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A Sense of Fairness

Bags of Magic

The children inside the gate laughed, sang songs, and played with a ball. The children outside the gate watched them.

The 20 or so children outside the gate were different, a subset of the society in which they lived. They were children whose formative growth years would be stunted by their immediate world, one seemingly accustomed to disadvantage and disregard.

To Inderjit Khurana, the only teacher at her small school, there could be no starker contrast. As her surname reflects, Inderjit Khurana's cultural origin is India. The town where she began her school is Bhubaneswar. The year was 1978.

"The scene at my school used to be a few children inside the school and tons of children outside the entrance gate," Inderjit told us. "They came from neighboring slums. The children outside the gate would be naked or semiclad. They were disheveled and dirty because the parents were not at home. The parents were at work. Most of the girl children were carrying their little siblings around with them. An older girl wearing just a pair of panties carried a baby that was naked. The girl may have been 8 or 9 years old, and the baby was about 9 months.

"They were at the gate because they saw such fun and joy," Inderjit continued. "They didn't have a childhood like that. They were just left

with duties, chores to be done at home such as look after the baby and cook the rice. They had very sad accidents because they were little children given a big responsibility. One of the young girls who was going to remove the water from the rice once it was done was pouring it out and the whole pan fell on her. Her left arm was completely burned."

The parents, Inderjit told us, put a cow dung plaster on the child's arm instead of informing anyone or taking her to the hospital. "It was only when we didn't see the girl outside the gate for about 10 days that we went to her home and found what had happened to her," Inderjit remembered. "She was lying on the bed with an infected wound. We treated her and got her to a hospital, but some of the skin had shrunk, and her arm couldn't be straightened. But at least her infection was gone."

These were the forgotten children of India, invisible to the middle-class world of Inderjit's students and their parents. But to Inderjit, their presence was conspicuous and troubling. She saw them congregate at the school gate each day; she saw them stare at her students with a mixture of wonder, confusion, and wistfulness; and she knew it was not right that while the children inside the gates went to school, those outside did not.

Inderjit wanted to do something for these children who she knew could never escape their impoverished lives without an education, but she realized there were powerful social barriers to overcome. If she let the poor children outside the gate come to the school free of charge, she told us, the middle-class parents would withdraw their children. "Either way it would fail, whatever I was doing," she said. Little did Inderjit know that she would find a way to turn this "lose-lose situation," as she called it, into a win-win.

Inderjit stood only 5 feet (1.5 meters) tall, but she always had lofty ambitions. She married young at age 19 and later earned her master's degree in history and received her teacher's training in early childhood education. In 1977 her husband retired, and they moved to Bhubaneswar, a city in the state of Orissa on the east coast of India. For the first 3 months, Inderjit was at a loss trying to settle into this new society. "Playing cards and partying were not something I wanted to do," she said. "That's what the other females did in that society. I wanted to be usefully occupied."

So she started a preschool center with just two 3-year-olds and no advertising. "I had just a little board to say it was *Ruchika,* which means something that is interesting and aesthetic. At the end of the year, I had 11 children. It was just by word of mouth. I was the only teacher, and I was also the only chauffeur. I was driving the children around in my car to see places of interest and taking them to the zoo and things like that. I think the visibility got the other nine children. I charged 40 rupees, or $1.00, for each child per month." The school's reputation steadily grew, and 7 years after it opened, enrollment had climbed to 90 students.

Despite the success of her school, Inderjit could not forget the children outside the gate. She recalled, in particular, how they seemed to mirror every move the Ruchika children made. "They smiled at the children when they were smiling. When the children were playing games and laughing, they would also laugh a little. I'm sure it crossed their minds, why couldn't they go to a place like the children inside the gate?" But Inderjit knew that there would never be a time when these children would be included in any learning environment like her school. She knew the sad truth, a destiny the children were too young to fully appreciate. Their time would never come.

