When Equality Doesn't Get You There

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I sprinted for the spot closest to my teacher's brown creaky rocking chair as she called for us to sit on the purple dragon rug towards the front of our classroom. The walls of that classroom, the last one in the first grade hall, held colors of every hue. Our creations hung on clothespins like they were masterpieces, and the science corner housed enticing jars and tools for us to explore. But that rug. I loved that rug. This was where we always did the most exciting activities that allowed my mind to take flight. I cherished my time spent at the feet of that smiley purple dragon as a first grader. After we'd made it to the floor, my teacher began to pass out little red envelopes to each student and hushed chatter filled the space between us as we guessed what the envelopes might possibly contain.

Mrs. Fortin took her spot in her chair and instructed us to open our envelopes. Something about her curly brown hair that was now mostly gray and the permanent wrinkles carved into her cheeks from one too many smiles helped me know, even as a first grader, just how wise she was. I tore open the sealed envelope and pulled out a card that read "Rattlesnake Bite." Huh? One by one she asked us to read aloud what was on the small card inside of our red envelopes. Paper cut. Broken leg. Headache. Sore throat. Skinned knee. Sunburn. Each contained an injury that we were to imagine we had for a moment. I closed my eyes and shuddered at the thought of having a rattlesnake bite.

As we read off our imaginary injuries, Mrs. Fortin tossed us each a brown band-aid. I glanced at the band-aid and then at my rattlesnake bite card. Chatter again billowed into the room as some kids began to point out that a band-aid wouldn't fix their problem like it would some others. It certainly wouldn't fix mine.

She then began a discussion that would permeate my brain and etch itself into my thoughts for decades. "Class, is it *fair* that everyone got a band-aid?" I quickly nodded as my

early-bred-daughter-of-an-engineer mathematical brain took charge of analyzing the question. Everyone got an equal amount of supplies to fix their injury. Fair. Period. Then my eyes darted from my rattlesnake card to the paper cut card of the classmate sitting next to me. My nod slowed and turned into a shake as mathematical equivalencies faded from my thoughts and suffering human faces in desperate need of help replaced them. No. No that's not fair.

I'd heard my parents chant "life's not fair" repeatedly in exasperated response to hundreds of arguments surrounding subjects so menial that only siblings could find a way to make them contentious. And I heard it just a few months ago, except this time with a more empathetic tone, when my mother-in-law commented on the recent tornado that struck the small, poverty ridden town of Selma, Alabama just an hour from her own home. We were on our routine Sunday facetime call when she told us about the tornado. "It's just not fair for those people." I sat there silently, internalizing the thought of a tornado being unfair. I understood where she was coming from, but I couldn't help but thinking that nobody could've controlled the tornado. Unlucky perhaps, but not *unfair*. Even tornado experts don't know exactly when or where a tornado will touchdown before it does (Davies-Jones, 1995). Less than one quarter of all tornadoes even have an issued warning and when they are issued, warning times average only three minutes before impact (Adams & Golden, 2000).

Three minutes. Imagine having three minutes to wrangle your family and outrun a wind monster travelling as fast as a car speeding down the freeway (Davies-Jones, 1995). I grew up in tornado alley and was terrified of these storms. The warning siren for our neighborhood was right in the corner of our front yard, so we could hear it loud and clear everytime it went off. Though my family was fortunate enough to never get hit by a tornado, the fear of these storms seeped into my dreams. I can distinctly remember having dreams where a twister carrying cows

and trucks was coming my way and I couldn't move. I wanted to run, my brain was screaming at every muscle fiber in my body to run, but I couldn't. And the truth is nobody else can run either. With three minutes to flee to some illusive place of safety, residents in neighborhoods are forced to brace themselves wherever they are for impact. Since we can't outrun them or truly prepare for them, successfully minimizing the impact of tornadoes and other natural disasters points toward disaster recovery efforts as an indispensable component (Laska, 2006).

