

THE WORLD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN

Betty Kenley
March 12, 2006

My earliest memory of social injustice, though I would not have labeled it social injustice, was just prior to World War II, in the late 30's. I must have been about seven or eight years old.

There was a very popular song, "The World Turned Upside Down". I remember thinking, "if the world turns upside down, the hierarchy will be, white men on the bottom, white women in third position, then black women, and in top position, black men." Somehow, I thought that I, a female, wouldn't be any better off.

The topic I had planned to talk about was discrimination and how it impacts us and the focus was to be how men and women could bridge the gap between us. I wanted to find some way that after many, many years, Ken and I, and others, could discuss this issue without him winding up defensive and me angry.

I believed that a part of the problem was that men had not experienced the overt discrimination of others. I had also come to the conclusion any discussion had to be very objective about the facts and how discriminatory acts affect others.

Also, that discrimination is learned behavior and is perceived as the way things should be. Therefore, acceptance of the status quo on the part of women and men is seen as the way things have always been, and should remain.

About this time, the book Somebodies and Nobodies by Robert Fuller, arrived, and it gave me a whole new perspective on the subject. This is a book about the abuse of rank. Fuller identifies rankism as persistent abuse and discrimination based on power differences inherent in rank.

About 20% of us suffer from racism, 50% from sexism, but ALL of us suffer from "rankism". He sees racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, ageism, etc., as subspecies of "rankism".

Rankism is not the same as rank. Legitimate rank is based on merit. The person is an authority on a subject, and/or has extensive knowledge based on experience. They have responsibilities to an organization for certain goals and objectives. The military, companies, and governments must have levels of responsibility and authority to meet its objectives. To place someone who does not have the requisite skills, knowledge, and ability in positions of authority would have dire consequences for the organization and society. **Earned rank has proven utility legitimacy, and deserves our respect.** I wish, as does Fuller, we could find another word for "rankism". It makes it very difficult to distinguish between appropriate ranking and the abuse of rank.

Rank differences are not the problem. Difficulties arise when these differences are used as an excuse to abuse, humiliate, exploit and subjugate. Rank is subject to change. You may be a somebody one day, a nobody the next. As a result, most of us have been both perpetrators and victims of rankism indifferent situations. For example, the nobody at work or at home may go to dinner and abuse the waitress or waiter, because he or she can.

Human dignity is trampled on by “rankism”, and therefore violates the first UU Principle “the inherent worth and dignity of every person”. It also does not promote the second UU principle, “Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations”. The first step in the learning process is the awareness that something exists. As I was reading the book, I became aware of more and more situations, books, and articles in which somebodies and nobodies were apparent.

For example, at the Jamestown dig, a docent was explaining that the skeleton remains which had been unearthed were of SOMEBODY. How did they know? The box in which he had been buried had a sloping top which had been nailed together. The nails were distributed in a neat row down the center of the skeleton. At that time, nobodies were buried in plain, flat topped boxes or no boxes. You may recall that Mozart was buried in a pauper’s grave, no box, only lime sprinkled over the remains.

I was startled recently when a senator said of Coretta Scott King, following her death, “She was more than just a wife, she was a full partner in every way.” I have always believed that the marriage ceremony made both participants “full partners”.

Barbara Ehrenreich in “Nickel and Dime” writes about the working poor. She argues that the working poor, the nobodies, subsidize everyone else.

George Lakoff, professor of linguistics at the University of California, Berkley, was interested in differences in the words, “family values”, and looked at the different conceptual systems. He found two models of the family. One was the strict father model and the other was the nurturant father model. In between these models are blends of the two models. The strict father model is what James Dobson of Focus on the Family teaches. I would call it the “spare the rod and spoil the child” philosophy.

The nurturant father model belongs to the school of teaching and guiding to develop responsibility in the child. This model does not promote physical punishment. In the strict father family there is a hierarchy of moral authority.

God over man

Man over nature

Adults over children

Western over non-western

America over other nations

The extension of this moral order is:

Men over women
White over non-white
Christian over non-Christian
Straights over gays

Earlier thinking certainly is obvious in this scenario, and leads to rankism and abuse of power. We have witnessed some of the consequences of this point of view. In his letter from the Birmingham jail, Martin Luther King wrote: “When you are harried by day and haunted by night, by the fact you are negro, ‘forever fighting the degenerating sense of nobodiness then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait—We shouldn’t wait.’”

Addressing adults by their first names can be rankism, if one adult is addressed as Mr. Jones and other adult is Janey or Johnny. It sets up an adult-child paradigm. A subtle way of exercising power and control over another. At VTCC, our new director put forth the proposal that everyone at the Center, including the children, who were our patients, should call each other by their first names. I took this proposal to the nursing staff to ascertain their wishes. They were adamant that the children were not going to call them by their first names. The majority of the staff were black. What he did not understand was that black people had struggled for years to have the dignity of a title. They were not about to give up that gain. As Sydney Poitier said in “In the Heat of the Night”, “They call me Mr. Tibbs”.

When President Bush addressed Cindy Sheehan as “Mom”, it was not a term of endearment. He depersonalized her. First, she is not his mother; second, he failed to recognize her as a person. She was not important, and therefore could remain nameless.

