

In the air

Unfair, unjust, bad luck ...

Ariel Wagner-Parker

Many years ago, when I was a child, something happened that I've never been able to forget. Some ornament had got broken at home. My mother asked my brother who'd done it and he said it was me. It wasn't and I protested. My mother believed him.

A sense of injustice, or perhaps rather unfairness, develops early on in life. You often hear outraged or disbelieving children crying „*but it's not fair!*“ as if unfairness could not exist. But we all discover pretty quickly that we live surrounded by unfairness, injustice and bad luck. It's part of the human condition.

As a child, you first notice the small injustices that concern only you and your immediate environment – the sibling whom mummy or daddy seems to prefer, the classmate who's cleverer or better looking or more popular than you are. This awareness conditions your psychological make up for ever and possibly determines your system of values.

Later on, as the horizons of your world broaden out and the bigger picture gradually swims into focus, you become aware of other injustices – socio-economic, cultural, political – ones that may or may not concern you.

Once you've identified an injustice you can't unknow the knowledge and as an ethical being, you have to accept the consequences. You begin to make political choices: as a citizen, you're morally bound to do what you can – even if it's only signing a petition – to hound injustices out of the world. Even the smallest is a wart on the face of humanity and must be fought.

This is not meant to be a philosophical or theological treatise – far from it – but injustice needs to be distinguished from bad luck.

People who're born in the wrong place at the wrong time – in Pol Pot's Cambodia or Nazi Germany, for instance, or in present-day Iraq or Palestine; people who're born with incurable illnesses or who die from diseases for which a cure is only found after their lifetime: these are victims of bad luck („*fate*“) not injustice – although injustice may be wreaked on them as well (cf. the Palestinians).

How you react to finding yourself in such a situation – whether you shrug your shoulders, or grind your teeth and live with a feeling of bitterness, or launch yourself onto the campaign trail – is a question of temperament and to a certain extent, beliefs.

The basic characteristic of bad luck is that nothing can be done about it. But some kinds of bad luck become injustice as society and knowledge evolve.



Photo: imno4p.org/images/war/

Iraq: Born in the wrong place at the wrong time

Poverty, for example, was once seen as inevitable and being poor was considered merely unlucky. Then it was realised that poverty could be alleviated and allowing people to live in poverty became a question not of bad luck but of injustice, bringing with it the obligation to act. In the same way, treatments have been discovered for some medical conditions once thought incurable: not to make them available to those affected is another injustice.

From these two examples alone, it's easy to see that eradicating injustice is a very low priority on the highest political agendas ...

Some victims of bad luck fall into a special category. If, for instance, you're injured or lose a loved-one in an accident, or disaster, natural or otherwise, (Chernobyl, the Tsunami, New Orleans, Columbine ...), you may be able to fight back – and you may need to, in order to restore some idea of justice.

Believers and non-believers will be affected differently.

If you believe in God and immanent justice, your anger and distress may be softened by the conviction that your suffering on earth will be made good in heaven, or that your loved-ones have gone on to a better life. But if you're one of the increasing number of non-believers in our largely post-religious western societies, there can be no such consolation: there is no compensatory justice. If you're going to get any redress (material compensation for physical and psychical suffering), then you have to do it here

and now ... since there is nothing afterwards, on earth ... since there is nowhere else.

And most important, psychologically, you have to find someone to assume responsibility for your tragedy, since you don't believe there's a „*divine will*“ at work.

This desire to snatch some kind of human justice out of misfortune is probably one of the driving forces behind the rise of the so-called „*litigation culture*“ (although obviously without the necessary legislation on corporate responsibility and compensation, it could not have happened). The human judge is being made to replace the divine one.

It's often been said that a sense of injustice is what makes us human and being human, it's natural that one's perception of injustice is made more acute by personal circumstances or experience. As a woman, for instance, I find it difficult to stifle a sense of outrage at the basic injustice suffered by women: the inequalities, brutalities and humiliations, great and small, that the majority of women everywhere still have to suffer. But obviously, not only women are victims of injustice.

In the preceding pages you can read stories about individual humans fighting institutional injustice – a scenario that is repeated all over the world.

Who will prove stronger in the long run, the just or the unjust?

In every case, the outcome is more than uncertain. But as humans we still have to go on fighting.