But the more I read, the more I realize that the impact of such events often have little to do with the category of storm and too much to do with the political economy and social equality of the affected region (Sovacool et al., 2018). It seems to me that these natural disasters may be a little more unnatural than we realize. Vulnerability is not just determined by an unlucky set of coordinates, rather how both human and environmental factors are coupled and with what degree of fairness they are treated (Schnieder & Kunze, 2022). While the storms themselves can be considered random, previous history shows that disaster recovery efforts have resulted in a degree of hidden injustice that is difficult to ignore (Sovacool et al., 2018).

I was in Tampa, Florida once, right in the path of a brewing hurricane. Gas stations were packed with cars within miles and miles of my apartment and you couldn't find bread on grocery store shelves anywhere. The once warm and inviting homes that lined the streets of the neighborhoods around me that I explored each day in the beautiful Florida sun were now boarded up with scrap pieces of plywood that were undoubtedly used for this purpose at least once before evidenced by the plethora of rusty nails and banged up corners. Sandbags began to pile in people's doorways and clouds gloomed overhead. Something tangible had shifted in the air. I remember feeling unprepared myself, but assuming that the hurricane wouldn't affect me like the many times our tornado warning went off with no damage done. But then it affected me.

I went to visit an elderly man named Mike before the storm was predicted to hit. Mike had become a dear friend of mine through my church. His New Jersey accent and crooked-tooth smile invited me deeper into his life with each fantastical story he told. He'd once cooked in a michelin star kitchen, with gadgets and gismos aplenty (Musker, 1989). Now, he had a microwave to cook what little he could afford. He once played in a jazz ensemble for his worship group at church, but now his fingers were trapped in an arthritic prison. I could tell by the mildew-tinted stench coming from inside his apartment that flooding had wreaked havoc there before. As we sat on his doorstep swatting mosquitoes away, I asked him what he thought of this hurricane. With a smirk, Mike pulled out a dime from his pocket. "Heads it gets me, tails it misses." He tossed and caught it with ease and then uncovered the result. Heads. A shrug of cynical hopelessness bounced off his shoulders as if to say that he'd accepted his fate. He went on to explain that because he lived in government subsidized housing, he depended on the city to prepare his home. His health made it impossible for him to change a lightbulb at home, let alone board up his windows and barricade the walls with heavy sandbags.

Now, the hurricane didn't end up coming our way. The coin was wrong. In fact, it took a sharp eastward turn and left us with heavy rainstorms that were not uncharacteristic for Tampa. But I was so bothered by how helpless Mike felt, and how helpless he truthfully would've been had the storm actually come our way. I couldn't help but think about what may have happened to Mike and about what's happened to people like him who weren't so fortunate, who've had to sit in their hiding places and take the brute force of mother nature.

In the case of Hurricane Katrina, many of the poorer and predominately African American neighborhoods were in lower plains, more prone to flooding (Sovacool et al., 2018). Pause. My eyes have glossed over that last sentence hundreds of times without thinking twice.

But why were they there? Why did this cluster of poor African Americans exist in what just so happened to be the most geographically vulnerable location in all of Louisana? From what I've found, this cluster doesn't seem to be coincidental at all. During the Great Depression, millions of homes were foreclosed (Wheelock, 2008). In response, the federal government established the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HLOC) (Swope et al., 2022). These agencies worked in tandem to conduct neighborhood appraisals to determine investment risk and generate a color-coded residential security map. Neighborhoods were ranked from "A," best, to "D," hazardous (Swope et al., 2022). When a neighborhood was determined hazardous, it was colored red on the map - thus coining the term redlining.

It didn't surprise me to learn that part of the appraisal process included an assessment of race and ethnicity. What did surprise me was that so many of the redlined neighborhoods looked a lot like the one I grew up in and loved - a healthy mixture of immigrants and black families. On the flip side almost no neighborhoods that received an "A" or "B" rating included black or immigrant residents (Markley, 2022). Homebuyers of color were then disproportionately shut out from obtaining home loans for housing developments with higher ratings deepening racial residential segretation (Swope et al., 2022). Ultimately, this resulted in clusters of lower income, minority families living smack dab in the middle of New Orleans flood planes.

