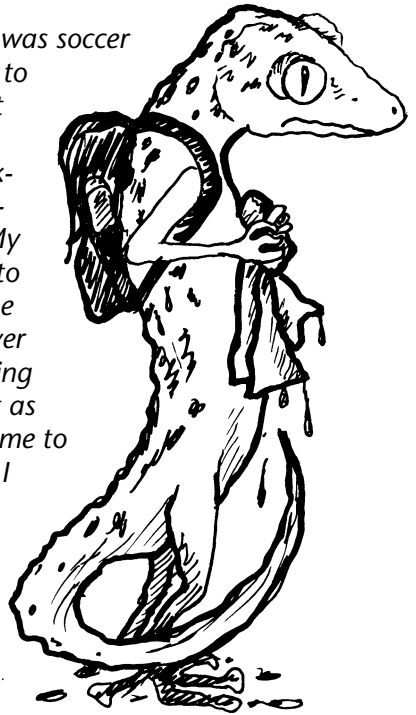


Chapter 21

The Importance of Being Fair

Today was a really important day for me, it was soccer tryouts at school. I went to bed early last night, to make sure I'd be my best. My alarm clock didn't go off and my mom left for the early shift so no one woke me up. I didn't have time to eat breakfast, and I ran all the way to school. It was raining, and I tripped and fell into a huge puddle. My soccer clothes were drenched and muddy. I got to school and this big kid who has been on my case shoved me and said, "You little wimp, you'll never make the team, so forget about your clothes being wet!" I was so mad that I shoved him back, just as my teacher walked around the corner. She sent me to the office, but he got off without a second look. I tried to tell her, but she's one of those mean teachers and she wouldn't even look at me. "I know your type, you act sweet and innocent, but the minute I turn my back you're hitting some poor student in the hall." The principal sent me to in-school suspension for the day for fighting and talking back to my teacher. I missed my math test, and a history quiz. I missed the first day of soccer tryouts, and I heard that once you are sent to suspension you can't be on a team. I even had to have my parents sign a piece of paper about everything I did, even though it was really nothing. Could anything else go wrong? Oh yeah, I almost for-



got, I think I sprained my wrist when I slammed it into my locker after school today, and my little sister ran home before me so she could tell my mom everything. Life is so unfair!

Billy, 15

Life can be unfair. Some days it seems like anything that can go wrong does go wrong. No matter what corner of the world you are from, you will experience unfair situations sometimes. People don't always get what they deserve. Some people are born sick or become sick later, and suffer from illness throughout their whole lives. Some people get into accidents and have to change their entire lifestyle because they were hurt badly. Other people don't get a job that they are qualified for because the employer hires a personal friend instead. Some people are starving because their country is very, very poor and there are no jobs. Other people are treated as second-class citizens because of the way they look, because they have a foreign accent, because they are poor, or for some other unfair reason. Others are imprisoned unlawfully, or even put to death for crimes that they did not commit.

What is fairness? If life is unfair sometimes, what is the best way to handle such situations?

What Does it Mean to be Fair?

Fairness means that people get what they deserve. And what do people deserve? The best way to determine this is to think how you would like to be treated in the same situation. In other words, treat others as you would like to be treated yourself. For example, suppose you are playing a game. Although you might like to cheat, would you like others to cheat you? Probably not. So the idea of a rule is that it applies in the same way to everyone. No one is specially favored.

Wouldn't you want the rules to be applied to you in the same way that they are applied to others? Isn't it fair that the rules should be the same for everyone and that people who break the rules should be treated in the same way?

Think about your school. You have certain rules in your school and in your classrooms. If you do not follow those rules, you will have to face certain consequences. How would you feel if the rules were different for everyone? Imagine if you had to follow one set of rules and your friend had to follow another set of rules. Imagine if you were punished severely for breaking a rule, but your

friend was not punished at all for breaking the same rule. A school is only fair when all of the people are expected to follow the same rules, and if they break those rules, they will suffer the same punishment.

