone; value for nature; an ethics based on interconnectedness and responsibility; differences addressed with listening, conflicts handled with negotiation, offenses through a fair legal process. We live in peace. And instead of winners and losers, everyone wins, and all cheer as we carry each other home.

Despite these benefits hierarchies remain popular. It's habit, the thinking that helped primal hunters survive, and thinking that helped us survive is hard to give up. I know I can be as ruthless as my ancestors. It is ego syntonic to be superior. And it simplifies the world. I win; you lose, simple.

Furthermore hierarchies support our country's economic system. As some are rich and others poor, people want to be rich. They work hard, dominate others, exploit nature, and then spend hard -- good for profits, not so good for people's spare time, families, justice, the planet, or the human spirit. This economic hierarchy supports what some seem to see as the identity and purpose of America, that America is an economic machine here to support profits and enrich the wealthy. In the hierarchical world, not only is the country an economic machine, but each person is also a little money-making machine, a cog in the larger machine.

Equality, its justice, peace, harmony with nature, and spiritual wholeness supports an alternative identity for America: a home where people can live meaningful lives; and support a different individual identity: each of us is a human being.

And this is where we are trending. With almost seven billion of us, our survival has passed the precarious place it had been 13,000 years ago, so we are less desperate to survive at others' expense. 2,000 years ago, people began to benefit from trade, and enemies became partners and friends. In 1776 our Declaration of Independence challenged hierarchy by declaring "that all men are created equal..." In 1863 slavery became illegal. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries women demanded power, and their children seemed to rise in value alongside their mothers. The first report of child abuse was made to the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Now laws and agencies protect children from abuse.

I see greater equality reflected in increasing global peace. War makes my enemy very inferior, letting me kill them. As I mentioned, during prehistoric times the odds of dying by violence were high. In the 1600's, during its 30-Year's War, one fifth of the German population died as a result of the war. In 1991, 51 wars were being fought around the world; in 2004, 20. Now in a given year war kills one ten-thousandth of the world's population -- still too many, of course, but fewer than before. A decrease in war parallels an increase in the equal valuing of other people.

In religious circles, the Protestant Reformation challenged the Roman Catholic hierarchy. The printed Bible put religious authority in the hands of any reader. 20<sup>th</sup> Century theologians described God not as a superior being, but as a spirit, or a source of meaning and love. One such, Martin Buber, viewed God as a uniting spirit, present in person-to-person contact. These theologians removed God from the top of a cosmic pyramid, and wove God into the fabric of meaning.

Laws bring equality, as we are, in theory, equal under the law. Five hundred years ago about a fifth of the world was governed by laws. Now the exceptions, such as lawless areas of Afghanistan or Pakistan, draw our attention.

Humanity's death grip on the earth remains, but some of us see the earth not as inferior dirt to be conquered, but as our source of life.

I see UU's helping this development of equality. Our value for equality is obvious when we affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Our value for equality is less obvious when we affirm the interdependent web of all existence. But in contrast to a cosmic pyramid, with a superior, creator God on top, angels next, Seraphim, Cherubim, then Caucasian heterosexual adult men, then Caucasian heterosexual adult women, then children and people of color, then unbelievers, then homosexual people, and near the bottom: nature and animals, and people we don't like and label evil, and those we kill in wars, and at the very bottom: mosquitoes; instead of this hierarchy, we, Unitarian Universalists, champion an interdependent web of equals.

One current battle-ground between hierarchy and equality involves marriage rights for gays and lesbians, and the don't-ask-don't-tell law in the military. Rights for gays and lesbians seems particularly galling to those who value the hierarchical world-view. You can no longer beat your child into submission. Women have more power. Black people have spoken up. And if society views homosexual love as just as valid as heterosexual love, who will be left to put down?

The trend toward equality threatens America as a wealth-producing machine, and threatens to pull some people off their comfortable rungs on the hierarchy into an interdependent web where they would have to cooperate with each other. I think the prospect of forgoing profits, or cooperating with others, so terrifies some people that they intensify putting others down, bullying them down in their hierarchy.

In the face of this pressure, I believe we, Unitarian Universalists, gain strength when we link equality to the ultimate values of health and peace. Equality offers the health that comes with affirming one's worth, not out of superiority, but because one is alive. Equality offers the peace that comes from understanding each other and finding ways everyone wins. With equality as a grounding principle we can value women as well as men, marry gay and lesbian couples, oppose racism, and love nature.

What the world will look like when there is no one left to put down, I do not know. I think there will still be leaders. Elk will still crack antlers in the mountains, and athletes will strive to win games. But humanity will also know how related we are to each other and that we are in this world together and that what affects one affects all. If someone else is suffering, I am suffering, and maybe I can offer support.

With equality, people will solve problems, from marital tensions to international conflicts, through talk and agreements. If violence erupts, whether in a neighborhood or between nations, a police force will stop the bloodshed, a legal process will render a fair judgment, and those who pose a danger will be kept from causing harm.

I imagine individuals increasingly treating themselves with gentleness, their flaws and pain less a threat, more a painful mystery that comes with being alive. I imagine people having a humored love-me-love-my-dog acceptance of their foibles.

I imagine we will value the earth as our home, and as the source of life.

I imagine we will see America less as an economic machine, more as a home in which we all can live with love and meaning. I imagine we will view ourselves not as little economic machines, but as human beings here to live meaningful lives.

I imagine concepts of God shifting from cosmic ruler, to a source of life and love, to that bedrock which we can most trust. I imagine this God symbolizing the ineffable mystery people experience as they form graceful arcs to meet each other and that spirit which brings peace.

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