Hurricane Katrina was a category 5 storm, but the majority of the deaths that Katrina caused were from an engineering failure in New Orleans' levee system - a mishap that resulted in the flooding of over 100,000 homes (Henkel, 2006). But get this - most of these families didn't have flood insurance, so insurance companies refused to cover the damage done by the flood. Federal aid went towards damage caused by the hurricane itself, not the levee failure (Craemer, 2010). Renters, which happen to be many of the same poor, African American demographic,

received little to no help with rebuilding costs (Henkel, 2006). White neighborhoods received 60 more temporary trailers per 1,000 residents than predominantly black neighborhoods (Craemer, 2010). So while the storms themselves have no bias towards one city or another, resources do. This keeps marginalized communities in a cycle nearly impossible to escape. It seems to me that the unfairness of the storm is not found in its path of destruction, rather in the human's role in the path of rebuilding. In this way, I think humans *do* control the storms - just different versions of them.

Despite a similar and predominantly black demographic to New Oreleans, the recent catastrophe in Selma has brought more government disaster recovery funding than expected in hopes of protecting and restoring its history steeped streets and buildings. But shouldn't the worth of the current residents be enough? It feels unfair to me that there are discrepancies at all in recovery aid. I shudder thinking about what Selma's recovery aid may have looked like had disaster chosen to strike in a demographically identical but historically vanilla city 30 miles south.

What makes Selma history steeped and worth protecting in the eyes of those in charge of distributing aid are the events that took place there during the civil rights movement. One event of particular note famous to Selma is known as Bloody Sunday. As the civil rights movement reached its peak, nonviolent activists arranged a march for voting rights from Selma, Alabama to Montgomery, the state capital (Pratt, 2017). On March 7th, 1965, three Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) lieutenants, the organization with which Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was associated, met at Brown Chapel to determine who would co-lead the march with non-violent veteran John Lewis of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) (Salaam & Muhammad, 2015). Rumors had been spread that these marchers may be met with

violence from Selma's police force and some white residents, so make it fair, they flipped a coin. Hosea Williams, ordained minister and passionate activist, won the toss (or as he would joke years later, he actually lost the toss). He would be up front to march beside Lewis.

As an aspiring statistician, this coin toss interests me. It triggers an involuntary something inside me that was pounded into the fleshy tables of my heart by one of my first statistics professors. The mathematical theory behind statistics leans on randomization as one condition that must be met for the math to provide accurate and trustworthy results (Suresh, 2011). This is because randomization helps avoid biases, eliminates the effects of confounding variables, and permits the use of probability theory (Suresh, 2011). In other words, it makes things fair so that the numbers can tell the objective story they were designed to tell. If a true random sample of the population of interest is selected, then conclusions made from studying just fifty people can be applied to the entire population of thousands. Powerful. If treatments are randomly assigned to subjects appropriately, then correlation *can* be deemed causation. Powerful. Randomness in statistics is fairness.

However, it interests me that when p-values and scatterplots are the furthest things from their minds, these 3 lieutenants still turned to chance to make their decision as if it were the only way to make it fair. This signals to me that this idea of letting chance make objective decisions feels right in some scenarios because it separates the decision from our own messy, human opinions. But is randomization what constitutes fairness everywhere else?

I think that in some cases, the answer is yes. For example, it would seem most fair to be randomly assigned a judge rather than having one hand selected who was particularly passionate about holding at bay the crime you've committed. It seems fair that natural disasters don't have a mind of their own and are only puppetted by science. It seemed fair on that spring day in 1965 to

leave the task of assigning the leader of a potentially life threatening march up to chance with the flip of a coin. But if other scenarios were handled with randomization, we might have something to say about it. Think prison sentences. The malicious murderer walks free with the right flip of a coin while the struggling single-mom of four with a speeding ticket way past due is sentenced to life in prison. Think jobs. The industrious international student upon finally finishing his PhD in Neuroscience lands a job as a fry cook at McDonald's while the high school drop-out becomes a professor of law at Yale. What's complicated is knowing which decisions need the help of our messy, human opinions and which one's are better left up to the flip of a coin. Fair or not, chance decided that Hosea Williams would be front and center leading the march while Andrew Young and James Bevel would stay back to handle logistics in case there was trouble (Pratt, 2017).