So, what is fairness?

- ☉ *The same rules for everyone.*
- ☉ *Everyone suffers the same consequences for breaking the rules.*
- ☉ *No one is treated as a favorite.*
- ☉ *Good deeds are encouraged.*

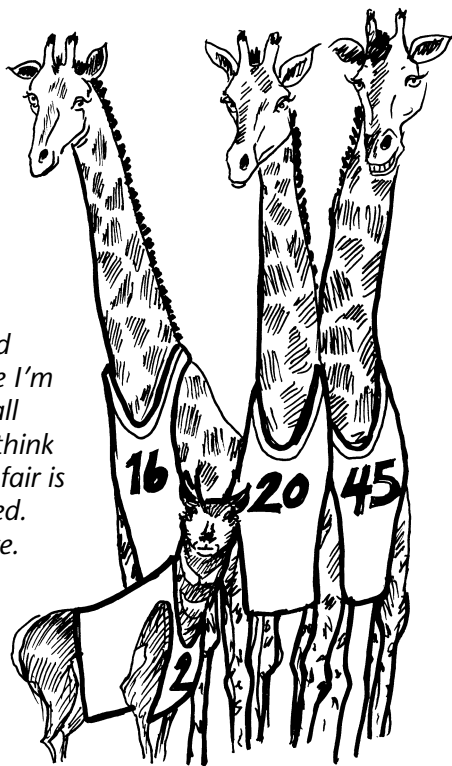
It is important to understand that fairness does not mean that every person has the same things, the same amount of money, the same clothes or even the same opportunities. This is impossible. Different people have different opportunities and each person has to make the best of the opportunities that come to him. The hard part is to recognize a good opportunity and to act on it.

How Do You Handle Unfair Situations?

After talking to one group of students, we discovered how being treated unfairly made them feel: *hurt, upset, enraged, and disrespected*. They agreed that they respected people who were fair, although when asked if the students themselves were always fair, all of them said—*Not always!* One student, Matisha, summed it up when she said:

I tried out for basketball. I'm a really good player but I'm short. I think I was cut because I'm short. The rest of the girls on the team were all much taller. I don't think it was about skill, I think it was about the way the team looked. Being fair is treating others the way you want to be treated. This is how you can show others that you care.

Do you think that she is being treated unfairly? Is height a valid reason to keep a good player off of a basketball team? Do you think that she should



have the same chance to play if her skills are at the same level as the other players, *but* she is much shorter?

We think it is safe to say that no one wants to be treated unfairly. However, life is full of challenges, and some of those challenges come in the form of unfair situations. Take a look at some of the examples below and ask yourself how you would handle each one.

What would you do if:

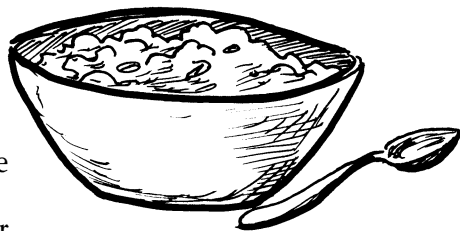
- ☹ *You think that your teacher has given you an unfair grade?*
- ☹ *You get in trouble for something you didn't do?*
- ☹ *Your backpack gets stolen?*
- ☹ *You break your leg and can't play your favorite sport?*
- ☹ *You get sick and have to stay in the house for a few months?*
- ☹ *Your parents have financial problems and you have to move into a much smaller place, go to another school and not have the clothes and things you are used to having?*
- ☹ *A player from the opposing team cheats but the referee pretends not to see because his friend is playing on that team?*
- ☹ *You study very hard for an exam and get an honest "A" while someone else cheats and gets the same mark?*
- ☹ *You go camping and you get the worst tent because your dad favors your older brother?*
- ☹ *You are told that there were no seats left in a movie theatre because they did not like the way you looked (but there were actually lots of seats left in the theatre)?*
- ☹ *Another person received credit for the work you did?*

It's always easy to say, "Oh, I'd be a good sport, I would be able to handle those unfair things!" But it's hard to do. It may help you in the future if you realize now that you will have to go through difficulties. The way you behave when you are treated unfairly may make a big difference in the outcome of the situation.

