

UNFAIRADELPHIA – November 2004

— By Richard L. Kiniry

Living in Philadelphia can lead to the loss of a natural sense of justice. You can get accustomed to the wrong people winning too often and get out of the habit of being outraged by injustice. We all remember feeling as children the rage at unfairness - when the whole class gets punished for one person's mistake, your brother gets a new bicycle and you get his hand-me-down, or you're blamed for something you didn't do and no one will listen. Well, now that we are big boys and girls, that sense of unfairness has been tempered with a bit of life-weariness. There are all kinds of petty injustices that become the expectation that life isn't fair and we have to just live with it. Trouble is that petty unfairness habituates us to greater injustice.

A sense of fairness is basic to a person's sense of self. It is also the grounding of law and the idea of right and wrong. Every individual yearns for their fair share and the manner in which we respond to that need determines how we relate to each other. Some of us stop expecting fairness and choose whining bitterness as a life-stance. Others decide that fairness means that they get everything they want, and the hell with the rest of us. Most of us develop a relatively balanced sense of fairness, and through the years, through repeated experiences of unfairness, we learn not to expect the world to be just.

But living in Philadelphia can also be a stimulant to a renewed sense of outrage at the lack of fairness. I have spoken before of my disabled neighbor and the difficulty he experiences getting around the streets of the city. Knowing him has increased my empathy for those who need assistance. I notice how many perfectly healthy people are getting out of cars with Physical Disabled license plates. On weekends, each time my neighbor moves his van from his PD designated spot, he loses it to a carload of teenagers with a disabled card hanging from the car mirror. And from the other side of the issue, the street signs reserving the space in front of supposedly disabled people are blossoming like dandelions. Taking advantage, unfair advantage, becomes an expectation.

There are other examples. Take the disregard for parking laws by our official government handlers. While ordinary citizens are given tickets for minor infringement of laws that are supposed to be in the public interest, police, parking authority officers, politicians, and the well-connected ignore the rules. Then there is "pay to play," and building and health standards avoided with a few bucks in the right hands. In the last few years schoolyards all around the city have been confiscated from the children and given to teachers as parking lots. Compare the roads, schools, and public institutions in poor and middle class neighborhoods. Compare the Greenfield Elementary School in Center City and the Robert Morris School in North Philadelphia. No outrage? Oh, well.

Moving from institutional unfairness to the individual version, consider the unfairness of all of us having to live with the wastefulness of SUV owners, and all of us paying for sports stadiums for the few.

Of course, since the beginning America was not supposed to be fair and therefore our natural outrage at unfairness has not been encouraged. The founding fathers (not the mothers, they were behind the scene) promised us liberty and the pursuit of personal happiness. They certainly did not promise equality and fairness. Individuals have to fight for their fair share. America has not been big on the common interest and fair distribution of anything.

The great injustices of preemptive war, a regressive tax system, etc. depend on people getting used to unfairness, losing their sense of outrage. So, as politicians speak of “quality of life” issues, which is code for getting homeless and young, noisy people out of sight, and when they talk of other plans to improve our community, take some time to question who the improvements hurt.