Throughout that muggy Alabama day in 1965, marchers assembled at Brown Chapel. Many arrived straight from church, still wearing suits, ties, dresses, and high heels - their Sunday best (Pratt, 2017). Before leaving Brown Chapel, marchers gathered around Lewis and were reminded in a sermon of thoughts undoubtedly worthy of being preached on a Sunday, that no matter what happened, they were to hold true to the principles of nonviolence that had been practiced by Dr. King's followers for the entirety of the civil rights movement.

Dr. King's nonviolence ideals were founded on a Christian principle commonly known as the golden rule (Miller, 2015). Dr. King understood that if peace was what he desired for himself, then that was what he must offer. I can't doubt for a moment that Brown Chapel, the very chapel where these marchers stood waiting to peacefully fight to be treated themselves as they'd been treating others, was likely the place where many of them had first learned to live the golden rule themselves.

But the golden rule isn't just a Christian principle. Religions across the globe teach the idea of treating others the way you'd want to be treated yourself to emphasize how a moral life should be lived. Even non-religious people grab hold of this idea, some even using it as justification for their belief in the uselessness of organized religion (Vogel, 2004). The non-religious share the same sentiment as the Jews on this matter. The Talmud, an ancient text containing Jewish qutoes and stories states that the golden rule is "the entire law [and] all the rest is commentary" (Talmud, Shabbat 3id, 1500 BC). It's as if they're saying forget about commandments and rituals for a moment and consider what might happen if we were kind, if we treated others how they deserve to be treated, how we would want to be treated. Wouldn't everything else naturally fall into place? There wouldn't be a need for the commandment "thou shalt not kill" because nobody would ever even consider it (KJV, 1611, Exo. 20:13). There wouldn't be a need for "honor thy father and mother" because honoring would happen naturally (KJV, 1611, Exo. 20:12).

Mastering this principle is the goal of many religions and strongly connects with their beliefs in what happens after death. Christians believe that their placement in the afterlife is based on their belief in Jesus Christ and their good choices (Vilaythong, 2010). Buddhists and Hindus believe that they will be reborn after this life, but that their status in the next life is also contingent upon their good deeds in this one (Corning, 2011). Religious or not, humans recognize the biological need to cooperate with one another (Sun, 2013). It's almost as if the golden rule is a thread in our DNA that has allowed us to progress as far as we have. The Selma marchers were no different. They understood as Dr. King did that living this principle was the only way to make a lasting difference. Before the marchers set off for Montgomery, the floor of Brown Chapel shook as 600+ knees hit the floor in prayer, in part asking for the strength needed

to live the golden rule when it was highly likely that they were about to be met with inhumane brutality (Salaam & Muhammad, 2015). I'm not confident that every ear could hear the prayer Lewis offered, but that every heart felt it. As many marchers remember it, there was no singing or shouting as they set off towards Montgomery some 50 miles away - just a feeling of reverence as they listened to the beat of their own hearts falling in perfect rhythmic syncrhonization with the sound of their shoes hitting the pavement (Miller, 2015).

As they reached Broad Street, they turned left and began their climb up the north side of Edmund Pettus Bridge - a landmark in Selma named after a Ku Klux Klan Grand Dragon (Pratt, 2017). When the front of the double-file river of marchers reached the crest of the bridge, leaders Hosea Williams and John Lewis stopped dead still. There waiting at the other end of the bridge was a storm they couldn't outrun. A "sea of blue-helmeted, blue-uniformed Alabama state troopers, line after line of them, dozens of battle-ready lawmen. Behind them were several dozen more armed men, some on horseback, all wearing khaki clothing, many carrying clubs the size of baseball bats" (Pratt, 2017).