After much deliberation, Inderjit came to an important realization. "I made a silent commitment that one day I would reach out to these children in a place where they would be accepted and where I could take the school to them. That's where the idea began: If the child cannot come to a school, then take the school to the child. I had to scout around before I chose the group which I found was the most appropriate. I found that group at the railway station."

Selecting her newest group of students at the railway station was no accident. Inderjit often found herself there, as the railway station is a major hub of activity in Bhubaneswar. She would see children wiping the trains' compartment floors and begging for money from passengers. Later on, Inderjit would discover that these "railway children" belonged to a vast underclass of millions of young people who lived in the streets. But in the beginning, all she cared about was helping these children who spent their days at the railway station, but who had no destination.

On April 7, 1985, confronted by long, hard odds, Inderjit took the first step toward helping the railway children. "I went to the railway station with a colleague of mine, and we just carried what we called our bags of magic," she remembered. "We each carried a bag of storybooks, crayons, paper, paints, some sweets for the end of class, and soap because I knew they would love a bath. As it turned out, the bath was the most popular activity. The children at the railway station, with the steam engines and sleeping on the floor, were always dirty. I thought, if their clothes were dirty at least their bodies should not have body lice, skin infections, and things like that." Inderjit and her fellow teacher had 11 children on the first day they went to the railway station. By November 12 of the same year, that number had reached 114.

Everyone, however, did not view the railway children with the same compassion that Inderjit showed. "From the beginning, we had a lot of train passengers coming in and saying, 'Why are you trying to educate these children? You think you are saving their lives? God has sent them into families like this because it was predestined. They were supposed to be poor, and they will remain poor, and they will remain uneducated. It is karma. They are paying for the karma of the last life by having a difficult time in this life.'"

Inderjit felt differently. In her eyes, they were simply children at the edge of humanity and in danger of falling off. "We had girls getting pregnant at age 12," Inderjit told us. "While promoting HIV/AIDS awareness, I would say to them, 'Do you know how sick you can get with this kind of open sex? You might just die!' This one young girl turned around and told me, 'But I'm dead already.' It's because she had no control over her body. It just earned her money to live."

Inderjit knew their troubles could not be washed away with a bar of soap. She also knew she did not want to merely nurture their status in life, but help them rise above it. After all, she believed, living in unlivable conditions is dehumanizing. Not having a way out is immoral. For them to find a better place in the world, Inderjit knew they must be educated. And she knew even a little education would go a long way toward avoiding a lifetime of humiliation.

Inderjit was the architect and driving force behind a simple but powerful improvement to her society: Take the school to the children.

From just one school, the Ruchika Social Service Organization has grown to include 17 platform schools at railway stations dotted across well over 100 miles (160 kilometers) of train track. The schools reach more than 500 children every day from the villages and cities along the trains' paths. "We don't deny admission to any child at the railway station," Inderjit explained. "They can come for a day, they can come for 2 days. We don't put rules on them. We put a child on the rules after he has been attending school somewhat regularly for 3 months. Then we know we have hope of transferring him to a formal school. About 50 children get mainstreamed to a regular school each year."

Inderjit eventually expanded her core philosophy of taking the school to the children with more than 100 centers of education, consisting of preschools and primary schools, for children in the slums. There is also a Toy Library on Wheels program with books and toys for children to enjoy. The need is great and growing. According to Inderjit, in Bhubaneswar alone, some 20,000 children don't go to school.

Inderjit Khurana's Ruchika movement does not answer the problems of poverty for every street child in India, or even for every deprived child in Bhubaneswar, but for those that it does help, it is a solution. In Inderjit's eyes, safety, education, and a happy childhood were not a fringe benefit available just to the privileged. For her, they were a dead center birthright. "If a child is happy and confident, that's all that is needed in life," Inderjit said. "The rest will follow."

At the end of our interview, Inderjit expressed her attitude toward fairness simply but eloquently, "I felt the haves and the have-nots marking in society was some taboo we had to break." If only by a small margin, she narrowed the gap. Inderjit's footprint may have been small, but it offered a huge stride toward a more positive future.

