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THE EQUALITY OF DIFFERENCES

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Differences and similarities of anything are based on our subjective judgements about whatever it is. In our society, for example, men are judged more capable in most kinds of work than are women, because society has placed more value on certain kinds of products than on others. These differences in extrinsic, social values became social judgments about the intrinsic values of individual human beings, simply because they are different in some aspects and therefore either perform certain actions differently or perform different actions. So it is that the more dissimilar someone is to ourselves the more likely we are to make black-and-white judgements about their intrinsic value as human beings.

Such judgements are made against our standards, which are an internal measure of comparison for qualitative and quantitative value, a criterion or a norm. We each have a standard against which we measure how everything around us fits into our comfort zone. Our standard is therefore our basis for judging that this person, or situation, or thing is right or wrong, good or bad. Each person's standard is correct and true only for that person. It has no validity for anyone else. Each person's standard is only his or her *mental landscape of acceptability*.

In other words, we use socially-constructed, hierarchical couplets of extrinsic differences - white male versus white female or white male versus black male - as a basis for judging the equality of such things as one race versus another, of men versus women, of the secular versus the spiritual, of right versus wrong, of good versus evil, etc. To many white, male Americans, for example, being a Caucasian is better than being a minority of any kind, and being a man is better than being a woman. Why? Because most white males deem themselves superior to all males that aren't white, and most males of any colour deem themselves better than any woman.

The most extreme example of this dynamic is the use of extrinsic differences among peoples to justify a social end in such a way that one group of human beings declares itself superior to another group, because it wants - for nothing - what the other group has. Put differently, throughout the world, the "civilized" peoples of a country, usually invaders at some time in history, such as the Europeans in North and South America, see the indigenous peoples as subhuman - only a little above the animals with whom they share the habitat.

I think the reason for this extreme attitude is that one cannot justify conquering an indigenous people and forcibly steal their land with the intent to exploit it, if the indigenous people are seen as equals. The conquered, therefore, must be viewed at best as inferior and at worst as subhuman. This view allows the conquerors to exploit resources at the expense of the conquered - even unto their extermination.

Such notions of superiority and inferiority are based on personal, familial, and societal judgments about the intrinsic values of extrinsic differences and are erroneous judgements, as stated in . *Course in Miracles* (Manual For Teachers, 1975, p. 26):

Judgment, like other devices by which the world of illusions is maintained, is totally misunderstood by the world. It is actually confused with wisdom, and substitutes for truth. As the world uses the term, an individual is capable of 'good' and 'bad' judgment, and his education aims at strengthening the former and minimizing the latter. There is, however, considerable confusion about what these categories mean. What is 'good' judgment to one is 'bad' judgment to another. Further, even the same person classified the same action as showing 'good' judgment at one time and 'bad' judgement at another time. Nor can any consistent criteria for determining what these categories are be really taught. At any time the student may disagree with what his would-be teacher says about them, and the teacher himself may well be inconsistent in what he believes. 'Good' judgment, in these terms, does not mean anything. No more doe 'bad'.

To illustrate the above point about judgment, consider these two questions about white, male garbage collectors and white, male medical doctors: (1) Is collecting garbage as a social service of equal value to that of treating sick people? and (2) Is the social stature of a garbage collector equal to that of a medical doctor?

In my experience, most people seem to think that the service performed by medical doctors is of far greater social value than is that performed by garbage collectors and that they not only enjoy but also deserve a higher social status than do garbage collectors. But when judging garbage collectors and medical doctors, most people focus on their differences and fail to take their similarities into account, one of which is that they both help to keep the environment healthy. How much more difficult would be the task of medical doctors if garbage collectors stopped collecting garbage and just allowed it to accumulate in the streets?

With time, and not too much thereof, the outcome could easily be an epidemic of bubonic plague, a disease carried by rats that live and proliferate in human garbage and whose fleas transmit the disease. Once the plague bacteria begins to spread, doctors would have to marshal their numbers to treat the sick. If, however, the garbage collectors resumed collecting the accumulated garbage, the disease would abate and the doctors would be freed to focus their attention elsewhere.

Thus garbage collectors serve society collectively and medical doctors serve society one individual at a time. We therefore become personally acquainted with our doctor but not with our garbage collectors. I find that such a personal acquaintance greatly increases the value we attribute to an individual's job, because we not only have a more intimate sense of the person's intrinsic value but also a greater knowledge of how their profession contributes to society.

Nevertheless, garbage collectors are as vital to human health as are medical doctors, only in a different way. Why, therefore, are they not afforded equal status in society? Perhaps because they don't need to go to school for seven

to eight years or become sufficiently trained to collect garbage and therefore don't have a socially-coveted title, such as Doctor, before their names. Perhaps because few people see them at work and therefore don't ponder the value of the service they perform, but these same people, when ill, seek out their doctor, who can usually make them feel better. Perhaps because we don't form a personal relationship with them as we do with our doctors. Have you, for instance, ever thanked your garbage collector for taking away your trash as you have thanked your doctor for making you feel better? Perhaps because, compared to medical doctors, they don't make nearly as much money and therefore don't live in expensive houses or drive expensive cars, so we deem them less successful in a society where money is our measure of success and social status. Perhaps because they're filthy and stink when they get off work, instead of wearing a suit and tie.