Taking the Lumps with the Sugar

Do you follow the crowd when it comes to unfairness? Do you moan and wish that you had it as easy as So-and-So? As we mentioned, life is often unfair. You are not going to wake up one morning to find that everything is going to go your way from that moment on. You are not going to ride off into the sunset of a per-

fect life. You are going to face troubles, and life is going to be unfair sometimes. You can't change the fact that you will have to deal with difficulties sometimes, but you *can* change how you look at these difficulties.



You can learn to make the best of your circumstances. We have already mentioned this when we talked about the importance of creating a good attitude, or outlook on life. You can realize that in every bowl of oatmeal there will be a few lumps (unless you are an expert oatmeal maker), but with those lumps also comes the sugar. It all depends on how you choose to digest your food! *But*, you may ask, *does making the best out of an unfair situation mean that you become a doormat and let anyone and everyone treat you badly?* Certainly not!

Sometimes You Can Do Something about the Lumps

It's also important to understand that some situations should be changed. If you see an unfair situation that is caused by human error (unlike being sick), you can say something about it. How you choose to say something about an unfair situation will probably determine how other people respond to you. If you scream out "*You idiot! That's unfair!*" you probably won't help matters any. If you can express yourself in a calm but clear manner, you may be able to get somewhere.

Lauren was upset because she felt that her history project was graded unfairly. At first she whined and moaned and said things like, *This is so unfair, she just doesn't like me and wants to make it hard on me!* Another one of her teachers heard her groaning over her fate in the halls and she talked to Lauren. After their conversation, Lauren went back to her history teacher to discuss the grade. Instead of saying things like *This is unfair, you just don't like me! I worked so hard on this project and I deserved a better grade! Why did you take off so much credit?* Lauren said something like this: *May I please speak to you about my grade on my project? I worked really hard on this project and I thought that I did exactly what you asked. I was surprised at my grade, and I was wondering if you could tell me what I did wrong and if there is any chance that I can still fix it? I want to do well in your class and it's important to me.*

After talking to her teacher, Lauren realized that she misunderstood some of the directions. Because she approached her teacher

in a calm and respectful way, instead of accusing her, the teacher gave Lauren the chance to fix her project.

When you face unfair situations you may not always be able to mend the problem as Lauren did, but sometimes you can. You will simply have to accept some situations and use them as learning experiences. Remember, though, that many bad situations can be cured by an honest and calm approach. Instead of allowing unfair situations to ruin you, you may be like one American who used them for the better.

The Unusual Response to Unfairness

One of the most important men in our history was a man who was bold and courageous in the face of terrible unfairness. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was an African-American minister during the civil rights era of the twentieth century. This was a time in America, in the 1950s and 1960s, when African-Americans were

demanding that their rights be respected.

Actually, the civil rights era began much earlier, but that is when it really heated up.

Many African-Americans and some other non-whites were treated unfairly, like second-class citizens. It was hard for most of them to get interesting and competitively paying jobs even though they were qualified; their children

had to go to poorer schools; and they had to live in economically depressed neighborhoods. Although they were indeed Americans, they were often not allowed to vote. They were forced to sit in the back of buses and give up their seats to white Americans if seating was limited. They also had to use separate public facilities like restrooms, water fountains, restaurants and hotels. They were suffering from people treating them unfairly.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. led a revolution, but he didn't use guns and brute force. He only used non-violent means. He helped African-Americans and their supporters stand together to change circumstances. He encouraged people not to give up, and to continue to work together as a team. Because of his work, changes were made, laws were changed, and circumstances slowly improved.

