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Equality-What Is It Good For

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At a recent conference, one of the workshops was "Obama and Ethnicity". One of the panelists was talking about how, in the Age of Obama, that equality and equity, might or might not take on new meaning.

What I wanted to know was, "what is equality"?

Some forms of equality seem clear, like equal pay for equal or comparable work. Yet, for many years, teachers in private/parochial schools earned less than teachers in public schools, doing the same work in the same industry.

And what do we want to be equal to? Many African-Americans heard growing up that one had to be twice as good to be just as good (or equal); though no one ever said what was "once as good".

For example, an African American had to have a graduate degree to compete with a non-African with only an undergraduate diploma, to be considered just as good, just as equal, for the same career or job. The obvious of course is that African Americans, by implication, were not equal at all, unless we could demonstrate a measurable superiority to other African Americans - be "a credit to our race".

In NYC last year the police stopped and frisked over half a million, mainly young men, ninety percent who were African or Latin descendants; ninety percent without cause or found to have cause.

I don't think we want equal here - that the police stop an equal percentage of

non-African, non-Latin males. That would mean that unnecessary stopping and frisking would go on at a much higher pace. What we want is for it to stop, not be equalized. An argument could be made that if there was equality in stopping and frisking it would, because of reluctance and indignation on the part of non-Africans and non-Latinos, within and without the police force, the practice would be seriously curtailed or stopped altogether. Maybe.

The gay community is proposing Marriage Equality. According to the Marriage Equality document, "Marriage offers 1,138 Federal benefits and responsibilities, not including hundreds more offered by every state."

In other words, what is wanted is very clearly defined; impervious to any other interpretation; the same for all in the same condition; and if changed, would change in the same way for everyone.

In the movie, "When Harry Met Sally", in the restaurant scene, a grandmotherly woman, after witnessing what she thought was an orgasmic display by Sally, said to the waiter, "I'll have what she's having". Very funny. But what she thought she wanted, what she thought she was witnessing, a woman in the throes of public ecstasy, possibly brought on by the food she was eating, was not true. Sally was trying to prove to Harry that women could fake an orgasm, and men wouldn't know the difference. The older woman wanted an equal experience based on what she *thought* she saw; what she thought was happening, but in fact was something else altogether.

The point is, when we are talking about equality, are we talking about it in the same way? Do we know what it is we want? Do we want what we *think* some others have?

When African descendants in North America were granted a freedom that should have never had to be obtained, what many seemed to want was to blend into American society. The only model we had as to how we were going to live was the model that was at work. So we wanted what they already had.

A few years ago in New York City, there was a woman's health fair testing for calcium deficiencies. The profile for who should attend said "white woman over forty", and some other designations. Black women were up in arms. Why were they excluded from the health test? What the organizers had not said in their literature was that osteoporosis, the result of calcium deficiency, was chiefly an issue for small-framed and smaller-boned European descendants; that African descendant women were not nearly as likely to suffer from bone fractures because of their larger bone mass. Having African American women take the test would have been a waste of resources. This is a case of wanting to be treated equally based on omitted information.

Equality can be an addition and a subtraction; a gaining and a losing; ascendancy and descendancy; failure and success. Equality can be looked at socially, economically, politically and legally. When the scales are unequal, somebody gains and somebody loses. And therein lays resistance.

I don't think it occurred to us in the beginning that what the larger society had that we seemed to want was based on our enslavement as a marker for who they were. To be called "white" had no meaning without a "black". Freedom obtained its meaning from enslavement. Without enslavement there would have been no need to define who was free and who was not and to devise and derive status from such designations.

So when we obtained "freedom", those who formerly had the coveted designation apparently felt a need to continue defining themselves, so as not to have equal social

status with former unequals. Welcome "Jim Crow", "separate but equal" and a renewed interest in the science of eugenics.

Equality also reads like it means assimilation, a desire to blend in and become like everyone else; our Africanness invisible, "color blind". According to Geoffrey Hodgson, author of "America in Our Time", in his chapter on The Crisis of the 60s, "The overwhelming majority of black Americans, in spite of the misgivings about how they would be treated, said they wanted not to get out of white society, but to get deeper in it." (pg 159)

The statement came from a survey that reflecting white social anxiety about their own status, what was going to happen to them; what did these people want from us? If we African descendants wanted to be more like them, then they were all right; they had done nothing wrong; and if they had, they had made honest mistakes, and mostly, it was hoped, we were not going to ask for anything – if all they wanted was to be like us.

But equality as we know it, as we talk about it, assumes a default position that the dominant culture is right, just as it is, with maybe a few tweaks needed here and there. That in order to be accepted we need to be less of what we have become, albeit in the face of incredible odds and challenges, and more like some other; dropping our culture, our ways, as required by the larger group to which we might want to become embedded ; keeping only that with which the dominant group feels comfortable. We might not be able to sit in the school cafeterias as a group anymore.

The problem with equality is it is not self-determining, but a state determined by others, to be granted by others, who would decide when and if and how it is obtained. It seems we would be in a constant state of striving, never arriving.

Fairness, equity and justice are sometimes used interchangeably with equality, but they are not always necessarily the same thing.

It seems that we should determine what it is we want; how we want to live in this society, and let the society, if they feel the need, to adjust itself to us.

I am just saying.

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