

## Interlude 3

### The Real Benefits of Fairness

*Earl Shorris*

*Q1. What comes to mind when you think about your country?*

It would be comforting to think of a disjunction between America at home and America in the world, to imagine the arrogance of government a matter of distance rather than character, to think of the billion people in the world who are starving and the epidemic of obesity in the United States as a failure of knowledge rather than of character. But there are so many who live poor in this, the richest country in the history of the world, that I now doubt both the ethics of America and the wisdom of its leadership in the ways of the world. The country seems to be now on a wrong path, having confused the momentary benefits of triumphant force with the real benefits of fairness. The cost in money to provide the poor of the world with potable water is nothing compared to the cost of war.

America maintains its youthfulness and its place in the intellectual and political economy of the world now because of immigration, yet it now both dislikes and distrusts immigrants. The wealth of the country is now so skewed toward the very rich that its educational system has all but collapsed at the roots, with the schools in the cities failing and the system of private education and better schools in wealthy areas ensuring that the wealth of the country will continue to be skewed toward the rich few.

What I am describing is a homologous relation of America at home and America in the world. What comes to mind when thinking of America is where to look for hope, who will take on the burden of bringing fairness about in the future. My generation, born in the Great Depression, sought justice both at home and abroad. The national and international roles were homologous then as they are now. But my generation did not have sufficient wit or will to establish a lasting ethics. The homologous relation between national and international views faded during the last years of the 1960s. There were simultaneous wars: a battle for fairness at home and a battle for dominance abroad; hope at home, fear abroad.

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The generation now in power has returned to the homologous relation between the two spheres of life and influence; they are both unfair, both based on force, neither one concerned with ethics. I think now of how this generation came about and what will change it. It is on my mind every day. And every day I am encouraged by knowing that my sons live against the grain of their generation, ethical men living ethical lives.

And I see something of what I like to think of as the future of America, the generation that may very well recoup the will to fairness of the Depression-born politics of an America lost since the 1960s and the civil rights era, in my grandchildren. The oldest is a gentle boy, Tyler Sasson, as American as anyone from an immigrant family can be: his mother's ancestors came here on the *Mayflower*. The youngest one, Michael Laurino, to whom I posed these four questions, not so that he would answer them, but so that even at his tender age he might begin to think about them, is the child of a writer and a man who has devoted his life to public service. He lives and attends school at the southern tip of Manhattan. Like his older cousin, he is a gentle fellow, but full of laughter. Not at all surprisingly he has a taste now for television programs broadcast in the 1950s and 1960s, some of them made almost half a century before he was born.

I have thought a great deal about the choices these children make. Michael loves language and the gentle laughter of an earlier time; Tyler loves the waves that break on the Atlantic seacoast, where his ancestors landed so long ago. This has always been, I think, a country of hope and fear, a surprise of expectations and uneasy sleep. Eventually, one will win out.

*Q2. What for you is the most exciting and inspiring philosophical insight, scientific discovery or artistic creation?*

Nine years ago, at the conclusion of a book about poverty in the United States, I started the Clemente Course in the Humanities, a one-year course for young people 17–35 years old who live in poverty. The course includes moral philosophy, literature, logic, history and art history, the humanities as Petrarch defined them. In a rigorous curriculum, beginning with moral philosophy, the students read the Socratic dialogues, part of the Nichomachean Ethics, and selections from Hume and Kant. The philosophical adventure has been extraordinary for me as well as for our professors and students. We begin always by reading the Apology, and I have come to think more firmly than ever that Socrates' idea of virtue being in one's self-interest is correct. Nonetheless, the poor, some of whom have been to prison, often find even more intellectual excitement in Kant, for the idea of being an end in themselves rather than a means, to have dignity is, in truth, a vast and almost instantaneous change in their lives.

The goal of the course is to make citizens of the poor, who are de jure citizens, but de facto not, for they have no legitimate power. They do not often vote, they have no power to influence others to vote, they live within what I call a 'surround of force' that leaves them with no possibility but to react, no time to reflect. Thus, the course is planned to lead them, as it led the ancient Greeks, through the humanities, to think reflectively, to seek the middle way between liberty and order, to discover democracy for themselves. I often say, the purpose of this is to make the poor dan-

gerous, as all citizens are dangerous in a democracy, for they all have legitimate power.

*Q3. Is there a specific part of the world to which you feel particularly drawn or close?*

I was raised on the Mexican border, I have written many books, fiction, non-fiction and an anthology of Mesoamerican indigenous literature (with Miguel León-Portilla), as well as numerous articles and essays. Recently, the Mexican government was kind enough to award me the *condecoración del orden Aguila Azteca*. It was a grand moment, but my interest in the moment was to have the chance to talk about the question of undocumented Mexican immigrants in the US. These people, who work, pay taxes and live peacefully, get virtually no benefits from their taxes other than public schooling for their children, and cannot pass legally to and from their homes in Mexico. They are lost in the world, without a country, in constant danger, always exploited economically, politically and often sexually. They have few defenders, although they contribute greatly to the US as agricultural workers, food service workers, maintenance workers, construction workers, child-care workers and low-paid workers in many kinds of manufacturing.

The US could not enjoy its present economic position without them. Prices of most foodstuffs, many services and many kinds of goods would rise dramatically, lowering the standard of living for US citizens. Nonetheless, there is little sympathy for their situation, and Mr Bush, a vindictive man, has refused to do anything on their behalf since the Mexican President refused to side with the US position in the UN Security Council debate over Iraq.

My interest in Mexico continues to be in Mexico, and I will publish a fairly comprehensive book about the country in the fall of 2004, but Mexico is very close to the US; the countries are now inextricably involved. To be interested in Mexico is thus to be interested in the United States, and vice versa. To put it most succinctly, one of every nine Mexicans now lives in the United States. Mexico, in that sense, is home.

*Q4. What are your dreams, hopes (and fears) for your country and for the rest of the world today?*

I fear hunger, disease and war, the growing gap between the comforts of the rich and the vast numbers of poor. I fear that the morality of my own country fails as it fails its responsibility in the world. I fear violence both real and imagined, and I think the Greeks were quite correct when they said *ananke* (necessity) also meant violence, for violence and hunger are the twins of failure in this world.

You see, I think often of the failure of civilization, although I love and admire the successes of art and science, technology does not please me much, for I agree with Jorge Luis Borges that repetition is death, and what is technology but the constancy of repetition?

What hope have I? My sons, grandchildren, generations, are the hope of the world as I see it, from my corner, with my soupçon of experience, my infinitesimality of knowledge. I have thought this from the moment they were born, and it encourages me. What choice have we realistically, people of my age, the third age as some gently say, but to have expectations for those who come after us? Not that the

struggle is over yet for me, but my time is fleeting now. Rather than be memorious, I imagine a hundred years forward. These generations are not merely dreams; they are real; I have heard them laughing.

Earl Shorris  
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