As we learned in Chapter 1, the people in this book have made a strong connection with others that is deeply rooted in empathy. A perception that there is some sort of injustice, or lack of fairness, at work profoundly intensifies that connection and is a powerful motivator to take action to right the wrong.[1] In fact, in philosophical and religious discussions of human goodness throughout history, fairness and equity have been highly valued. That we all deserve a fair

chance—the core value of "justice"—is a timeless and near-universal belief.[2]

As we delved into the experiences of our interviewees, we observed a remarkable consistency in how our interviewees choose to view fairness in the world—the second choice along the path. The potency of two overarching beliefs about fairness stood out: first, the world is filled with ill fate and good fortune, and second, fairness equals access to opportunity.

Ill Fate Versus Good Fortune

Intentionally, and usefully, our interviewees simplify the world. In the grand philosophical universe, they understand how some people are boxed in by life's luck of the draw. In their reality-checked wisdom, our interviewees know anyone, including themselves, could have been born into far more challenging circumstances. None of us gets to choose our parents, place of birth, or starting position in life. To our interviewees, one's anthropology is simple: pure chance. They do not recognize any selective birthright to entitlement. To them it's a cosmic crapshoot. We are born into advantage or disadvantage.[3]

Our grasp of this relativity matters as it influences our intrinsic attitude toward others. As we learned from our interviewees, if we see the disadvantaged as seemingly upstanding individuals beset by circumstance, we are led in the direction of compassion and a willingness to help. If, on the other hand, we see the disadvantaged as people whose circumstance is the result of their own personal flaws, poor choices and shortcomings, then we are likely to assign them blame and distance ourselves from them.

Ryan Hreljac understands this distinction. Over the course of a year, he raised $2,000 to build a well to provide clean water at the Angolo Primary School in northern Uganda in Africa. Of particular interest, Ryan was 6 years old.

As Ryan, 16 at the time of our interview, told us, "It all started in my first grade classroom when we were doing our annual charity project, canned food drives and all of that good stuff. That year we were raising money for developing countries. So my teacher brought

in a list of things we could save for. Something like one cent would buy a pencil, $2 would buy a blanket, and so on. Then she got to the point where she said $70 would buy a well. She explained to us that they don't have clean water. I was 6 at the time, and it was the first time I actually really thought about anything. We were all confused by this. What do you mean they don't have water?"

Ryan's teacher explained to the class the simple arithmetic that added up to a colossal injustice. Too many people in the world had to walk 10 kilometers to get clean water, while more fortunate people, like the students in Ryan's classroom, only had to take about 10 steps to the nearest drinking fountain. "We didn't know what 10 kilometers was or the whole measurement thing, so our teacher said, 'It's something like 10,000 steps.'

"I remember that day and I just remember going from my classroom to the water fountain and counting the steps it took me to get there. I counted 10. I just thought it is really unfair that I am walking 10 steps and someone else is walking 10,000 steps just to get a drink of water."

Ryan understood the concept of fairness at age 6. Ten years later, as his work to provide clean water has broadened in scope, he understands it more deeply. "It's helping people, and I'm glad I'm still doing this today because of the benefits that have come out of it. It's great for everyone. When I was 9, my mom, dad, and I traveled to Uganda to see my well. When I wake up in the morning, a smile doesn't light up my face because I have clean water to drink, but they held a huge celebration. There was food, and there were people who came from 10 kilometers away. It was a huge celebration just because they had clean water."

What began as a seemingly implausible do-it-yourself improvement to the world resulted in a water well in a country 7,000 miles (11,000 kilometers) away, all because Ryan Hreljac felt a fierce passion for fairness: 10 steps versus 10,000 steps to get clean water. "I just thought it was really unfair," he said.

In many ways, the saga of humanity is an epic about the imbalances of fairness. The line between ill fate and good fortune is slender and fickle. Some people are blessed with good fortune right from the start and even along the way. Some are sucker punched by fate.

