All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten
A sermon by Rev. Kate Wilkinson
First Parish in Cambridge
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Excerpt from *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* by Robert Fulghum:

All I really need to know about how to live and what to do and how to be I learned in kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate school mountain, but there in the sand pile at school.

These are the things I learned:
- Share everything.
- Play fair.
- Don't hit people.
- Put things back where you found them.
- Clean up your own mess.
- Don't take things that aren't yours.
- Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.
- Wash your hands before you eat.
- Flush.
- Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.
- Live a balanced life - learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some.
- Take a nap every afternoon.
- When you go out in the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands and stick together.
- Be aware of wonder. Remember the little seed in the Styrofoam cup: the roots go down and the plant goes up and nobody really knows how or why, but we are all like that.
- Goldfish and hamsters and white mice and even the little seed in the Styrofoam cup - they all die. So do we.
- And then remember the Dick-and-Jane books and the first word you learned - the biggest word of all - LOOK.

We have that Robert Fulghum list up on the wall near the microwave in the staff room at the UU Urban Ministry. I think our office manager Linda might have put it there, because the lines “Put things back where you found them” and “Clean up your own mess” are in bold.

Apparently some of us did not pay attention in kindergarten because Linda complains that she is tired of picking up after us! Maybe we should have taken notes back then when we were six.

My nephew John is in kindergarten now. And I wonder, and try not to worry…is he learning all he really needs to know for life? Is he learning to share? To look? To play fair and not take what is not his?
And I wonder, as life gets more complex and he moves out of the sandbox, will he have learned those lessons well enough to apply them to new settings and surroundings. Will he have grasped them well enough to apply them even in the gray areas? And did I?

Because once you move beyond the sandbox and the kindergarten classroom, things get a lot more complicated. Once you stop talking about pails and shovels and toys and start talking about resources (like wealth and land and power), sharing isn’t so cut and dry anymore. Once you start learning about inheritance and privilege you have to start thinking not only about not taking things that aren’t yours, but also about why some things are yours to begin with, and what that means about sharing and taking and looking.

So while John is learning these lessons for the first time, and applying them with his friends on the playground, our task as adults is to take a look at those kindergarten lessons again, and see how they apply to our lives now, confusing as they are.

I don’t know about you, but I am not so different than I was in kindergarten. This means that sometimes I still learn best from stories.

So let me tell you a story that made me think differently about the task of sharing and the subject of fairness in this world.

It is the true story of Byron Green and Max Holland. They are about the same age, work for the same company and make the same income. They even live in the same neighborhood. Byron is black and Max is white. It would seem on the surface that these men are equal in our society.

In fact, Byron and Max are the co-directors of California Newsreel, the company that produced the PBS television series *Race: The Power of an Illusion*, from which I take their story. Sam is going to help me share it with you.

On the surface they have the same life, but if you compare their net assets, Max, who is white, has twice as much wealth as Byron, who is black. Why is there such a big difference? Has Byron not worked as hard as Max? Not been as prudent? Did Byron not prioritize his studies and go to a good college? They have the same job, so can we really say that Byron has been discriminated against? What happened? What roles have race and wealth played in their life stories?

As we were taught in kindergarten, let’s look! Let’s really look at their stories, starting with when their parents each bought their first homes.

In 1951, the Greens bought a two story duplex in one of the areas of Chester, PA that would rent or sell to African Americans. The Greens scraped together $1,000 for the down payment and mortgaged the $5,500 remaining balance.

The Hollands married in 1948. A financial gift from their parents and a low-interest government VA loan allowed the Hollands to stretch their resources and move to a new suburban development on Long Island. In 1952, they bought a home in all-white Merrick for $21,500.

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Now let’s take a look at how Byron and Max’s parents made a living.

In the 1950s, job opportunities for Black people were still very limited. Mr. Green worked as a lab attendant at a nearby refinery—he’d say, “Black men were the last hired and the first fired.” Mrs. Green provided domestic help for white families in the middle-class suburbs.

Mr. Holland financed his college education through the GI Bill. After graduating, he got a job as a “management trainee” for a big New York textile firm, where he worked for the next 15 years. The sales, technical, and management staff were entirely white.
Byron and Max now live in the same neighborhood, but let’s look at Byron and Max’s neighborhoods growing up.

When manufacturing crashed, many people left Chester, and the area became increasingly segregated. Those who stayed faced higher taxes to maintain public services and schools. While their income remained the same, the Greens saw their expenses climb and their neighborhood begin to deteriorate.

Meanwhile, property values were good and getting better for Max’s family. He and his brothers enjoyed good schools, parks, and libraries. In 1965, Mr. Holland started his own business by tapping into his home equity and borrowing money from an uncle. His business did well and he sent all three of his children to private colleges.

But Byron also went to college. He received an academic scholarship to an Ivy League school. Because of his family’s uncertain financial situation, though, he has always exercised a conservative approach to his personal finances.

Max’s personal “wealth-building” began at the age of 13 with Bar Mitzvah checks from friends and relatives. By the time he was 18, Max could use his savings and money from his parents to travel, explore his interests, and go to college worry free.

In the year 2000, the Greens sold their home in Chester for $29,500—a negligible increase in value considering the remodeling and improvements they put into it over 40 years. This amount has not gone far to provide for Byron’s parents in old age. At the time of the sale, Chester’s population was 76% black.

In 1991, the Hollands sold their home for $299,000—14 times what they paid for it—and were able to retire comfortably to the Berkshire Mountains. They also helped all of their children with down payments on their own homes. At the time of the sale, Merrick was still 95% white.

