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Disparate and Equal

I believe everyone, at some point, has told herself that she is special. Sometimes, it comes as an automatic response - a defensive one - because questions like “what makes you who you are”, “what do you believe makes you unique”, or even the practicable, professional “why do you think you’ll be a good fit at this job” invite us to spend a little bit of time thinking about our weaknesses and strengths, qualities of character that distinguish us from the rest of the crowd. We reach for an answer, even if nothing readily comes to mind, because it is very difficult to admit personal mediocrity. After all, no one would fill out an application or go to an interview advertising how average he is.

By itself, our aversion to being “average” is not necessarily making us worse people or harming society. Individuality is rooted deep in our culture, from our steadfast belief in political rights to our idolization of the wildly successful, “self-made” entrepreneur, celebrity, or activist, an image frequently set against mediocrity. Our view of the American Dream would be simpler, and much less alluring, if it had simply been of a house in suburbia and a peaceful subsistence. Instead, it is the promise of a *home*, and for not peace but prosperity. In the former view, an individual is equal to her neighbors: average, mediocre; in the latter she is at liberty to pursue whatever she wants, as an individual with agency. We have come to view mediocrity and individuality as incompatible, and the concepts we associate with either - *equality* and *liberty* - have led us to weigh one against the other. Given the choice between the two, my past self would almost always have chosen the latter.

For the overwhelming majority of my life, I was afraid of equality. In fact, everything that I had done so far was in some way an attempt to be unique. The late nights spent studying, the hours spent sharpening my writing, even the relationships I made with others, have all helped better define who I am as my own individual self. In believing myself special, I could choose to see myself exclusively in terms of my strengths. By cherry-picking character traits, I could be mediocre when it

came to physicality, or mathematics, or public speaking, because those weaknesses did not define me, or convince me that I could not be special in the aspects of life that mattered to me. This refusal to acknowledge my own equality was responsible for creating a belief in myself that, while it persisted, led me to undervalue the necessity of equality. I could hold onto it only because it remained untested. When I learned about the bystander effect, I found it difficult to accept the uncomfortable truth that people are capable of acting against their principles, because I considered myself an exception to the rule. It was then I realized what my English teacher had meant when he said that “knowing and feeling are two different things.” Because people tend to resist knowledge that threatens their existing beliefs, experience is often necessary to force a shift in perspective.

Though doubts about my worldview would periodically surface throughout high school, I only realized senior year that I was mistaken about equality. That year, I joined Youth and Government, taking an active role in campaigning for my school’s candidates, personal friends of mine. The results of that year’s elections placed me in a position to observe the inner workings of the annual convention. In the weekend’s defining moment, I found myself in a closed-doors meeting where the leader of one allegedly belligerent delegation was relentlessly berated for failing to keep her members in line. Through the entire fifteen minute tirade, a surrealistic, inquisition-like experience, not a single person present dared to speak up, and I knew absolutely then that any perception of myself as morally outstanding was misguided. I was forced to admit that I was no different from Genovese’s neighbors, because I did not have the courage to hold a friend accountable when he acted out against a stranger. By my apathy in a decidedly unjust situation, I stood that day against equality.

The most striking thing I learned about equality is that it is deeply humbling. To admit that you are on some fundamental level no better than the next person runs counter to the individualism that we are spoon-fed from birth. Equality is a more difficult concept than liberty for the human mind to grasp, as we are cognitively egocentric. It is hard enough to imagine ourselves in someone else’s shoes, but even more difficult to realize that we fit in them, too. But equality is necessary, because it lies at the root of all human understanding. Equality relates force to mass, resistance to

voltage, and one human being to another. In mathematics, an equals sign helps us understand that complicated expressions can be reduced to more comfortable, familiar forms. Two plus two is obviously four, but can one really understand that $\text{Log}_3 9 = 2$ without understanding the concept of equivalence first? While not as readily apparent, equality is necessary in how we interact with each other because it fosters compassion and tolerance. If I hold myself to be better than another, how can I give his ideas the weight they deserve? How can a discussion or a debate hope to be productive if its participants do not stand on equal footing? And how can a leader really lead if she does not have empathy for those who follow her?

If believing in equality takes a certain amount of humility, to live by it requires an equal amount of courage. JK Rowling's Neville Longbottom is awarded ten points on the account that "it takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to our enemies, but just as much to stand up to our friends." Though friendship and loyalty are also necessary to our lives, they often distort the lens of equality. To hold people we admire and respect accountable for their actions is difficult, but in doing so we foster a bond between equals, through which can flow both constructive criticism and genuine praise. From there springs the institutions and ideas necessary to safeguard liberty: checks and balances, civil rights, and the rule of law are all personifications of equality playing out on a larger stage. A truly democratic society is held together not by fear but instead by a common understanding of equality. In order for us to reap the benefits that equality confers, we must not only understand it, but also apply it fairly. Equality is not achieved when we choose to apply it selectively, giving ourselves or our friends exemptions.

What did I do with these newfound beliefs? A meeting between two complicit individuals revealed a mutual sense of guilt. Apologies were made, as were acknowledgements that we could both do better. But even then, I do not believe that we achieved equality in that moment; I cannot take back what was or was not done. To assume that an apology made with words or gestures can mend the pain we cause to other people is failing to see the bigger picture. Instead, I imagine that I am working toward achieving equality by committing to be more cognizant of my flaws and more accepting of others', by committing to be more emphatic and less egotistic. And though ideas like

these may yet lack concrete habits, they are, as Dr. Allen pointed out, like the Declaration of Independence, like the UN Charter, like any statement of principle, a starting point; no more, and no less.