



The Fairness Campaign

Fairness burns deep within the hearts of each and every one of us. A sense of fairness in any society appears to evolve automatically as an inherent part of working together outside our immediate families. The moment human beings begin to cluster in a group larger than the nuclear family they appear to evolve a strong, built-in sense of fairness.

The soul of any successful society appears to be turn-taking, or reciprocity — a sense of fair play. Even monkeys have an innate sense of fairness and fiercely object when one member receives more than another for the same effort.

Our sense of fairness has evolutionary roots. Even in primitive hunter-gatherer societies, human beings have an enormous distaste for hierarchical extremes due to a deeply and finely honed sense of fairness. The Ache hunter-gatherers in South America routinely give away up to 90 per cent of the food they gather to needier members of the tribe. A !Kung bushman inclined to braggadocio about the size of his catch is cut down to size by his fellow hunters with a self-explanatory ritual referred to as 'insulting the meat.'

Fairness is hardwired within us; neuroscientists have discovered an "it's not fair" spot in the human brain. Studies have demonstrated that people are less interested in receiving rewards for themselves than in rectifying financial inequality.

Ideas about fairness appear to be universal. People in most societies have similar sense of what constitutes fairness. Study after study of native indigenous populations reveal that they create similar societies with only mild differences in wealth and income distribution roughly like that of Denmark's, a country widely considered one of the fairest in modern western society.

Even in America, citizens of all persuasions have ideas about fairness that are virtually identical. In a recent study carried out by Harvard Business School, when asked to design their ideal society for wealth distribution, *both Republicans and Democrats came up with a markedly similar picture for a just society*, much like that of Sweden where there is far less division between rich and poor than there is in America.

Although we may be polarized in many areas, all of us — rich, poor, Democrat, Republican — broadly agree on what is fair.

Fairness is a sacred concept to most Americans. Our country was built on a platform of fairness. We severed British sovereignty over the American colonies because we believed that we were victim of a litany of unfair laws and practices.

Our rationale for this insurrection, as we announced in the Declaration of Independence, was the 'self-evident' truth of the most fundamental type of fairness — that 'all men are created equal,' with a right to 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.'

In our hearts we know what's fair.

So, what exactly do we mean by 'fair'?

Fair is a word with many meanings. According to the dictionary, 'fair' means impartial, free from discrimination or dishonesty, and law-abiding or conforming to rules. But it also has other connotations — of beauty, purity, even ease.

A ship has a 'fair passage' when unobstructed. A person traveling with a tight schedule can arrive on time with 'a fair wind.' When an author makes a 'fair copy,' his manuscript is legible and unblemished.

Life is fair when someone is given an equal chance, when each of us gets a turn, when giving is repaid, when a decision is evenhanded, when something is wholly *balanced*. When Emily Dickinson wrote 'Ample make this bed,' the poem made famous in the movie *Sophie's Choice*, with the line 'In it wait till judgment break/ Excellent and fair,' her use of fair had two meanings: justice and a piece of carpentry perfectly rendered. 'Fair' conjures up a sense that something is pure, balanced and true.

What most of us mean by 'fair' is not sameness or redistribution — but an equal chance, an equal possibility, an equal say in areas that affect our society, a reward commensurate with contribution, and, perhaps most important, a reward that does not come at someone else's expense.

Our strongly honed sense of fair play includes a strong sense of the importance of *reciprocity*. Turn-taking entirely rests on the assumption that each of us will have our turn, and that if we do something for someone else, that they will return the favor.

Most of us possess an in-built scorecard that abhors a freeloader — someone who takes more than their fair share or gives nothing back. In humans our abhorrence of unfairness is most evident in the fact that we are willing to punish transgressors of the social contract, even if it comes at our own expense. Even young children will punish other children who grab for a larger handful of candy than their fair share.

Whatever happened to fairness?

If we all know what's fair, why is life so unfair right now?

Presently we have strayed both from our birthright as human beings and from our nation's founding principles. America and indeed every society in the West are now at our most unfair in history. Although one in every thirty-nine Americans is a millionaire, one in seven, or 39.1 million Americans, live below the poverty line. Just one per cent of the population now control 40 per cent of the nation's money, and while their income has risen, income levels of the rest of the 99 per cent have drastically fallen.

