

Does Equality Still Matter?

By

Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof

June 11, 2023

When Kmele Foster, host of the popular 5th Column podcast, was a guest on *Real Time with Bill Maher* a couple of years ago, he said that the current emphasis on racial equity “is something that is rather new. But seems to have taken the country by storm.” We do hear it a lot nowadays even though just a few years ago, we seldom, if ever, heard the term at all. “Equality” has been the word we’ve used to describe the type of justice we want for everyone in our society, especially for those who have been most excluded from its benefits. Although they sound similar, they are not synonymous, yet *equity* has largely supplanted *equality* in today’s nomenclature. The familiar acronym, DEI, for example, stands for Diversity, *Equity*, and Inclusion, not Diversity, *Equality*, and Inclusion.

On the day of his inauguration, January 1st, 2021, President Biden signed executive order number 13985, better known as, “Advancing Racial Equity and Support of Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government.” It says, “that the Federal Government should pursue a comprehensive approach to advancing equity for all,” and,

Affirmatively advancing equity, civil rights, racial justice, and equal opportunity is the responsibility of the whole of our Government. Because advancing equity requires a systematic approach to embedding fairness in decision-making processes, executive departments and agencies must recognize and work to redress inequities in their policies and programs that serve as barriers to equal opportunity.¹

This sounds like a significant and valuable way to have begun his Presidency, but I wonder why not use the word *equality*, which we are already familiar with, to describe what he’s getting at, rather than *equity*? They sound so similar and are used in response to the same kinds of injustices, that it seems like they must mean the same thing. But, in a Nov. 1st, 2020, campaign tweet, soon to be U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris, explained:

There’s a big difference between equality and equity. Equality suggests, ‘Oh, everyone should get the same amount.’ The problem with that, not everybody’s starting out from the same place. So if we’re all getting the same amount, but you started out over here and I started out over here, we could get the same amount, but you’re still going to be that far back behind me. It’s about giving everyone the resources and the support they need, so that everyone can be on equal footing and then compete on equal footing. Equitable treatment means that we all end up at the same place.²

On its surface, although a bit convoluted, this explanation sounds pretty good, and I didn’t think much about the distinction until three years ago after having dinner with a local activist who said, with some anger, “I hate the word equality! It should be obliterated from the English language. Equity is the word we should now be using.” He then asked if I understood the distinction, which I did, but I also thought equity should coincide with

equality, not replace it. That's when I began paying more attention to the meaning of the terms, along with their differences, and began asking myself, *Does equality still matter?*

The first thing I did was look into their etymology, only to discover they aren't that different and could easily be used synonymously. *Equality* comes from a Latin word referring to things, like surfaces and numbers, that are level and even, and became the root of the Old French word, *égalité*, that was first applied to social justice during the French Enlightenment and has been the term used in the struggle for equal rights ever since—during the French Revolution, abolition, women's suffrage, racial equality, equal opportunity, marriage equality, and so on.

Equite is another French word from the early 14th century that is also rooted in the idea of evenness but was more directly used to refer to evenness and evenhandedness, or fairness, in human relations. So the terms are not etymologically very different, although equity, again, has not been widely used in our society until recently. I believe it is this relative unfamiliarity with the term that is the reason it's now being used to replace *equality*. As a word that sounds similar enough to it, many of us might not notice the subtle shift away from equality, although those pushing it admit, as Harris says, "there's a big difference," enough of a difference for at least one person to admit he hates *equality* and wants it obliterated from speech and replaced with *equity*.

The Unitarian Universalist Association is doing something similar these days by replacing the word *liberal* with *liberation*. Ours has long been defined as a liberal religion. Now they are calling it a liberating religion. These terms sound similar enough to be almost indistinguishable, but they represent very different approaches. Liberalism refers to a particular value system and way of life that determines how we achieve our aims. Liberation refers only to the final outcome of our aims and says nothing about how we should go about achieving them. The same is true with how equality and equity are now being used. Equality, especially as it has been used since the Enlightenment, has been a product of liberal values, and is achieved by promoting and adhering to human dignity, freedom, reason, and tolerance. Equity, as a linguistic *tabula rasa* (a blank slate), only refers to the aim of equality, not to how we get there, let alone how such equality of outcomes is to be maintained. Although it should be synonymous with equality, equity is sometimes being used to refer to achieving particular outcomes no matter how they are achieved.