It can be hard to see the ill-fate side of the coin, especially if one is born with inherent advantage and open-range potential. In many middle- and upper-class communities in developed countries, children are spoon-fed the recipe for success beginning with preschool. In fact, the term itself is telling. Before school begins, there is school. Formal education is that important. For the privileged in the United States, college prep often begins in middle school. If you are not divined into such a success-bound environment, your prospects are simply less from the outset. Context matters. In his book, *Outliers,* Malcolm Gladwell tells us success is the constant accumulation of advantage over several decades. He concludes that, "no one—not rock stars, not professional athletes, not software billionaires, and not even geniuses—ever makes it alone."[4]

But, if one starts out with nothing and is never given access to opportunities, as is the case for many people in developing countries, how can any advantage be accumulated? It's this contrast of opportunity that prompted Gordon Brown, the former British prime minister, to plead that Europe and America "come together to make sure the world is not just a more economically prosperous place, but a fairer place."[5]

Access to Opportunity

Imagine that you have been diagnosed with a potentially fatal disease. Imagine also there is a treatment, but it's not available to you in the country where you live. Now contemplate these questions: What would you be willing to do to get to the country where you could be treated? Would you use all of your money? Would you plead to be treated? Would you put your life at further risk to get there? Now, in the midst of such anxiety and uncertainty, imagine the treatment—and maybe even a cure—being brought to you. That is exactly what Dr. David J. Winchester is committed to doing.

David J. Winchester is a nationally recognized surgical oncologist and expert in breast cancer surgery. He is a professor of surgery, holds an endowed chair, is a noted author, and serves with several national cancer organizations. Most important, David understands

access to opportunity. On several occasions, he has left his busy practice and traveled to Russia and Latvia to perform lifesaving surgeries and teach leading-edge surgical techniques.

David told us that the first 2 years the team went to the Russian Ministry Railroad Hospital in Moscow, which serves as a centralized location for the care of railroad workers in the region. The hospital specializes in cancer treatment. He described striking disparities between operating room conditions in this hospital and hospitals in the United States.

"The Russian hospital is extremely impoverished," he said. "We were just saddened by the conditions in which the hospital staff work. They have operating rooms with windows that open to the outdoors. Most of their surgical equipment was from 50 years ago or older. They all had to provide their own scrubs, hats, and masks. We brought as much equipment and supplies as we could.

"I will never forget what happened after our first case," he continued. "We took off our latex surgical gloves, and as soon as they were off our hands and into the basket, they were picked up by the nurses to clean, recycle, and reuse. Everything we brought with us that we think of as disposable, they would try and reuse, from conductive pads to electric cautery pencils. It was just amazing how many needs they had."

With the care of cancer patients at a more formative stage in Russia, David said much of the focus of the trips has been on sharing the knowledge and technology of cancer surgery—in particular breast cancer surgery—an area in which there have been enormous strides in the United States in the past decade. Along with knowledge, the surgical team has brought hundreds of thousands of dollars of vital equipment and supplies, all desperately needed in Russia. "We typically don't check our bags, but we bring boxes of equipment instead," David said. "Last trip we brought 70 boxes of stuff. We used a lot of it during the operations and left whatever we didn't use."

By importing world-class medical care and knowledge to countries where health care is less advanced, David Winchester and his team are putting the idea of access to opportunity into action. "The first trip was set up with just one operating room," he told us. "It was my partner, myself, and a physician assistant. We did nine or 10 operations. The

second trip we went to two operating rooms and we did 17. The third and fourth trips were about 13 operations each. We do a few days of operations as well as lectures." David added, "It seemed like we were helping the Russian doctors to help their patients and to be better doctors, and it was just a great thing to do. We also had a chance to learn from our Russian colleagues."

David Winchester is part of a small envoy bringing surgical expertise to places without access to skill and knowledge for fighting cancer. Similarly, Inderjit Khurana offers educational opportunities to children who otherwise would have had none, and Ryan Hreljac builds wells to provide clean water to people for whom access to clean water is severely limited. Sanphasit Koompraphant's story offers a different perspective. Sometimes fairness and access to opportunity require the passage of laws, which can be a long and often frustrating process.

