



The Enlightenment



A Secular Mini-Journal for Inquiring Minds

Volume 1

Number 3

March 2020

Equality

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

So states the first line in the second paragraph of the American Declaration of Independence, pronounced on July 2nd, 1776, and approved on July 4th, 1776, which became known as Independence Day. The principal author was Thomas Jefferson, although John Adams and Benjamin Franklin also had input. This sentence has been called one of the best-known in the English language.

When the authors proclaimed, “all men are created equal,” what they were saying, I believe, is that every citizen should have equal rights as well as an equal opportunity to enjoy “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” You cannot argue with this premise, but the reality is, in other respects, all men (and women) are **not** created. equal. There can be considerable physical and mental differences.

Some people are stronger, or more beautiful or more handsome than others. Some have higher IQs than others. Some people are unfortunately, through no fault of their own, born with a handicap, or an incurable disease, or have mental challenges, while others may live their whole life hardly ever getting sick. Also, humans are born with a variety of talents or aptitudes. Some may be artistic, while others may have scientific or mathematical leanings. Some will become leaders, others will be followers. Some will be introverts, and some will be extroverts. Some will have mechanical skills while others may be all thumbs. And a select few will rise above the rest. Mozart and Einstein immediately come to mind.

I think what Jefferson was trying to imply is this: despite all the different characteristics, abilities, and talents of individual humans, all are entitled to live in an environment encompassing liberty and the pursuit of happiness, thus providing an equal opportunity for everyone to productively use whatever talents they were born with, regardless of race or creed or social standing. (However, the irony here must be pointed out that some of the signers of The Declaration of Independence owned slaves).

America succeeded in this endeavour, establishing a land of opportunity. After forming a democracy from scratch, with separation of powers, it eventually became possible for American citizens who worked hard,

to achieve the “American Dream,” while the country became the most powerful nation the world had ever seen.

Nevertheless, equality for all has not been achieved. Poverty and homeless are problems waiting to be solved as the gap between haves and have-nots increases, while the middle class shrinks. Societies face a huge challenge in determining how to allow every able-bodied person to achieve a meaningful existence, while at the same time looking after those unfortunately born with a handicap.

This challenge is even greater now with the digital revolution and artificial intelligence upon us. Is guaranteed annual income and the wealthy paying higher taxes part of the solution?

Dichotomy

East is east and west is west, and never the twain shall meet. So said Rudyard Kipling in his poem, *The Ballad of East and West*. This poem is almost 100 lines long and relates a complicated story about two warriors meeting face to face. But the first line of this poem can also be applied to religions. The monotheistic religions of the west versus the reincarnation religions of the east.

The adherents of the linear western monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Baha’i – believe in one God and an afterlife. The adherents of the cyclical eastern religions – Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, and Buddhism – believe in reincarnation. The adherents of all these religions believe humans possess some kind of spiritual ethereal entity often referred to as a soul. The monotheists believe the soul continues on after death and enters an everlasting life in an idyllic heaven or in an everlasting hell, depending on whether the individual lived a virtuous life or an evil one. Hence the linear designation. The believers in a cyclical reincarnation believe that upon death the soul moves into some kind of spirit world and eventually is reincarnated into a new body at the time of birth. This new individual will have learnt from mistakes in its former life and try to live better in the present one. This is known as karma.

This dichotomy poses the obvious question: which one is right? Is monotheism right for the western mind, and reincarnation right for the eastern mind, or is neither right? Or, are both concepts just the result of inventions of earlier humans at different times and places? Non-believers will say the latter is true, and that death is the end. No heaven, no hell, and no reincarnation. It’s as simple as that. We are born, we live, and we die. Therefore, get the most possible good out of this life here on earth.

The concept of a soul goes back a long way. Plato talked about humans having a soul and the possibility of an afterlife, and there is a possibility that this is where the early Christians picked up on the concept of a soul and an afterlife. The Jews did not make a big issue of either. But the idea of a soul entering an individual at birth makes little sense to a non-believer. And it did not make sense to the Greek philosopher Epicurus. He put it this way:

It is surely ridiculous to suppose that spirits are standing by at the mating and birth of animals – a numberless number of immortals on the look-out for mortal frames, jostling and squabbling to get in first and establish themselves most firmly. Or is there an established compact that first come shall be first served, without any trial of strength between spirits?

Epicurus' analysis, I believe, suggests with some certainty that souls do not exist, and therefore, neither monotheistic religions nor religions believing in reincarnation have much credibility. As already stated, the alternative is to live this life to the fullest extent possible while on this earth, without believing in supernatural phenomena. That being said, however, every individual still has the right to choose the concept that works best for them. (DAH).

The Importance of Kindness in Ethics

By Goldwin Emerson

Without kindness, even normal ethical actions lose much of their influence. For example, justice without kindness can be harsh. Honesty without kindness, at its worst, may sometimes take on an uncaring touch of cruelty.