Other aspects of life in America now feel manifestly unfair:

- *People are losing their homes* – while mortgage brokers are back making massive bonuses.
- *People are losing their jobs* – while manufacturers set up shop in other parts of the world.
- *People are losing social benefits and are paying higher taxes* – while the very people who created the financial mess – the bankers – are creaming off vast profits for themselves.

Unfairness hurts us all

The problem with this situation is not simply a case of unfairness. Our survival depends upon our ability to give each one of us a turn. The extent to which any society begins to fray relates to a deterioration of a sense of fairness and basic reciprocity.

Epidemiological studies show that in countries with giant income disparity between the very rich and the very poor, *both the most affluent and the very poorest* suffer from higher rates of ill health, crime, mental illness, environmental problems, and violence.

When life is unfair you and I both lose, no matter how wealthy either of us is.

Western countries in the main are at their most unequal in history, where our sense of taking and giving has been replaced with taking whatever you can get for you and yours alone. This is most blatantly the case in America. Although one of the wealthiest countries in the world with half the world's billionaires, America has far and away *the highest level of all social problems* — crime, lack of education, mental illness, suicide, disease of all varieties — of twenty countries, and the United Kingdom has the third highest.

Besides income disparity, most Western countries have become blatantly unfair to consumers.

The individualistic, winner-take-all zeitgeist of modern times is to blame for many of the crises we presently face in our society, particularly the excesses of the financial sector, with its insistence on a bigger and better profit every year, at any cost. This mindset is responsible for the raft of deceit that now goes on in every sector of society, from the 50 per cent of college students now known to cheat on exams to corporate cheating, even in sectors designed for the public interest.

Fairness is not socialism

Fairness doesn't mean redistribution of wealth or a socialist-style, across-the-board equality. *The Fairness Campaign emphatically is not an apology for communism or socialism.*

Fairness is about fair opportunity and about operating with integrity and with regard for the whole. It's all about honoring the connection between us all. When opportunity is available for all citizens, everyone benefits – without federal handouts. For instance, the US state with the lowest level of social problems is New Hampshire, which also happens to have one of the lowest public expenditures of any state. New Hampshire simply does not have a huge disparity

between the income of its richest and poorest inhabitants. There are opportunities there for all.

Fairness does not mean sameness. Throughout history the fact that there is a wealthy group of individuals at the top of a society has not automatically made for revolution. As studies show, even children have a nuanced understanding of fairness; they readily accept that a child who has worked harder at school deserves a better grade than a slacker.

In the wake of the worldwide financial crisis of 2008 the fury that most ordinary citizens felt – and still feel – toward bankers and traders had nothing to do with income resentment but a deep and compelling sense of unfairness that investment houses like Goldman Sachs still pay record bonuses after the recession they had helped to create caused so many others to lose their jobs.

With all of our current crises, re-establishing fairness is crucial to the survival of our American society – and indeed to the survival of us all.

Becoming a game-changer for fairness

The good news is that doesn't take much to re-establish fairness. Scientific studies shows that in any society, if a culture of turn-taking falls apart with too many taking too much, all it requires is a *small group of individuals committed to strong reciprocity* to "invade" a population of self-interested individuals and re-establish fairness and generosity.

Selflessness is the most self-serving act of all because it is the position naturally most beneficial to us all. It is possible – indeed most beneficial – for us to live our lives taking into account both what is good for our world and what is good for ourselves.

The Fairness Campaign has been created to highlight the essential nature of fairness and to put that old-fashioned virtue right back into the center of our lives and communities.

But it's not pie-in-the-sky wishful thinking. The Fairness Campaign offers a set of practical skills, tools and processes that have been proven to work around the world, even in the midst of bloody civil wars and high conflict — such as in South Africa and the Middle East. These processes have also proven successful in bringing both sides together over highly polarized issues, such as abortion.

It starts with you

You don't have to wait for your elected officials or management at work to make things fairer for you and for your community. All it takes are small practices that you can start to employ with yourself and your immediate circle.

You can re-establish fairness in your life, in your community, in your workplace and in your country by following the few simple Fairness Principles, below. Your own practices can quickly become viral and change your relationships, your workplace, your community –perhaps even the world.

When you become a spiritual activist for fairness, you can easily set off a contagion of good will. Fairness is even more contagious than greed because *in our hearts we know what's fair.*

