

The Complexities of Justice

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From the corner of my eye, I could see the opened cabinets and piles of bags on my kitchen floor. It was in that moment when I knew my childhood fear had come true. For the majority of my youth, my biggest fear was someone breaking into my home, wreaking havoc in my personal space, and stealing my valuable belongings.

The first question that crossed my mind was “Who would do this?” Unfortunately, my family and I would never receive an answer to this question. Hence, we never got our justice. However, justice as a virtue is more internal than simply abiding by the law. In Plato’s definition of justice, he defines it as a harmonious balance between reason, spirit, and appetite. The three elements create the will to fulfill one’s own duties without meddling in others’ duties. Under Plato’s idea of justice, the desire to experience every pleasure must be sacrificed for the benefit of society (Bhandari).

Burglaries were my biggest fear as a child because my family could not afford to lose anything. As first-generation Chinese immigrants, my parents did not have much to fall back on in the event of adversity. For the first five years of living in Flushing, Queens, we lived frugally. I attended public school, borrowed from the library, and collected quarters to use at the laundromat. My parents took public transportation, made food at home, and worked tirelessly while attending classes at CUNY schools.

Despite these challenges, my parents still provided an enriching childhood for me. I was able to attend field trips and summer schools where I immersed myself into educational experiences. We found solace with other people in our schools and churches. Most of them were Chinese immigrants like us. Because we lived so similarly, there was a sense of understanding at every potluck and festival. Living a just life provided a community, a group of people with

shared experiences to rely on. Finishing elementary school was a rewarding feeling. Everyone's sacrifices had paid off, and I was molded into a stronger, more educated person.

When my family moved to the suburbs of Florida, we struggled to adapt to the new routine of our mellow, suburban life. My fear of burglaries diminished as I was now protected by the curves of cul-de-sacs inside gated communities. However, a new fear began to encompass me. I quickly realized my family and I were outcasts in our new neighborhood. We were one of the only Chinese families here and no one else shared a similar childhood with me. If I tried to explain the intricacies of my previous life in Flushing, I was met with confused faces and a plethora of questions about why I had to live that way. In return, I began to question my way of life as well. "Why did I live in mild discomfort while my classmates were handed everything they wanted?"

One classmate in particular expressed her blatant hatred against my family, emphasizing how we were inferior to her and her white, wealthy family. This was not an isolated incident, and she continued spreading her hatred towards others without punishment. Her behavior always baffled me. She was born into a well-off home with a good family, so why did she insult those who had less than her?

I asked the universe those questions for years, especially as I volunteered. I spent hundreds of hours cleaning up beaches, making food for families, donating to veterans and the homeless, and caring for the sick in hospitals. The more I volunteered, the more strongly I believed that I was indebted to those who were less fortunate. The juxtaposition of my classmate's life and attitude versus the lives and attitudes of the people I aimed to help highlighted why justice is worth practicing. We often take what we have for granted, or even

forget where we started from. By practicing the virtue of justice, the importance of remaining humble and grateful did not slip away from my character.

In 2020, during the midst of the pandemic, my family moved back to New York. However, the hatred against us followed. For several months, I woke up to see videos of people harming the elderly in Flushing. I was especially heartbroken by the death of Michelle Go, a frequent volunteer who was pushed to her death despite never provoking her assaulter (Tully and Southall). I felt unsafe in the city I considered my home.

When my literal home was burglarized, I questioned why I needed to continue being just if others were not going to act just toward us. The burglars rummaged through every corner of our house and stole jewelry that my family owned for generations. Like my hateful classmate, they disrespected the hard work of my family and violated the duties of others. Justice was clearly not a priority for them. In the weeks following the burglary, my question transformed into “Why would somebody do this?” I was always searching for an answer to “Why?” as if I were trying to find the reasoning behind every injustice I encountered.

A month later, I stumbled upon a story from Humans of New York. The storyteller, Jon, burglarized a home under the pressure of his friend Koreh. They were only in eighth grade at the time, and Jon was let go. Jon joins the debate team in high school, where he meets his mentor Dico. Jon’s story continues to tell how he nearly fell into a life of crime like Koreh, or a life of drug use like his parents. Dico persisted in helping Jon and his teammates, despite the challenges he faced from his transgender identity. Ultimately, Jon’s involvement in debate granted him a full ride to college (Conyers).

After reading the story, I reassessed my perspective of justice. I respected Dico’s dedication to justice for Jon and his classmates regardless of the harm he endured. More

importantly, I respected Jon's ability to climb out of poverty through education. Both sacrificed aspects of their comfort and had the resilience to continue being just. In the end, they created better versions of themselves and each other.

Although I will never know my burglar and their motives, I hope for a day when they can put an end to their life of crime. Plato also argues that society must uphold justice. "Socially, justice is a social consciousness that makes a society internally harmonious and good" (Bhandari). Hence, we must create a society where theft is not something anyone should resort to.

At Baruch College, I am in the same classes as people who grew up like me or like my parents. Public education has and continues to serve as a form of societal justice, providing opportunities for every background. For Jon and my family, education has left us in a better place than we started. In my classes, I often meet peers who are first-generation, new parents, or low-income. I offer to provide help if needed and celebrate their success with them. I may not benefit directly from my efforts, but I do it because it is integral to the virtue of justice.

Beyond higher education, humans often question the purpose of justice when injustice is prevalent everywhere. In unpredictable times, it is easy for vengeance to blind us from humanity. My adversities should not be an excuse for quitting the practice of living justly. I should also not seek rewards for being just. We do not know the motives of others, but we can control our actions and desires. Therefore, practicing justice as a virtue comes from the heart.

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