

**Elora Tocci**

**Baruch College**

**November 1, 2016**

**Justice: It's Not A Game**

Ever since preschool, I have loved words. In the mornings, I would sit on my mother's lap and point out the letters in the newspaper as I ate my oatmeal. "This is an *a*; this is a *y*," I'd declare happily as my mother grinned encouragingly. As I got older and learned how those letters came together to form sentences that formed stories, I became a voracious reader. English very quickly became my favorite subject – if I wasn't reading someone else's story, chances were you could find me writing my own.

One of the things I loved most about words was the emotion they could convey. When I was angry or upset, I could say that, and people would understand and respond. And when I found a situation unjust, I could let people know in just a few syllables. "It's not *fair!*" became some of the most used words in my repertoire.

There was no shortage of opportunities to use the phrase. It wasn't fair when my sister and our neighbor formed an alliance against our other friends and me when we played games. It wasn't fair when classmates cheated on tests for which I myself had spent hours studying. It wasn't fair that a family dinner conflicted with a basketball game at school I wanted to go to with my friends.

As I got older I started to notice much more disturbing injustices. One of my soccer teammates, Lia, was whip-smart and very kindly tutored me when I was frustrated and confused in pre-calculus. But Lia wasn't born in the United States and didn't have citizenship, so she couldn't apply for financial aid to go to college. That wasn't fair.

When a new family moved into a house down the block, it didn't take long for the kids to start knocking on our door to ask if we had any food, because they didn't. I remember wandering upstairs and pulling open the refrigerator and pantry doors, wondering how my kitchen could be fully stocked while the neighbors' sat empty. That wasn't fair.

When my college roommate brought me with her on a “midnight run,” a ride organized by her high school mentor to deliver supplies to people living in homeless shelters throughout Manhattan, I met individuals who had no change of clothes, no regular source of food, and no bed to crawl into each night. That wasn’t fair.

So “fair” evolved into much more than one of my favorite words. It formed the basis of a truth I had heard people say time and time again, but that I had only just begun to understand: Life isn’t fair.

And as I went through college and started asking more questions and paying more attention to the world around me, I realized that too often, life isn’t fair by design. Lia was not an anomaly – no student who is undocumented is eligible for federal financial aid, even if they were brought here as young children and know no other home.<sup>1</sup> This means that regardless of their talent, plans, or ambition, they often have no access to quality four-year educations and must either attend community colleges or enter the workforce in what are often low-wage jobs.

The kids that moved into my neighborhood and asked for food were also, sadly, not unique. In New York State in 2010, the child food insecurity rate was 23.1%.<sup>2</sup> This translates to more than 900,000 kids in New York who go to sleep at least some nights with empty stomachs. And, in keeping with this heartbreaking pattern, the men and women I met on a freezing December midnight run through Manhattan constituted just a tiny fraction of New York’s homeless population – a group that last year totaled nearly 90,000.<sup>3</sup>

The worst part of learning about these injustices came in recognizing the systemic forces that created them. Decades of hostility toward and abuse of people of color and low-income people have led to policies and attitudes that insinuate these individuals deserve their circumstances. Our federal government could expand access to financial aid for undocumented

students who want to do more with their future. But it doesn't. We could work much harder to feed and house every New Yorker. But we don't.

This is intolerable to me. As a middle-class white woman, I have never had to worry about where I would live, what I would eat, or whether I could access college. But that is true only because I was lucky enough to be born into a family that had the resources and opportunities to take care of those needs for me. I played no more role in creating those situations for myself than children who live in homeless shelters, or go to bed hungry, or come to the United States before they can walk, play in creating theirs.

After graduating college I started working for a social justice organization, and I plan to continue working in social justice for as long as I am working. For me, there really is no other feasible option. I don't want to live in a world, as Bob Dylan so eloquently sings, "where justice is a game."<sup>4</sup> I want the words that I recited in school during the Pledge of Alliance each morning – "justice for all" – to ring true for everyone, not just a privileged elite.

There are certainly times when the pursuit of justice can feel frustrating, demoralizing, or even hopeless. The sheer number of gross injustices people face can feel overwhelming. And on top of the big, headline-grabbing issues – unarmed black men killed at the hands of police, or one in five women sexually assaulted in her lifetime,<sup>5</sup> to name just a few – are the seemingly smaller but no less consequential injustices. Just two percent of America's teaching force, for example, are black males.<sup>6</sup> Though that's a little-discussed problem, the implications that can have for black boys' lived experiences in school and perceptions of what is possible for their own futures is staggering.

It can also be challenging to figure out the best way to support social justice movements as an ally. I must remain constantly aware that, with the exception of social justice movements

related to women, I am not part of the oppressed group and cannot assert claims or speak from personal experience on behalf of those groups. And even on women's issues, my experiences and needs as a middle-class white woman are likely not the same as those of women of other races or socioeconomic backgrounds.

But the rewards of social justice work far outweigh the challenges. As I look back at global history, the sides of right and wrong on so many issues are so clear – during slavery, during segregation, throughout American relations with Native Americans, in eugenics, during World War II – and although some issues may seem fuzzier in the present, I know in my heart that history will side with progress, inclusion, and expansion of equity. There are days when I wonder whether I can or should be doing more for social justice and question what I can do differently. I am constantly trying to push myself to think bigger and lead more boldly. But I know that even if the contributions I make to social justice movements seem small, they will combine with the work and leadership of so many others to move our country to a more just, equitable reality. I can imagine no reward greater than that.

## Works Cited

1. Financial Aid and Undocumented Students. (n.d.). Retrieved November 1, 2016, from <https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/sites/default/files/financial-aid-and-undocumented-students.pdf>
2. Hunger Facts « Hunger Action Network of New York State. (n.d.). Retrieved November 01, 2016, from <http://www.hungeractionnys.org/hunger-facts/>
3. Homeless Shelters and Homelessness in New York State. (2016, June). Retrieved November 1, 2016, from <https://www.osc.state.ny.us/audits/allaudits/093016/16d3.pdf>
4. Dylan, B. (1975). *Hurricane* [CD]. Columbia Records.
5. National Sexual Violence Resource Center Info & Stats For ... (n.d.). Retrieved November 1, 2016, from [http://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/publications\\_nsvrc\\_factsheet\\_media-packet\\_statistics-about-sexual-violence\\_0.pdf](http://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/publications_nsvrc_factsheet_media-packet_statistics-about-sexual-violence_0.pdf)
6. McClain, D. (2016). Black Males Represent Just 2 Percent of Teachers. That's Bad for Students and Black Men. Retrieved November 01, 2016, from [http://www.slate.com/articles/life/tomorrows\\_test/2016/06/only\\_2\\_percent\\_of\\_teachers\\_are\\_black\\_and\\_male\\_here\\_s\\_how\\_we\\_might\\_change.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/life/tomorrows_test/2016/06/only_2_percent_of_teachers_are_black_and_male_here_s_how_we_might_change.html)