

We've been reflecting these past several weeks on those gems of wisdom we discover in unexpected corners. This morning, I invite us to consider the Rotary Four Way Test, the four questions asked by Rotarians to measure the appropriateness of a given action. More specifically, I would like us to reflect on the second test, "Is it fair to all concerned?" Is what I am about to do, fair to everyone involved in a particular matter?

I remember one of the first lessons on fairness I learned. I must have been around five-years-old, which is about as far back as my memory goes, and then only fragmentarily. My father had come home with a candy bar and had given it to me and my little brother, David, telling us to share it. This, of course, was like throwing raw steak into a cage of wildebeests. My brother and I squared off, squabbling over who should get more, until my mother intervened, took the candy bar away, placed it on a plate, handed me a butter knife, and said I could cut it, but that David would get the first choice of portions. Let me tell you that until that day, no candy bar had ever been cleaved in half with such precision as that one.

Of course, ideally, that wouldn't have been necessary. Ideally, my brother and I would have resolved this fairly on our own, but we were immature, and so our mother did for us what we weren't yet able to do for ourselves—taught us about fairness and offered a practical way to achieve it. From that time forward, we were able to resolve similar situations for ourselves, liberating us to fight about other things.

A man and I were talking once about fairness and he said something very interesting. He said, "Life will never be fair, because each of us, whether consciously or unconsciously, look first to our own interests, and not to the interests of others." I thought that was a very cynical perspective and told him so, citing the example of Mother Teresa, saying, "Do you think she is looking first to her own interests?" to which he responded, "If she did not find her work meaningful and did not receive a measure of satisfaction and joy from it, she wouldn't be doing it."

I've revisited that conversation many times since, remembering the satisfaction I receive when I help others. It makes me feel virtuous when I've done something nice and others comment on it. Though I shrug it off and insist it was nothing, a part of me delights in the recognition. I'm still cutting the candy bar cleanly in half, making sure my pleasure is every bit as real as the pleasure of those I've helped.

Perhaps this is the reason Jesus told his disciples to beware of outward piety, that when they helped others, they were to do so quietly, secretly, without their left hand knowing what their right hand was doing. For then they could know their motives were genuine, that their generosity was motivated by love for the other, not with a desire to enhance their own reputation.

Let us return more directly to the topic of fairness and let me say this—while life isn't always fair and just, while some will have more and others will have less, it is our responsibility, as we become spiritually mature and gracious, to make sure our blessings don't come at the expense of others, so that even as we enjoy more and more, others benefit less and less. Is what we do, fair and good for all concerned? Good not just for us, but good for everyone in a given transaction.

Last year, I was sharing a meal with two other guys. The first man asked the second if he wanted to go into business with him buying foreclosed homes, purchased with adjustable rate mortgages. The monthly payments had dramatically increased, the owners had defaulted on the loans, the banks had seized the homes and were reselling them. "Lots of bargains out there," one first man said. The second man said, "Nah, I know somebody is going to buy them, but I don't want to profit from someone else's misery."

He wasn't smug or self-righteous about it. Just matter-of-fact. I saw the first man a few months later and asked him how his business idea was going and he smiled and said, "I decided against it. It didn't pass the smell test."

While life isn't always fair, our goal should be to lessen injustice wherever and whenever we can, so we're not adding to the meal of misery upon which others must dine.

That's my first point. Insofar as it depends upon us, we will be as concerned for the interests of others as we are concerned about our own interests. This isn't always easy, and maybe isn't even natural, but as we mature, we will grow in awareness, so as not to prosper at another's expense.

My second, and last, point is this: While we should always be careful to be fair to all concerned, if we are hyper-sensitive about whether we have been treated fairly, we will be miserable. We will see malice when none was intended, perceiving slights where none were meant. We will analyze and dissect every action, looking for the insult to us and the injustice against us. Eventually, because of our hyper-sensitivity, we will see only the worst in others, and be blind to the best.

We will collect injustices like some people collect art, keeping careful count of the wrongs we've suffered, the inequities we've endured. Indeed, we will expend so much energy worrying about the wrongs done to us, we will have little time to think of others and the real injustice they might be bearing.

Not long ago, I was feeling unduly put upon by life and was stewing about it. "I'm a good person. Life shouldn't be this difficult. I deserve better," I told myself. I grumped around all resentful for a day or so, then read this great quote by the writer Dennis Wholey. "Expecting the world to treat you fairly because you are a good person is a little like expecting the bull not to attack you because you are a vegetarian."

Let's go over where we've been:

It is always tempting to act always in our own self-interest, but moral and spiritual maturity requires us to consider the well-being of others equal to our own. Our blessings shouldn't come at another's harm.

Our own hyper-sensitivity to the unfairness we experience will make us miserable. We will see malice where none was intended, and doubt even those of good will.

Friends, let us pray: To thou who lowers the high and raises the low, may you raise our sense of justice and lower our pride of privilege, lest we become unfit to live with others, ourselves, and you.