

8 February 2018

Reject Equality



We cannot predict or properly imagine what our society will look and feel like when we stop trying to regard all people as the same and, instead, see each person as a human being: a unique expression of humanity.

Some of you reading the above will immediately protest that I am denying the equality of all people. I am not arguing for or against treating any other person as my equal. We use the word 'equality' too loosely, and it is wrong to treat every person equally in a society that cares about the welfare, health and happiness of all the people who are part of that society.

No two people are equal in health, in access to resources, in ambition and in physical and mental ability. Different people are fulfilled, made happy and satisfied by different things. While two people may be equally matched, say, economically and mentally, they may have different food needs. Two people who equally enjoy watching tennis may not be equal in physical ability.

Men and women are not the same, as any two men are not the same, any two women are not the same, any two girls are not the same, any two boys are not the same. Including physical differences, a particular man and a particular woman may be more similar than that man and another man or that woman and another woman.

The treatment of many women by many men is unacceptable, not because men and women are equal, but because they are both human beings. There are undoubtedly historical reasons why some men feel entitled to treat women the way they do – it is that sense of entitlement that is the crux of this. And such a sense of entitlement, also historically based, has some people behave unacceptably towards others because those others are black or coloured or servants or children or don't fit into a heterosexual gender stereotype.

To attack someone who has a different view of the world from the one you hold is also unacceptable. You can certainly criticise them or argue with them, but you are no more entitled to your view than they are to theirs. Diversity of opinion, lifestyle, beliefs and appearance is one of the elements that make living in a society interesting and, I would argue, worthwhile.

The increasing number of people, especially women, who are speaking up about atrocious behaviour to which they have been subjected, mainly by men, is to be welcomed, even while the behaviour of the perpetrators is to be condemned. The behaviour, along with bullying in workplaces, schools and other institutions, as well as online, is an indication of a disease affecting society.

For the reasons given earlier, a solution does not lie in treating or regarding other people as equals. The solution lies in bringing about a change in thinking, one that regards other people with respect and compassion. I can only guess at what might bring this about.

It would require a concerted effort in primary and secondary schools and in the tertiary institutions that train the teachers. It would require a change in the material published through all media – print, electronic broadcast, online – by those who control those media. It would need a monumental change of attitude for our politicians. It would require a complete change of awareness and consciousness for

everyone. It would take every individual taking responsibility for telling those who are silent about unconscionable attacks or laugh about them, that this is not acceptable.

In my own lifetime there have already been massive changes in some societies. Even into the 1960s, women in Australia were not able to obtain a loan without the backing of a male guarantor. Women who worked in the public service, including teachers, had to resign if they married. Same-gender marriage was unheard of and, probably for most people, unimaginable.

The early 1960s saw the first woman head of government – Sirimavo Bandaranaike in what was then still called Ceylon. Australia elected its first female prime minister in 2010. There have been other women elected as president or prime minister of their respective countries, but they are still regarded as outliers. Societies have a long way to change before we stop remarking on woman being elected to positions of political power.

Corporations that have numerous women on their boards and in managerial positions are known to be more resilient to economic vicissitudes and are generally more profitable.¹

The historically subjugated positions of women in our ('western') societies is still seen in the anachronistic ritual at weddings where the bride is 'given away' by her father to the groom. Historically, a woman was essentially her father's property until passed on to her husband, to become his property. Enticement of a woman away from her husband, was an offence against the husband. Rape of a woman was a crime against her father or husband, or against the man who owned the village or farm where she lived. Husbands had a right to demand sex from their wives and a man could not be charged with rape against his wife.

While the laws have changed, the attitudes they reflected are only changing slowly. There are still many men who regard women and some other 'types of people' in their society as being in some way inferior to them and fair game to be used in any way that these men desire to use them.

In attempting to address this situation, we naturally and easily make the mistake of pronouncing that all people are equal and we blind ourselves to difference that we should be taking note of. These are not the differences that allow us to easily group people and label them. Two people with the same colour skin are not the same. Two people paralysed from the waist down are not the same. Two people who believe in a deity that created the world in six days are not the same. In each case it is easy to find more things that set them apart than things that unite them. The only thing that each one of these individuals has in common with every other one is that they are all human beings.

The United Nations has, through the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, attempted to encapsulate both the fact that we are all human beings and that some human beings may need to be assisted to allow them full expression of their humanity. The UN *Declaration* does not say that we all equal; it says that we have equal rights and, in one Article, obligations. Inherent in the *Declaration* is the notion that some people have special needs.

In 1875 Karl Marx wrote: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need." (*Critique of the Gotha program*) The sentiment predates Marx and is usually connected with the principles of communism. However, a society need not be organised according to communist principles to embody the sentiment behind Marx's words.

Our society taxes people largely according to their ability to pay – based on income – because not all people have an equal ability to financially contribute to society. Much of this tax revenue pays for infrastructure and services that every member of the society benefits from and a lot of it is distributed unevenly to people who have needs that are unequal.

For our society to serve everyone, we need to recognise each person as being unique. As Monty Python put it so brilliantly in *Life of Brian*² when a crowd is told that they are all individuals: they repeat in unison, "We are all individuals." Except for one old man who shouts, "I'm not."

In our 'modern' society we pretend to ignore in each person we meet anything that sets them apart, because that is the politically correct thing to do. It is ethically and morally the wrong thing to do. These differences in us make us interesting and worth taking the trouble to get to know. Those differences are expressions of our humanity. We owe it to each person we know and to each person we meet to acknowledge those unique characteristics. We can then relate to each of them as the unique individuals they are, without judgement or prejudice, without any sense of superiority or inferiority.

In the workplace, one person may be in a position to direct another, but that should be related purely to the work environment and their respective, defined roles. Those defined roles are accepted by each as relating to the workplace and have no relevance outside it. Those roles also are no reflection on the relative worth or otherwise of those people. Ann may be Andrew's manager at work. In the volunteer fire brigade, Andrew may be Ann's superior. In each situation, these are roles they play; the roles are not who Andrew and Ann are. That one of them is in a heterosexual relationship and the other in a same-gender relationship is irrelevant. So is the fact that one of them was born in Sweden and the other in Zimbabwe.

I look forward to living in a society in which differences are acknowledged and celebrated, and simultaneously made nothing of. This may sound like a contradiction, but it is only so if we are unable to live with contradiction. We tend to like everything in easy-to-comprehend boxes. Concepts such as a poor millionaire, a rich pauper, a healthy person who lives with cancer or a sad comedian are difficult for us. What about a man restricted to a wheelchair, who has almost no usable muscles and is unable to speak, yet is celebrated as one of the world's top experts in cosmology.

Acknowledging differences in people and making nothing of these – not having them be in any way an issue – is hard for us to imagine, because we are thrown to categorise everyone and everything. I look forward to that being the norm, because it would make life easier for all of us and leave us with more freedom to enjoy ourselves and each other. I would have more energy to devote to things that are important, fulfilling and joyful and would enhance my life. It might even make it possible for *Homo sapiens* to survive.

1. <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/ecpe/why-diversity-matters-women-on-boards-of-directors/>
2. Handmade Films, 1979