There are all kinds of potential, judgmental reasons for these discrepancies in social stature, but none are valid when it comes to the intrinsic value of each person in their service to the health of society as a whole. An appropriate analogy might be the spokes of a wheel. Each spoke is slightly different and seemingly independent of the others; yet each is equal in the importance of its function. Each spoke is connected at the center of the wheel and at the outer rim. Leave out one spoke and the strength and function of the wheel is diminished to that extent, although the effect might not be immediately apparent.

The point is that garbage collectors and medical doctors are of equal value professionally, albeit different in how they serve the health needs of society. Further, their services are not only vital but also complimentary in that they accomplish far more together than either could possibly accomplish alone. Thus each person and each profession has a gift to give and each gift is unique and critical to the whole. They are, therefore, equal *and* different.

What is true for garbage collectors and medical doctors is true for every living thing on Earth, because every living thing is equal in its service to the Earth. Each individual life, each individual species, each individual function, including those of each human race, creed, nationality, sex, and age-class is equally important to the evolutionary success of *Homo sapiens* and of human society. Each is only different. Therefore, all differences among all living things are just that, differences, and the hierarchies or judgemental levels of value are human constructs, which have nothing whatsoever to do with reality. So it is that because of and in spite of these differences, every living thing is equal before God.

Having said this, we come to the notion of right versus wrong, again based on perceived similarities and differences. Society is composed of individual human beings much as the compound eye of an insect is composed of individual facets, each of which is slightly different in structure but equally important to the total vision of the eye. Each facet has its own light-sensitive element; each has its own refractive system, and each forms but a portion of the image.

As there are as many points of view in the compound eye of an insect as there are facets, so there are as many points of view in a society as there are people, and although everyone is right from her or his point of view, no one person has the complete image. Hugh Prather (1980, p. 93) put it nicely:

...Reality is what reality is, and whatever it may be, it is so vast that no one sees it all. There would be no more intellectual standoffs if just this much were realized: we are all looking at the same thing and each...seeing something. But since we are standing in different positions, our points of view differ. Fortunately, we can move. And we must if we are to see more.

It is precisely because we each have our point of view, established after we have considered the data and have reached a conclusion, that I cannot convince you of anything. If I'm to convince you that my point of view is right, then I must simultaneously convince you that your point of view is wrong. You will resist, of course, first because I have stolen your dignity and second because your point of view is correct from your interpretation of "your" data.

Although I cannot convince you that you are wrong without stripping you of your dignity, I can give you new data, which allows you to reach a new conclusion while maintaining your dignity. What I have done, is *raise the value* of your making a new decision, one based on new information. In this way, I can be patient and give you the space that allows you to change your mind. "Fortunately," as Prather says, "...we can move. And we must if we are to see more."

So the question is, "who's right" when we're all right from our own points of view? If everyone is right, then who's wrong? Because no one is wrong, we cannot argue any case based on "right" or "wrong." Right or wrong is always a human judgment, and judgments can only deal with appearances, not with reality, which means that if I think I'm right, I must "win," and if I win, I must be right. You, on the other hand, are clearly wrong because you "lost," and you lost because you're clearly wrong. Thus, each side becomes committed to winning its point of view and is not even in a position to contemplate another possibility under the competitive illusion of winners and losers.

If the truth be known, however, everyone loses when issues are "settled" by judgements of right or wrong, because, as I've said, judgements can deal only with appearances, and everyone appears to have the right point of view from his or her own point of view. This really is no different than a world at war in which each nation, each army, each person is sure God is on its side. Did anyone ever stop to think that we might *all be wrong* or that we might *all be right* from our respective points of view?

I submit that the duality of right versus wrong does not exist. Instead, there is a continuum of "rightness," which we cannot fully understand because of our own, limited points of view. To me, therefore, everyone is right from her or his

own point of view, and each point of view is different - not wrong, only different, regardless of what the discussion is about.

So, if societies are to survive the evolutionary throws of the present, we must be willing to accept that we each are right, right, and different. Wrong in the classical, combative, human sense must become a relict of the past if we are to treat others as we ourselves would be treated. Then and only then can any issue be *resolved* in such a way that each side retains its dignity and society, as we know it, can progress with some semblance of order into the future.

That notwithstanding, I find the duality of the "rightness" or the "wrongness" of almost everything to be so pervasive that the notion of *right, right, and different*, which points to the *equality of differences*, is exceedingly difficult to get across in a society that stresses judgmental values as its norm. If we insist on the duality of "right versus wrong," we will always be in competition with one another, because we will always be misjudging appearances. If, on the other hand, we can agree that everyone is right from his or her own point of view and that each point of view is only a different perception along the same continuum, we will be able to coordinate and cooperate with one another, which is the glue that ultimately holds societies together.

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