After being told that their assemble was "unlawful" and "a danger to the public", Major John Cloud issued a first and final warning to the marchers. They had two minutes to flee to their own place of safety (Pratt, 2017). Not having it in his nature to retreat, but knowing that moving forward would put the marchers in danger of a storm they too couldn't outrun, Lewis decided that the only option left was to kneel once again in prayer. Williams and Lewis crouched to their knees and so followed the valiant army of marchers behind them. As Lewis began to pray aloud, the blue sea of troopers shuffled to prepare for battle. One minute and five seconds after Major Cloud issued his final two minute warning, all hell broke loose (Miller, 2015). Within seconds,

the storm unleashed and the marchers were enveloped in a tornado of swinging clubs, flying fists, charging horses, and a cloud of tear gas.

Something about the Selma stormcloud and gascloud got me thinking: neither cloud would take the life of any Selma resident and both would leave the city devastated, but one felt so much more *wrong* than the other. I get that the tornado caused more physical and economic damage, but somehow the events that occurred that spring day in 1965 feel far more devastating to me. It seems even harder for me to grasp with my values and perspectives in 2023 that the violence with which the marchers were treated could have possibly been seen as fair by some passersby. Why is this? What makes one feel so much more fair than the other?

I think that the idea of fairness evolves with time as history teaches its lessons. In biblical days, the fair punishment for commiting adultery was death. Not anymore. A fair wage for my first job at Chick-fil-a was $7.25. Not anymore. What was fair in the past, may not be fair now, and vice versa. However, I think at least one thing remains constant. From what I've learned, our pull towards being treated fairly is undeniably innate. It's ingrained in you and me, woven into the very strands of our DNA (Sun, 2013). Think about the following scenarios:

- Is it fair to keep a convicted prisoner locked up if DNA evidence later proves that he/she is innocent?
- Is it fair to pay a 5 year old and a 15 year old the same amount in allowance each week?
- Is it fair for a teacher who made a mistake in grading a calculus exam to refuse to correct the mistake at the expense of the student's grade?
- Is it fair for regulations surrounding voting registration to prevent marginalized groups from being able to register?

If you answered "no" to each of these, you are living proof of this natural sense of fairness. Many of us, despite different life stories, feel the same about scenarios where basic justice is called into question. I first noticed this innate sense fairness while spending time with my cousin and her twin toddlers. At the time, they were two 18 month old tornadoes of energy

and emotion - twinadoes if you will. I began to notice that if one twin was held by their mother, the other, without fail, would ask to be held too. They felt the need for equal love and attention, even if they'd previously been satisfied with the attention they were given before seeing her sister with Mom. Not even two years old, yet they already were concerned with being treated fairly.

Another cousin of mine, the brown capuchin monkey, illustrates this too. In 2003, a group of researchers set out to see if this pull towards fairness was uniquely human, or if we shared it with our animal neighbors. Researchers trained the monkeys to use rocks as currency in exchange for food reward (Bronson & de Waal, 2003). Once the monkeys learned the system, they were paired up and each given a rock to exchange for yet another food reward. If the monkey returned the rock, it was rewarded with either a grape or a cucumber. Grapes were highly favored by the monkeys while the cucumbers weren't - I don't blame them. When both monkeys received the same reward regardless of whether or not it was a grape, they were willing to make the exchange. However, when one monkey was given a cucumber while their partner received a grape, the monkey refused to participate in the exchange. Some even threw the cucumbers back at the researchers in disgust. The inequality effect in this experiment proved significant signalling that we are truly not alone in our desire to be treated fairly. By the way, you'd be happy to hear that Bronson and de Waal must have taken the same statistics class that I did. In their study of the brown capuchins, they randomized with textbook precision. This is one reason why they are able to make such powerful conclusions about monkeys having an innate sense of fairness like we do.

While this innate 6th sense of sorts may be present in some other species, humans still have a unique desire to cooperate, even if it acts against our own evolutionary self interest (Liesen, 1999). Animals, on the other hand, are strongly driven by their need to survive.