Sanphasit was among the first to speak out against child abduction, trafficking, and prostitution in Thailand and the Mekong region, areas of the world in which such practices are not only rampant, but also well organized and commercially viable. He began his work in the early 1980s, working with the Center for the Protection of Children's Rights to rescue children in forced labor. Sanphasit described the horrific working conditions children endured before laws prevented such practices. "They start them at 12 years old. They have to work almost 14 hours a day. Many of the employers provide only two meals a day. They have to sleep on the floor." In the worst situations, Sanphasit said, children were beaten and even tortured. "So the situation at that moment was really bad, and there was no legal protection to this group of children," he added.

After initially focusing on helping children who had been exploited through child labor, in 1985 the Center became involved in combating the commercial sexual exploitation of children and in helping young people who had been abused or forced into prostitution. Child prostitution has historically been an enormous problem in Thailand, largely because it is so profitable. It is estimated that several million people earn their living directly or indirectly from the prostitution industry. In 1992, Sanphasit put the number of children in prostitution at 800,000, a figure for which he was roundly criticized by those

seeking to protect the industry. Sadly, Sanphasit told us, it was not uncommon at the time for children as young as 12 or 13 to be forced into prostitution, mostly with migrant workers. At the most extreme, Sanphasit said, there was a "market" for children as young as 5 or 6.

Sanphasit discovered through his work with the Center that the children's families were at the root of many of the problems. He told us, "Many families who send their children to be a child laborer or child prostitute were not really poor, but they expect to get money from their children. So I start to work with the family. I found that there were a lot of cases of sexual abuse and physical abuse in the family." This discovery spurred a campaign against sexual abuse within families, but Sanphasit, who has a legal background, soon became convinced that a larger solution lay in changing the laws of the land. Without such laws, Sanphasit told us, there could be no safety for children and no opportunity for them to return to their families and receive the education that would offer them a chance for a better future.

"So in 1988 I started to explore our Thai legislation concerning children in every aspect, not just criminal law, family law, and child protection law," Sanphasit said. And he studied laws affecting not just Thai children, but also children from other countries, particularly Burma, who all too often crossed the border for forced labor and prostitution. At the time, Sanphasit explained, "The Thai government and the government of the country of origin [of the children] did not pay any attention to this group of victims. More than that, they did not try enough to prosecute or investigate trafficking kids."

Changing laws that governed long-ingrained and often socially accepted practices wasn't easy, however. In fact, the most significant child protection law wasn't passed until 2003. This groundbreaking law, the Child Protection Act, which Sanphasit played a key role in drafting, aimed to protect children under age 18 from all forms of abuse, exploitation, violence, and gross negligence. But acceptance and compliance hasn't come easily. As Sanphasit told the *Bangkok Post* in 2004, "We have to fight again and again because they [the government] said this law tries to limit or control children. But that is not the point. When children are in danger, someone must try to help and rescue them from that danger. That is a universal rule."

Our interviewees consistently define fairness in terms of access to opportunity. Opportunity changes the game for those who are afforded access, whether it's to education, clean water, surgery, or freedom from abuse. Access to opportunity offers a chance. Isolation from opportunity dictates stern limitations. Furthermore, if access to opportunity is afforded to some but not to others, additional difficulties can emerge. The late sociologist Robert Merton tells us social deviance occurs when a society encourages the same goals for all of its citizens without allowing everyone the same access to achieve them.[6] On such an uneven playing field, other problems can occur to offset the unfairness.