Dr. King was a great leader, a true American and a world citizen. He fought to ensure the rights and freedom of all people. He believed that all people deserved equal treatment and an equal



opportunity to pursue a life of liberty and happiness. These were the mandates of the United States Constitution and he worked diligently to make America fulfill its promise. He challenged all Americans to live up to the national creed regardless of race or religion.

In the early days of Dr. King's work, he faced incredible opposition. He was one of the most controversial leaders of his time. Above all, he managed to overcome incredibly unjust circumstances because of his ability to see that good results could come out of bad situations. We could talk about Dr. King in many chapters: courage, fulfilling goals, having the right attitude or being a good citizen (just to name a few). Dr. King was a man of courage who lived what he believed and acted righteously, even at the risk of his own life.

Working Together

Some people change unfair circumstances by working together with other people for the same cause. This is what human rights groups do. They see that people are being treated unfairly, so they put pressure on the governments that are imprisoning or beating people, and sometimes innocent people are released as a result of their efforts. Other people feel that it is wrong to mistreat the environment, and they work together to make changes. Even in those situations, the members of such groups have to act in a calm and respectful manner. One high school student who is a human rights activist tells us how she feels:

We write letters to government officials who we know are doing really terrible crimes—like beating and torturing innocent people and holding them in prison for no reason. Sometimes I'd like to write mean letters telling those people what I really think about the way they behave, but instead I have to address those officials as Dear Sir, or Dear Madame. People are much more likely to take you seriously when you can express yourself in a respectful way. It's hard when you know how unfair things are, but it's the only way to make changes.

Lynn, 16

It's great to join such a group and be able to help yourself and other people in this way. On a day-to-day basis, though, how you handle unfair situations will depend on you. The same rules apply: the way you express yourself may determine whether or not others listen to you.

Being Fair in Judging Others

It is unfair to judge people based on surface features such as the color of their skin, their religion, how wealthy they are or how well they play a certain sport. A big part of being fair is treating people equally no matter what surface differences they may have. This has been a problem in the past. People have been denied many opportunities because of their race, religion or background. One general rule may help you to decide if you are judging someone else fairly, and that is to ask yourself: *am I treating this person the way I would like to be treated?* If the answer is no, then you might want to change your approach.



Journal

Have you ever treated another person unfairly? If so, imagine that you could go back and change the situation, what would you do?



To Do

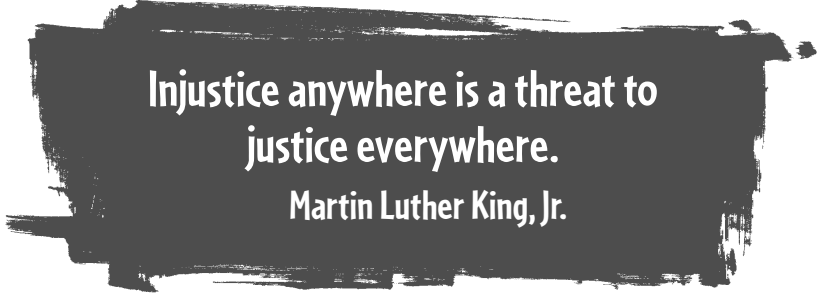
1. If you had to set five basic rules that all people had to follow at all times, what rules would you choose? Why? Would these rules help create a fair world?
2. If every person treated other people exactly the way he wanted to be treated, do you think that we would suffer from problems of fairness? Why or why not?
3. Look at the situations in the section called *How Do You Handle Unfair Situations?* As a group discuss the possible ways a person could handle those situations. Do your classmates agree on one approach or do you have different opinions? Have you ever been in one of those situations? How did you handle it? Was anyone in your class ever able to make the best out of an unfair situation? If so, what happened in that case?



Key Points

- ☞ Life is often unfair, but you have a choice in the way you handle unfair situations. A wise person will use even an unfair situation for the better.

- ☞ A fair person treats others the way he would like to be treated.



**Injustice anywhere is a threat to
justice everywhere.**

Martin Luther King, Jr.