It feels far fetched to imagine humans believing the same way, believing in survival above all else. A Christian parable in the New Testament highlights this principle. Peter, a follower of Jesus the Christ, asked how many times he must forgive someone. To emphasize that there should be no end to our mercy, Jesus set up the story of an unforgiving servant. This servant owed 10,000 talents to his ruler, an amount that would have taken him 160,000 years to earn (Martens, 1956). Rather than being taken into slavery or cast into prison as the law would have permitted, the king had compassion and completely forgave this enormous debt. This same servant, just forgiven of a debt larger than I can comphrehend, then turned around and refused to forgive the debt of someone who owed him 100 pence (Martens, 1956). If this 100 pence debt was worth $100 in our money today, the 10,000 talent debt of this unforgiving servant would have exceeded $1,000,000,000 (Holland, 2017). In this situation, it seems that this servant wasn't concerned with the golden rule or with fairness or really tuning into his human sense of cooperation. He was consumed with improving his chances of survival. To me, this seems like a survival of the fittest attitude and when placed in human terms, it seems absurd, universally unfair. But in the animal world, it's different.

In 1953, an ecological tornado of brown tree snakes touched down on the island of Guam. The brown tree snake had been accidentally introduced to the island of Guam at the end of World War II when it became an important military base and transfer point for Allied forces (Rafferty, 2020). Much like the minimal warning time given to neighborhoods in the path of a raging tornado, native species to Guam were not evolutionarily designed to defend against the

brown tree snake and couldn't outrun the impact they brought to their habitats. They had no chance of survival (Prentis et al., 2008). From the first spotting in 1953 to today, the brown tree snake would devastate almost a dozen native bird, bat and lizard species (Perry & Vice, 2009). Many of these birds served as a critical pollinators for the island's plant life and their decline brought about the devastation of plant life on the island, including two species of fruit trees that significantly contributed to Guam's economy (Rafferty, 2020). This brown tree snake domination continued for decades with no real push back from the native species that were being pushed out, even though, in my mind, this feels unfair (Perry & Vice, 2009).

In my mind, there's some degree of unfairness in an alien species devastating so many native species. After all, we've seen this habitat takeover of sorts in the human world too. We just don't see this happen in our world without some sort of push back or demand for justice. However, you don't exactly see protesters with signs fighting for the lives and rights of the Guam kingfisher. In the brown tree snake's world, this is the circle of life and survival of the fittest seems to be the ruler against which fairness is measured. But there seems to be more to me than mere survival. I want to do more than just outlive the humans around me.

Another realm where survival of the fittest rules is in sports and there seems to be an emerging invasive species of sorts here too. Professional surfer Bethany Hamilton has refused to participate in future World Surf League events after a recent policy change has allowed the participation of transgender women to compete in women's competitions - biological men competing against women (Greenberg, 2023). The official rule for the World Surf League was adopted from the International Surfing Association, which updated their policy to remain in harmony with Olympic regulations (International Surfing Association, 2023). The official rule states that any athlete who was assigned male at birth and identifies as a man is eligible to

compete in a men's event or as a man in a mixed event. Any athlete who was assigned female at birth and identifies as a woman is eligible to compete in a women's event or as a woman in a mixed event.

This is the traditional divvying up process. It fits what we're used to and makes division in sport simple. Recent updates have determined that an athlete who was assigned male at birth, who identifies as a woman, may still compete in the men's competition category. However, in the event that she wishes to compete in a women's event or as a woman in a mixed event, she will be eligible to do so if she has provided a written and signed declaration that she identifies as a woman and that she has maintained a testosterone concentration in her serum below a certain threshold continuously for the previous 12 months (International Surfing Association, 2023). This muddies up the simple male-female dividing line, resulting in controversy and a wide array of opinions from fans as well as people otherwise indifferent to the sport of surfing. I personally possess a wide array of opinions within my own mind on this topic.