When this happens, when ethics focus primarily on outcomes, the ends can be used to justify the means. Whatever it takes, no matter what we ruin in the process, or whose rights get trampled on, or what or who must be sacrificed, is morally necessary and, thus, justified, to accomplish our righteous cause. Traditional notions of equality, however, being an outgrowth of Liberalism, as demonstrated by the common humanity ethic of Dr. King, require us to go about social reform in a just way, in a way that reflects our humanitarian values. Hence, the word *equality* has become problematic for those seeking to forge ahead

by any means, as has the word *liberal* for those seeking to force their latest Utopian ideal on the rest of us.

To oversimplify the difference between what is meant by these two terms, *equality refers to equal opportunities and equity refers to equal outcomes*. A popular illustration of the latter depicts a group of kids of unequal height standing atop differently sized crates so that they are all exactly the same height when looking over a tall fence. I think this is a good image of what it takes to accomplish equality in some cases, especially when we're talking about equal access to the opportunities and benefits of society. Some outcomes should, no doubt, be the same. Sentencing criminals, for example, should be the same for everyone. Yet statistically we know nonwhites disproportionately receive longer and harsher sentences than whites. Systems and rules must be put in place to prevent this kind of injustice.

As a liberal, this is precisely what I believe ought to be the function of governments and laws, to level the playing field so that everyone has equal rights and equal opportunities regardless of their individual identities and ideologies. A black kid should have access to the same kind of quality public education as a white kid, or a poor kid as an affluent kid. That requires a fair public educational system. Likewise, a gay couple should be free to legally marry the same as a straight couple. That requires equality under the law.

But if you noticed, this is not what Vice President Harris says equity means. She talks about everyone starting from the same place, that is, having an equal opportunity so that, "everyone can compete on equal footing." Equal footing is good, but how can it be considered competition if, as she goes on to say, "Equitable treatment means that we all end up at the same place." So, there's no point in competing if our rules and regulations and maybe even our standards of living are adjusted so that everyone ends up in the same place, if legislating such an outcome were even possible. Communist Russia and China have tried doing this for decades and have failed to establish the prosperous and just societies their Bolshevik and Maoist revolutionaries originally fought for.

The liberal idea of government is that they should exist to guarantee and protect equal rights for everyone regardless of their individual identities and ideologies. Governments should, thus, establish laws, policies, and systems that ensure equal access to our basic human need for quality food, shelter, and clothing, and, these days, to quality public education, healthcare, and employment, along with equal protection and treatment by our criminal justice system. It means regulating industries, corporations, and special interest groups so that the pursuit of their interests don't undermine the welfare or environment of everyone else. When governments fail to accomplish these things, they are failures, at least from a liberal perspective.

All of this covers the bottom part of Maslow's Pyramid of Needs. If these needs are met, it is then up to the individual, not the government, to achieve the top part, the part that can lead

to self-fulfillment and self-actualization for those who wish to take advantage of the opportunities that society has or should have given them. But in North America, our governments often fail to achieve their proper function, leading to some having had far more advantages than others, and to some not able to achieve their full potential, through no fault of their own, because adequate systems, laws, and protections have not been in place to assure they have their basic physiological needs met, let alone a safe and secure environment, and the sense of belonging within the greater community.

It is because of the failure of our governments to accomplish their *raison d'être*, their reason for being, which has led to social inequalities, that Liberalism must be revived today; because of its centuries-old commitment to the notion of equal rights that has long fomented and sustained our social justice movements—abolition, women's suffrage, civil rights, voting rights, equal opportunity, gay rights, and so forth. Focusing, instead, on equal outcomes at the expense of individual freedom and equality cannot be the solution. This, again, has been proven by the worse failures of the governments in Russia and China that have already tried this approach.

In 1956, social psychologist Erich Fromm complained that "Equality today means 'sameness,' rather than oneness."³ I think this is also the way *equity* is now being used, to suggest that everyone should end up the same, with the same amount of income, the same kind of home, the same kind of clothes, and the same opportunities that cannot be granted based on merit or individual abilities, but on simple numeric evenness. In the worst cases, to cite the examples of Russia and China again, people also end up having to have the same State mandated ideas and speech.

This notion that equality means everyone gets the same and is the same, is a rather childish way of thinking because it seeks to make things fair, evening the score, if you will, by simply eliminating numerical differences. A couple of years ago, for example, while I was visiting Silver Falls State Park in Sublimity, Oregon, I happened to pass a young boy shaking his fist while standing above a smaller boy. "You're making me mad," he said. "There are no losers. Everyone is a winner." I presumed the smaller boy must have been boasting about some small victory he'd won over the other, and the other didn't like being the loser.