There is a tone of softness and caring attached to kindness. Words that are similar to kindness such as compassion, concern, comforting, courtesy, and charitableness indicate thoughtfulness about other people. Kindness means we can identify with others, especially when we understand their troubles or their need for help. Kindness means we are thoughtful about the plight of fellow humans. In everyday language, kind people are willing to "walk in the shoes" of others and understand their difficulties and their needs.

True kindness is given without external rewards for the giver. While it is rewarding when receivers of kindness thank you and recognize your help, the best kindness does not require thankful comments. At its best, true kindness makes us feel rewarded because we have better feelings about ourselves. We are rewarded by the feeling that we are close to being the kind of person we would like everyone else to be.

So far, I have emphasized that kindness requires a tenderness and sensitivity in order to be effective. But there are times when kindness also requires a firmness or inner discipline in order to work well. Some people call this "tough love." If you are a teacher or a parent and you want to instill good work habits and carefulness in children, you may need to be firm in order to be kind. When you care enough about children to help them develop habits that will serve them well throughout their lives and you want to make life good for them this is a gift to humanity. You aspire to developing knowledge and skills and habits that will make their life productive and happy because you care about their welfare. When children are young it may be easier to accede to their wants and wishes, but your experience in living directs you to be kind by helping them develop habits that will, in the long run, bring them the greatest happiness and kindness. The wisdom of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, emphasized that this kind of development of good habits was one of the greatest kindnesses one could offer to children.

In more modern times, Mother Teresa, who in 1997 became Saint Teresa of Calcutta, was widely known for her kindness and her help towards the needy and poor in India. She was born August 26, 1910 as Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu in Macedonia. Her kindness was recognized on many occasions, such as in 1979 when she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. In her earlier life, from 1931 to 1948, she taught as a teaching nun in a secondary school. She was kind but firm in helping students develop self-discipline because she knew that in the long run this would be a kindness and help to her students. Mother Teresa has been well recognized throughout much of the world, by people of many religious faiths as well as by secular thinkers, for her contribution towards helping the poor and needy. She has set a great example of what kindness can do to make for a better world. There is a theory that in order to understand the poor and needy one must have

experienced such conditions in their own life. Yet this was not the case with Mother Teresa who came from a wealthy family.

Kindness is a very good moderating factor in developing and supporting ethics and morality. It enables people and governments to work towards world harmony and peace.

An Amazing Story of Kindness to Warm Your Heart.

The following story was written by a flight attendant who was on Delta Flight 15 on the morning of September 11, 2001. This flight was one of 53 diverted to Gander, Newfoundland, after the World Trade Centre Towers in New York were struck by hijacked aircraft. Unfortunately, I was not able to find the name of the flight attendant. (DAH).

On the morning of Tuesday, September 11, we were about 5 hours out of Frankfurt, flying over the North Atlantic. All of a sudden, the curtains parted and I was told to go to the cockpit, immediately, to see the captain. As soon as I got there, I noticed that the crew had that "All Business" look on their faces. The captain handed me a printed message. It was from Delta's main office in Atlanta and simply read, "All airways over the Continental United States are closed to commercial air traffic. Land ASAP at the nearest airport. Advise your destination."

No one said a word about what this could mean. We knew it was a serious situation and we needed to find terra firma quickly. The captain determined that the nearest airport was 400 miles behind us in Gander, Newfoundland. He requested approval for a route change from the Canadian traffic controller and approval was granted immediately -- no questions asked. We found out later, of course, why there was no hesitation in approving our request.

While the flight crew prepared the airplane for landing, another message arrived from Atlanta telling us about some terrorist activity in the New York area. A few minutes later word came in about the hijackings. We decided to LIE to the passengers while we were still in the air. We told them the plane had a simple instrument problem and that we needed to land at the nearest airport in Gander, Newfoundland, to have it checked out. We promised to give more information after landing in Gander. There was much grumbling among the passengers, but that's nothing new! Forty minutes later, we landed in Gander. Local time at Gander was 12:30 PM that's 11:00 AM EST.

There were already about 20 other airplanes on the ground from all over the world that had taken this detour on their way to the US. After we parked on the ramp, the captain made the following announcement: "Ladies and gentlemen, you must be wondering if all these airplanes around us have the same instrument problem we have. The reality is that we are here for another reason."

Then he went on to explain the little bit we knew about the situation in the US. There were loud gasps and stares of disbelief. The captain informed passengers that Ground Control in Gander told us to stay put. The Canadian Government was in charge of our situation and no one was allowed to get off the aircraft. No one on the ground was allowed to come near any of the air crafts. Only airport police would come around periodically, look us over, and go on to the next airplane.

In the next hour or so more planes landed, and Gander ended up with 53 airplanes from all over the world, 27 of which were US commercial jets. Meanwhile, bits of news started to come in over the aircraft radio and

for the first time we learned that airplanes had flown into the World Trade Center in New York and into the Pentagon in DC. People were trying to use their cellphones, but were unable to connect due to a different cell system in Canada. Some did get through, but were only able to get to the Canadian operator who would tell them that the lines to the U.S. were either blocked or jammed.