At one moment, I think it's unfair for stronger individuals to compete against weaker ones. I don't think it's a problem that can be solved in the weight room either. In general, males are biologically stronger than females and there's really no natural way of changing that (Geary, 2010). In the next moment, I'm thinking that aren't some athletes within the same gender divisions genetically stronger than others anyways? Our muscle mass and body fat ratios are largely influenced by our genetic make-up. Given two individuals of the same height and weight, eating the exact same diet, and exercising on the exact same plan, one could still emerge stronger than the other. It's DNA, hard coded inside of us. Does this give naturally gifted athletes an advantage in sport deemed unfair? No. This is a phenomenon that the athlete themselves has no control over. In fact, this is highlighted and sought after by coaches and praised by the public.

The right decision in this scenario is confusing to me, but what I do know is that every human being is worth the extra time and consideration, no matter how muddy the line.

Hamilton spoke up claiming that this new policy will inevitably lead to male-bodied dominance in surfing as it has in other sports where this rule has been instituted such as swimming and running (Greenberg, 2023). And I don't think this is Hamilton just trying to make excuses. Hamilton was attacked by a 14-foot tiger shark at age 13 resulting in the loss of her left arm (Greenberg, 2023). Some may claim that it wasn't fair for her to have to compete against two-armed athletes. Maybe not, but she really didn't have a choice. In fact, I don't think it's absurd to wonder if it may be possible that judges of competitions were so caught off guard and impressed by the skill that Hamilton was able to develop with only one arm that they subconsciously leaned towards higher scores - bias. Perhaps this subconscious bias gives Hamilton an advantage just as strong as the hormones.

It would seem that fairness is dependent upon the extent to which human choice creates an imbalance. Maybe not the disaster itself, but the resources guiding the recovery. Maybe not the naturally gifted athlete, but the hormone enhanced one. Imbalances created by human choices are inevitable. They'll always be there, sometimes without warning, and sometimes with no place to hide. So I guess it's up to me to consider my own biases and figure out how to make them work for me in a way that is as fair as possible.

We see bias everywhere. It's in almost all of our choices - why I like to sit next to my good friend at a work meeting instead of my boss who yells at me from time to time, why I almost always go for a pair of flats over high-heels, why I will never go to Walmart on a Saturday night if I can avoid it. Bias is systematic distortion, a calculated shift (Suresh, 2011). Though sometimes subconscious, it's based on human preference. When used correctly, bias

keeps us comfortable, safe, and can actually help us make fair decisions. It's the reason companies hire the PhD candidate and not the high school drop out, the reason judges lock up the murderer and forgive the 100 pence debt of the single mom. But when used without caution, bias causes rifts of injustice (Gilovich, 2002). The more this topic swirls in my brain, the more I recognize bias happening around me.

Just the other day, I overheard a coworker complaining about how his professor graded a couple of his recent papers. He'd written a beautifully poignant essay about men on the battlefield that received a C but when he chose to appeal to his professor's bold feminist stances by writing an essay about Taylor Swift's "The Man", he received an A. This was intriguing to me, so I tracked him down after work and begged for more details. He'd claimed that both essays were written with equal effort and executed with comparable skill and even allowed for me to have a look to see if I agreed. I did. Both essays were impressive, yet a 20 point gulf separated them. I think if it were me, I'd rather have a coin decide my grade than to have bias taint the decision. Just thinking about it sparks something inside of me that makes me feel so wronged. It makes me want to throw a cucumber in the teacher's face (Bronson & de Waal, 2003). Coin or bias, there's a chance that you receive a grade lower than you deserve, but with the coin at least there's a statistical chance. Bias often thwart opportunities, they get rid of our statistical chances at achieving something - and maybe that has a lot to do with fairness. Perhaps the outcomes won't ever be perfectly ideal or look exactly the same for everyone, but maybe, just maybe, we all deserve an equal chance.

Now, an unfairly graded paper, isn't the end of the world. Had I actually thrown a cucumber at my teacher, I'd probably live to regret it. That's not exactly following the golden rule like I once learned in Sunday School. After all, it's difficult to consciously recognize and

hold at bay our biases when we're passionate about something. However, I think experiences like this one are the gateway drug to something far more dangerous than a grade. If I can't address my own biases in small, seemingly unimportant scenarios, how can I trust myself to avoid bias when it matters a whole lot more?