According to research by British epidemiologists Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett based on data from the World Bank, United Nations, World Health Organization, U.S. Census, and other sources, inequality in society undermines social trust and community life, leading to a host of problems. These problems include increased drug use, mental illness, teenage pregnancy, obesity, and violent crime. In an unequal society, Wilkinson and Pickett argue, the quality of life is diminished for everyone.[7]

Sure-footed about their sense of fairness, our interviewees articulate very clear perspectives. Sherri Kirkpatrick, who has worked for more than a quarter century to empower women and children in developing countries through health education and advocacy, told us, "Life is not fair. We have an extreme obligation to work toward a sense of fairness because we are so interconnected as a world."

Peter Samuelson, who created the Starlight Children's Foundation, said, "I don't think the world is fair. I believe that there are fundamentals of fairness that ought to be and are not. I believe that every human being has the right to an education. Every child has a right to health care. I believe everyone deserves a roof. I think that these are fundamentals of a civilization without which it's not really a very good civilization. How you treat your innocent, weakest members defines whether your whole damn civilization is worth anything. I don't think the world will ever be fair. All we can do is chip away at it."

Craig Kielburger, founder of Free The Children, puts fairness into this perspective: "Is it fair that 213 million children work in child labor? Absolutely not. Is it fair that 1.1 billion people live on less than $1.00 a day? Absolutely not. Equally, is it fair that we have so much? It is unfair, absolutely, without a doubt. What are we going to do about it? Fundamentally, that is the question. What is next? It requires us to reevaluate our priorities. How we give our time or our money. How we cast our ballot. From the philosophical question, is it fair or is it not fair, once we all agree that it's not fair, are we willing to take the next step, which requires that we fix it."

To Ryan Hreljac, the young man who spearheaded the building of hundreds of wells in more than a dozen countries, it is very simple. "Not everyone was born and has privileges where they can go to school and have three meals a day and have access to clean water. I guess for some people who do have those liberties, they have to think outside the box and help those who are less fortunate. Life isn't fair; the world isn't fair; but we can try and make it fair the best we can in our everyday lives."

Finally, Dr. Irving Williams, the pediatrician and public health specialist who has brought a multidisciplinary approach to health care in remote African communities, offers a broader perspective. "The blue sky that adorns the white sandy beaches in Miami is the same blue sky that adorns the white sandy beaches of Havana, Cuba. There is a need for us to get rid of these walls that separate us for no real reason at all," he said.

Whose responsibility is fairness? Our interviewees answer this question based on how they think about other people. They see some people as ill-fated by circumstances and lack of access to opportunities. They see how some people are advantaged while others are disadvantaged. This clear understanding is fundamental to their perspective on fairness.

In some well-imagined future, it all may be different. But for now, this is our world. Learning to live within our overwhelming array of challenges requires adopting one of two perspectives about fairness: There is nothing I can do about it. Or, I *can* matter. I *can* make a difference. It is this pivotal choice that we focus on in the next chapter.

Clarifying Your Perspective on Fairness

1. Our interviewees have all accepted responsibility for righting some unfairness in the world. They see that some people, like the children outside the school gates in Bhubaneswar, are ill-fated through no fault of their own. But other people might have a different perspective. How do you think one's view of fairness might be influenced by one's own culture?

2. How do you think about people in need? Do you think that some people are advantaged while others are disadvantaged, or do you believe that everybody gets what he or she deserves? If you believe that a helping hand should be extended to those in need, do you believe helping the less advantaged is the role of government, or should it be left to faith-based groups, private charities, and individual citizens?

3. What about your own role in helping others? Are you inclined to step toward others or step back? Can you think of a time when you felt a strong sense of unfairness and decided to do something to help? Was there ever a time when you felt conflicting feelings when confronted with an instance of unfairness? For example, many people see homeless people on the streets on a daily basis, but few assume responsibility for the problem.

4. Do you agree that access to opportunity is at the core of fairness? Can you give other examples of disparities in society in terms of lack of opportunity between those who are advantaged and those who are disadvantaged?

5. What does it mean to be on the fringe of society? Have you ever felt that you were on the fringe? Have you ever been treated unfairly in terms of access to opportunity? How did this unfair treatment make you feel? Did it make you feel more inclined to do something to ensure that others don't have the same experience?