Sometime in the evening the news filtered to us that the World Trade Center buildings had collapsed and that a fourth hijacking had resulted in a crash. By now the passengers were emotionally and physically exhausted, not to mention frightened, but everyone stayed amazingly calm. We had only to look out the window at the 52 other stranded aircraft to realize that we were not the only ones in this predicament. We had been told earlier that they would be allowing people off the planes one plane at a time. At 6 PM, Gander airport told us that our turn to deplane would be 11 am the next morning. Passengers were not happy, but they simply resigned themselves to this news without much noise and started to prepare themselves to spend the night on the airplane. Gander had promised us medical attention, if needed, water, and lavatory servicing. And they were true to their word.

Fortunately, we had no medical situations to worry about. We did have a young lady who was 33 weeks into her pregnancy. We took REALLY good care of her. The night passed without incident despite the uncomfortable sleeping arrangements. About 10:30 on the morning of the 12th, a convoy of school buses showed up. We got off the plane and were taken to the terminal where we went through Immigration and Customs and then had to register with the Red Cross. After that we (the crew) were separated from the passengers and were taken in vans to a small hotel. We had no idea where our passengers were going. We learned from the Red Cross that the town of Gander has a population of 10,400 people and they had about 10,500 passengers to take care of from all the airplanes that were forced into Gander! We were told to just relax at the hotel, and we would be contacted when the US airports opened again, but not to expect that call for a while.

We found out the total scope of the terror back home only after getting to our hotel and turning on the TV, 24 hours after it all started. Meanwhile, we had lots of time on our hands and found that the people of Gander were extremely friendly. They started calling us the "plane people." We enjoyed their hospitality, explored the town of Gander, and ended up having a pretty good time.

Two days later, we got that call and were taken back to the Gander airport. Back on the plane, we were reunited with the passengers and found out what they had been doing for the past two days. What we found out was incredible. Gander and all the surrounding communities (within about a 75 kilometer radius) had closed all high schools, meeting halls, lodges, and any other large gathering places. They converted all these facilities to mass lodging areas for all the stranded travellers. Some had cots set up, some had mats with sleeping bags and pillows set up. ALL the high school students were required to volunteer their time to take care of the "guests."

Our 218 passengers ended up in a town called Lewisporte, about 45 kilometers from Gander, where they were put up in a high school. If any women wanted to be in a women-only facility, that was arranged. Families were kept together. All the elderly passengers were taken to private homes.

Remember that young pregnant lady? She was put up in a private home right across the street from a 24-hour Urgent Care facility. There was a dentist on call and both male and female nurses remained with the crowd for the duration. Phone calls and e-mails to the U.S. and around the world were available to everyone

once a day. During the day, passengers were offered "Excursion" trips. Some people went on boat cruises of the lakes and harbours. Some went for hikes in the local forests.

Local bakeries stayed open to make fresh bread for the guests. Food was prepared by all the residents and brought to the schools. People were driven to restaurants of their choice and offered wonderful meals. Everyone was given tokens for local laundromats to wash their clothes, since luggage was still on the aircraft. In other words, every single need was met for those stranded travellers. Passengers were crying while telling us these stories.

Finally, when they were told that U.S. airports had reopened, they were delivered to the airport right on time and without a single passenger missing or late. The local Red Cross had all the information about the whereabouts of each and every passenger and knew which plane they needed to be on and when all the planes were leaving. They coordinated everything beautifully. It was absolutely incredible.

When passengers came on board, it was like they had been on a cruise. Everyone knew each other by name. They were swapping stories of their stay, impressing each other with who had the better time. Our flight back to Atlanta looked like a chartered party flight. The crew just stayed out of their way. It was mind-boggling. Passengers had totally bonded and were calling each other by their first names, exchanging phone numbers, addresses, and email addresses. And then a very unusual thing happened.

One of our passengers approached me and asked if he could make an announcement over the PA system. We never, ever allow that. But this time was different. I said "of course" and handed him the mike. He picked up the PA and reminded everyone about what they had just gone through in the last few days. He reminded them of the hospitality they had received at the hands of total strangers. He continued by saying that he would like to do something in return for the good folks of Lewisporte. He said he was going to set up a Trust Fund under the name of DELTA 15 (our flight number). The purpose of the trust fund is to provide college scholarships for the high school students of Lewisporte. He asked for donations of any amount from his fellow travellers.

When the paper with donations got back to us with the amounts, names, phone numbers, and addresses, the total was for more than \$14,000! The gentleman, a MD from Virginia, promised to match the donations and to start the administrative work on the scholarship. He also said that he would forward this proposal to Delta Corporate and ask them to donate as well. As I write this account, the trust fund is at more than \$1.5 million and has assisted 134 students in college education.

I just wanted to share this story because we need good stories right now. It gives me a little bit of hope to know that some people in a faraway place were kind to us strangers who literally dropped in on them.

It reminds me how much good there is in the world. In spite of all the rotten things we see going on in today's world, this story confirms that there are still a lot of good people in the world and when things get bad, they will come forward.

Editor's Note: The story above is not the kind of article that normally appears in an *Enlightenment*. But it ties in so well with the preceding article on kindness, I felt it was appropriate, even after 18 years.