Those policemen lined up at Edmund Petus Bridge in 1965 allowed their predujice to control their decision making. It doesn't seem like a stretch for me to see a connection between the word "bias" and that hard-to-swallow word "prejudice" we tend to throw around. I think bias, when taken to the extreme, wears the mask of this undesirable synonym. The policemen who violently swung their clubs and charged the marchers on horseback were actually driven by extreme bias, bias that had spent too long going unaddressed. It seems to me that this can explain much of what's happening when we look at disaster aid too. The government is biased towards funneling aid to those who participate more in society both economically and democratically (Craemer, 2010). However they fail to recognize that those very decisions are what keep many trapped in the same biased-fueled cycle.

There must be a way out of this cycle, or a way to end it altogether. Bias may be embedded deep into my subconscious, but if making fair decisions is my goal, it's clear to me that a critical step to making this possible is to recognize my own biases and consciously recalculate the shifts they inevitably make (Suresh, 2011). This recalculation may not change my decision, but it can prevent me from turning a blind eye. And maybe when we recognize where blind eyes are being turned, we *cannot* just stand by and shrug things off with a hearty "life's not fair." If I ever want to treat other people fairly I have to figure out how to lay it all out on the table and dissect it, climb around in it for a bit, until I know my biases well enough to beat them.

Wise Atticus Finch from Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* seemed to have this figured out when he said "you never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it" (Lee, 2010). Atticus may have been on to something. Increased sensitivity to justice for others, my ultimate goal, is related to those who exercise cognitive empathy and concern (Decety & Yoder, 2017). Cognitive empathy is the act of consciously placing yourself in someone else's shoes, climbing inside of someone else's skin and walking around in it for a bit. It's making a conscious decision to examine our biases and ensure that they're not getting in the way of our ability and willingness to "have respect for every form" (*The Big Law of Peace*, 16th century). And maybe that's what this world needs a little more of.

I think about the kid that sat on that purple dragon rug that day. I was an early bred over-achiever. Only 6 years old but already overly concerned with being the smartest kid in class. My last name started with the letter "A" so I was often chosen to be the line leader, the holder of the grubby PVC pipe with a laminated green card that read "Fortin" which helped parents know where to find their kids at pick up time. At least, the parents that came to pick up their kids. See, I grew up in a poorer part of town. Most of my classmates had two parents with jobs - sometimes multiple each. Most of my classmates spoke Spanish at home, making it more difficult to learn in English at school. Most of my classmates were future first generation college students, if they decided to go.

Me? Well, both of my parents worked. My dad worked at a small engineering company and then headed to Wendy's until he was too tired to come kiss us goodnight to earn a few extra bucks for his young family of 6. My younger brothers were still too little to go to school, so my mom found a job at a daycare where she could bring them along with no questions asked. I

wouldn't be a first generation college student, instead I had a mother that snuggled with me in my bed and read Junie B. Jones with me at night. She would erase my school work and make me redo it if it wasn't written in my best handwriting. She had high hopes and high expectations for me. And I appreciated that. It made me feel like I was capable of anything.

But what about that kids that didn't have that? What about the kids who had parents too concerned with making ends meet to come to their parent-teacher conferences or choir recitals or awards ceremonies? The older I've gotten the more I realize just how much life has been tipped in my favor. And in writing this essay, I've kind of started to hate myself for it. The more I learn about what a hard life actually looks like the more I feel that I've somehow cheated life, that, in a way, I'm adding more injustice to the world just by existing.

I'm not a first grader anymore and neither are those classmates that surrounded me that day. Now instead of paper cuts and rattlesnake bites, our cards have very real issues. One of the classmates that sat next to me that day on the rug is about to become a father. Another decided she'd had enough and attempted suicide during our senior year. Some are battling with big life decisions and others have it just plain hard. Poverty. Anxiety. Cancer. Starvation. Homelessness. I don't know if life will ever be fair for everyone, but perhaps I have the duty to do a little extra climbing around in other people's skins, to think about what it might be like if things were different.

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