The young are especially vulnerable to rank-based discrimination. I am sure most of you have either been the victim or seen others victimized by a teacher or principal. But I think the biggest victimization of the young is the inequitable investment in their educations.

The objective of the integration movement in Virginia had nothing to do with a black child sitting next to a white child in order to learn. That was baloney. It had to do with getting their children into a school that had adequate and current books, good teachers, toilets that flushed, and roofs that did not leak.

Today, we are still struggling with these same issues, but it is the wealthy versus the poor. We say, “All men are created equal.” But then we make sure that there is unequal access to education resources, thereby ensuring that the poor and minorities stay poor.

Let’s look at spending on education in Virginia. Yearly, per pupil spending in Virginia ranges from a low of \$6014 to a high of \$15977. The average is \$8552. I defy anyone to convince me that you can get as good an education for \$6014 as you can for \$15977. If that were true, you would see the best schools in the nation costing the least, and wealthy people would not send their children to schools that cost \$40,000 per year. This inequity

in education ensures that children of the well-to-do have an advantage, and the poor are told to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps”.

Sometime ago, I heard Sandra Cisneros read this and it was so moving:

THE NOBODIES

Nobodies dream of escaping poverty and one magical day
Good luck will suddenly rain down on them
Will rain down in buckets but
Good luck doesn't rain down yesterday—today—tomorrow—or ever
Good luck doesn't even fall in a fine drizzle
No matter how hard the nobodies summon it
Even if left hand is tickling or
They begin the new day with their right foot or
Start the new year with a change of brooms.
The Nobodies—
Nobodies children, owner of nothing
The nobodies, running like rabbits, dying through life
Screwed every which way
Who are not, but could be
Who don't speak languages, but dialects
Who don't have religion, but superstitions
Who don't create art, but handicrafts
Who don't have culture, but folklore
Who are not human beings, but human resources
Who do not have faces, but arms
Who do not have names, but numbers
Who do not appear in the history of the world, but the police blotters of the local papers
The nobodies, who are not worth the bullet that kills them.

What do we do about the inequities in our society? The inequity now named “Rankism”. Awareness that it affects all of us, I believe, is a first step. We all have or have had the experience of being dominated, degraded, exploited, or insulted by people with greater power than our own.

However, my experience has taught me that being discriminated against does not necessarily make one sensitive to the situation of others. If this were true, Colin Powell may have been more sensitive to the plight of gays in the military.

I am also aware that people can be under constraints that do not allow them to be as fair as they should be. My colleague, who had been discriminated against all her life, could not understand how participating in a Christian Christmas play would put Muslim children in the difficult position of choosing between their religion and being part of their peer group. I believe that if we share with each other our experiences with

discrimination, not just racism and sexism, but also rankism, we will become more sensitive and therefore more alert to these abuses.

There are some movements which are challenging the status quo. Graduate students are revolting against teaching classes for professors when they are hardly paid a living wage. Many Catholic laity are promoting a more democratic organization.

We have the Golden Rule and other maxims. Fuller suggests a new one—“Protect the dignity of others as you would your own”.

Our UU principles speak to this issue.

1. The worth and dignity of every person
2. Justice, equity and compassion in human relations.

If we practice these principles it would indeed be, in the words of Fuller, a dignitarian movement. A dignitarian movement would include a living wage, universal health care, and a quality education for all. The right to dignity is a Human Right.

We can be honest and as objective as possible with each other in discussion how this phenomenon affects us. We can also find ways to intervene—objectively and/or with humor. The husband of a friend can give her a hard time and I feel sure she wants to keep the peace, as women are wont to do. Every one in awhile I say to her, in front of him, “Do you want me to kick him for you?” We laugh, but he gets my drift. This man is not a bad person. He has not yet developed sensitivity in this area.

We can also speak against it and support others who are dealing with indignities, in whatever situation. The most important lesson from this book, to me, was that this is not a black thing, or a woman thing. It is a person thing. It affects men also, and we are all in this boat together, although some of our boats may be leakier than others.

For a change of pace, I want to share Dr. Seuss’s story “Yertle the Turtle”. Dr. Seuss speaks of the dependence of power holders on the nobodies who support them. Yertle the turtle king, sits on a rock in the pond and because he is not high enough calls for the turtles to sit on the rock and he climbs up on top. He is still not high enough and calls for more and more turtles until turtles are stacked up quite high. He announces to all:

I’m Yertle the Turtle! Oh, marvelous me!
For I am the ruler of all that I see!
Then from below in the great heavy stack
Came a groan from a plain little turtle named Mack
“Your majesty, please—I don’t like to complain,
But down here below, we are feeling great pain.
I know upon top you are seeing great sights, but
We turtles can’t stand it, our shells will all crack!
Besides, we need food—we are starving”, groaned Mack.

“You hush up your mouth!” howled the mighty King Yertle

“You’ve not right to talk to the world’s highest turtle.

I rule from the clouds! Over Land! Over Sea!

There’s nothing, no NOTHING, that’s higher than me!”

Mack the turtle got bad, burped, which shook the throne and Yertle fell off the throne into the pond. And today the great Yertle, that marvelous he, is King of the Mud---and all the turtles are free. As turtles, and maybe, all creatures, should be.