This is an idea that is often being taught to children these days, that everyone gets a trophy or award at the end of a competition, which, to my mind, makes competition meaningless. It was also troubling to see this much larger kid shaking a fist to force his morality onto the smaller kid. Authoritarian and punitive thinking are characteristic of the earliest and most immature stages of moral development.

Equating equality with oneness, rather, means we consider ourselves equals even amidst our differences, be they differences in identity or ideology, or differences in the abilities and accomplishments that makes us exceptional individuals. This is the kind of equality that

allows us to be one society in which we can care for each other by seeing ourselves as one community made up of many different kinds of individuals. Equality is about putting laws and systems in place so that everyone, as Kamala Harris says, has equal footing. But it does not mean that we additionally adjust the finish line so that, as she also says, “we all end up at the same place.” This, as some of those living in those other countries I’ve mentioned might say, amounts to a miserable existence.

This isn’t to suggest everyone in our North American democracies are treated as equals, despite constitutions and other laws that claim we are equals. But the problem is not that we aren’t all exactly the same, but that too many of us, including our legislators, don’t see us as one people. The problem is tribalism based upon identity and ideology. It is a segregationist mindset that sees our differences as too big for us to ever surmount. So, we care only about our own group’s interest, even at the expense of outsiders. We succumb to myside-ism.

A simple example occurred right here in Spokane a few years ago, during the Unitarian Universalist Association’s General Assembly. Attendees from all over the country gathered to march together in a public demonstration against building a new jail. But before we could begin, the organizers ranked us from front to back, mostly based upon our identities. Up front, if I recall, were all those with physical disabilities, which, arguably, makes sense, or, at least, was thoughtful. Behind them were members of the local Indigenous tribes. Behind them were people of color. Then, I think, members of our local UU church. And so it went until all the able-bodied white people, who, let’s face it, were the majority of people there, marched behind everyone else. It was, at best, terribly paternalistic and insulting, and, at worst, an extraordinary example of the kind of segregation social activists were once set on ending, not arranging.

How sharply this contradicts Dr. King’s common humanity approach to social justice, which sought to end all segregation.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self evident; that all men are created equal ... I have a dream that one day the state of Alabama, whose governor’s lips are presently dripping with the words of interposition and nullification, will be transformed into a situation where little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls and walk together as sisters and brothers.

This common humanity understanding of equality has gotten us far since 1963, when King spoke these immortal words, even if it has not yet gotten us to the finish line. Speaking of Alabama, for instance, just this week the U.S. Supreme Court struck a blow to race-based gerrymandering there, recognizing, just as Dr. King said, the self-evident truth that we are all created equal.

This is why, in answer to my own question, I do believe equality still matters, perhaps today as much as ever, and it should not be obliterated from our language, or completely replaced with a euphemism that may result in even worst injustices. We may not all end up in the same place. Most of us may not want to. That would be a boring and meaningless existence. What would life be worth if we are fed, housed, clothed, protected, yet no longer free to pursue our own purposes, or to prove exceptional as individuals? How, as human civilization, might we ever advance if individuals are not free to be innovative? If the human spirit is not unleashed?

Rather, we should support each other along the way no matter how different the directions our journeys may take us or where we end up as individuals. Although things are a lot better today than they were in 1963, we still need little black boys and black girls to join hands with little white boys and white girls and walk together as sisters and brothers. We also need people of all colors and nationalities to do the same. We need gay men and gay women to join hands with straight men and straight women. We need Republicans and Democrats, Conservatives and Liberals to join hands as brothers and sisters. We need Russians and Ukrainians to join hands as brothers and sisters. We need Israelis and Palestinians to join hands as brothers and sisters. We need the leaders of nations like China and America to join hands as brothers and sisters. And, for that matter, we need North America to join hands with South America as brothers and sisters.

For as our world has become increasingly smaller, its peoples are becoming increasingly divided, retreating into old identities instead of embracing our common humanity, the recognition that no matter how different we are, how far apart we might be, we are more alike than not, and now, for the whole world's sake, we need to come together as one human family, a family of equals. As Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce said a hundred years ago, "The Earth is the Mother of all people, and all people should have equal rights upon it."⁴ We've not gotten there yet, and that is why I believe equality still matters.

¹ Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government, Exec. Order No. 13985, 86 Fed. Reg. 7009 (Jan. 20, 2021).

² <https://twitter.com/KamalaHarris/status/1322963321994289154>

³ Fromm, Erich, *The Art of Loving*, Harper & Row, New York, NY, 1956, 12.

⁴ Freedman, Russell, *Indian Chiefs*, Scholastic Inc., New York, NY, 1987, p. 111.