In 1994, Byron financed the purchase of a condominium and continues to make monthly mortgage payments today. He also needs to look after his parents’ finances and must be ready to pitch in whenever unforeseen expenses arise.

With help from his parents, Max bought his own house in 1985. Today, his parents are financially secure and his home is all paid for and appreciating value. Max is free to focus on his future—to provide a safety net or launching pad for his own children.

As you can see, in one generation, discrimination makes a big difference in the relative wealth of these two people. At the time their story was recorded a few years ago, the average white family had eight times the wealth of the average nonwhite family. Even at the same income level, whites have, on average, twice the wealth of Black families. Wealth isn’t just about luxury. It’s also the starting point for the next generation. Until the wealth gap is addressed, say Byron and Max, whites will continue to have an advantage over nonwhites, generation after generation.1

So if we take that kindergarten lesson and look, really look at the world around us, including issues of race, class, privilege, discrepancy, where does that leave us? It’s complicated. We can’t just hand over the green shovel and say “ok…you can have it now.” The inequities are too large scale for that, go too far back.

It is so complicated. I know now that I have power and privilege because of my race and my upbringing. But I don’t always know how to share it, even in those moments when I want to.

1 Story of Byron and Max quoted from Race: The Power of an Illusion
One way that I have found to address this complicated world, one in which some people have so many resources and others so few, is to practice my ministry at the UU Urban Ministry in Roxbury. In working there, I join with the hundreds of other Unitarian Universalists who see the UU Urban Ministry as a way to better the world by supporting a place that thinks about inequities and fairness.

The UU Urban ministry is a partnership with the community of Roxbury in which we recognize that it’s more complicated than handing over the green shovel. There are things that many of us have had access to, because of where we grew up or how much our parents made or the color of our skin that the youth in the Roxbury youth programs do not have easy access to because of where they are growing up or how much their parents make or the color of their skin.

We can’t fix all of those inequities over night. But there is power in acknowledging those inequities, and partnering with others, both in our own communities and in disadvantaged communities to work towards a more equal sharing of resources.

It sends a powerful message to the world when a UU from Belmont comes to Roxbury every week to tutor a student from the Madison Park high school. To the student it says, “It is not right that there are neighborhoods that I don’t go to.” You live here, and I believe in you, so I come here.

It sends a powerful message to the world that a congregation in Medfield is giving money toward scholarships for summer camps for children in Roxbury. It tells the parents in Roxbury, “my children were able to go to summer camp because I happen to live in Medfield and have resources to give my child this experience. But you happen to live in Roxbury with few resources, for reasons that predate either you or I or the choices we’ve made in life, and your children deserve that experience too. Let’s work together to make that happen.”

It sends a powerful message to the world that with the support of congregations like First Parish Cambridge, the UU Urban Ministry runs a domestic violence shelter called Renewal House. It says to the battered woman or man, “We believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person. And that includes you, and we’d like you to be safe.”

Another story. Cinthia was a resident of Renewal House a year ago. She’s given me permission to use her story. Part of the abuse that Cinthia suffered was that her husband cut off all of her connections to the outside world. Cinthia was not allowed to leave her home, speak on the phone or have contact with anyone. She did, however, have minimal contact with a woman who worked in the building where she and her husband lived.

Occasionally, this woman would have to come into their apartment to repair something or make routine checks. Cinthia didn’t speak much with her – but she didn’t have to, because the woman could see what was happening. One day, the woman knocked on Cinthia’s door and handed her $25 and said, “why don’t you use this to get out of here.” And that is what Cinthia did.

Rather than ignoring what she could see was happening, rather than passing judgments on the players in the story, this woman shared what she had with Cinthia because she could. When Cinthia first told this story she was at a church gathering in Northbridge. She looked out at the people gathered in the room and said, “You could have been that person giving me that $25. You can be the person to help someone leave an abusive relationship.”
The people gathered in Northbridge cried at this invitation. They cried, and I sometimes cry, in recognition of how complex and unfair the world is. And about how every day we are given the choice between being someone who doesn’t see the inequities around them, or being someone who does. And at how every day we are invited to be the person that goes to Roxbury or doesn’t, the person that sends underresourced children to camp or doesn’t, the person that gives a woman in distress $25 to get out of there or doesn’t.

And even if we are choosing to be the person who gives, we also have to make a choice each time about how we do that giving, that sharing.

In a recent letter from Charlie Clements, President of the UU Service Committee, on the subject of giving money for disaster relief in Haiti, he said, “In the midst of the terrible devastation, it was the Haitians who rescued each other and set up camps for the displaced when international aid was bottlenecked. Consistent with the Unitarian Universalist recognition of the inherent worth and dignity of every person, we believe that we must extend our hands to Haitians in solidarity and not charity. At UUSC we deeply appreciate the solidarity with the Haitian people that you have shown, and with your support we will work with them as they determine and act on the best ways to rebuild their country.”

On our own, it may seem like too overwhelming a task to combat the inequities we see when we really look around us. And without relationship, without partnering and a certain level of trust and openness, our efforts seem less like fairness and more like charity. But together, as Unitarian Universalists, together in partnerships like the one we have with the community of Roxbury at the UU Urban Ministry or the one the UUSC is trying to build with the people of Haiti, together, we can start living out some of the tenets we learned as children in a meaningful way.

Living, we have the choice to look or not to look. Seeing, we have the choice to share or not to share. Sharing, we have the choice to give in charity or in solidarity.

Maybe we did learn the most important lesson in kindergarten afterall. “When you go out in the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands and stick together.”

Amen and Blessed Be.