

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY SYSTEMIC OR INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE?

By Susan O'Halloran

Getting along may be "more natural"

Some people believe that it's natural for people who are different to have conflict and fight. However, when people don't get along, it often has more to do with injustice than differences. For example, a first grade class of children might get along just fine, but what if some inequalities begin to appear? What if some of the children get ice cream and others don't? What if only some of the children have to do homework but others get A's without having to work? How long would that classroom stay peaceful?

A key to understanding why we have the social problems and cultural clashes we do today is to explore the theme of justice throughout history — what groups received more than other groups? How and why?

It is extremely important that we look at our own biases and how we treat one another. But dealing with our personal and interpersonal relationships is not enough. We must look at the society we live in because if our society is not just, it will be much harder for people to get along, no matter how individuals try and how good their intent.

Discrimination means power

Everyone has prejudices and carries out exclusive behaviors from time to time. However, only some groups have had the power to *discriminate* against other groups.

'For example, throughout our country's history, individual Asian, Latino, African or Native Americans could have had prejudices against European Americans. They could have even treated individual European Americans badly when they got them within their circle of influence or power. But none of those traditional Outsider groups had the power to *act* on their prejudices in a systemic manner.

Power to decide who could be citizens and what rights they would have

European Americans who were elected to Congress decided who could enter this country. In the first Naturalization Law in 1790 they decided that becoming a citizen would be restricted to "free white people." First Nations, Latino and African Americans who were already here as well as Asian Americans whose immigration restrictions weren't lifted until 1965, never had the power to say white people couldn't come into this country.

European Americans who sat on the Supreme Court said in the 1857 Dred Scott decision that "we have come to the decision that the African race was not intended to be included in the Constitution for the enjoyment of any personal rights." Black people never had the power to enslave whites or make such judicial rulings that would become the law of the land. That's what we mean by systemic power.

Power to decide where people would live and what jobs they could hold

European American lawmakers passed the Indian Relocation Act and removed whole nations of American Indians from their lands to other parts of United States saying, “Give to the Indians the land that is not of a character to be useful to whites.” Native Americans never moved whole groups of white people about the country and told them where they could and couldn't live.

In 1911, when European Americans who sat on the Kentucky Derby sports commission saw that African American jockeys won 15 of the first 28 Kentucky Derbies, they prohibited all black jockeys from entering the derby in 1911. When people of color became successful in many different fields — medicine, law, academia, business — European Americans enacted laws to bar them from those jobs. People of color may have had plenty of prejudices against European Americans, but they never had the power to bar whites from whole areas of employment.

These examples help us remember what we mean by system-wide power. We aren't just talking about the right to vote. Some white Europeans had the firearms, the property and the wealth to start and run all the institutions of this society. They decided who would get into this country and who could be citizens. They decided where people would live and how they would work, go to school and even whether people would speak their own language and know their own names and history. (Note: The group in power looked down on some “white” Europeans, too. The ruling group called some of these later immigrants “inferior white races” and discriminated against them as well.)

Power to set up systems of interlocking institutions

This country started with Insiders who set up the systems of this country to benefit their group. This doesn't mean they were all bad people. This doesn't mean they didn't also accomplish wonderful things — fighting a revolution and setting up successful schools and businesses is no small feat. Institutional or systemic discrimination is always a mixture of conscious and unconscious acts.

Some of the Insiders were blinded by their status; they didn't have much contact with the Outsiders and thought the Outsiders were living similar lives to theirs. Other Insiders believed outright in their superiority. They thought whites *should* run things. When the politician Stephen Douglas debated Abraham Lincoln in the 1850s, he said flat out, "I believe this government was made on a white basis. I believe it was made by white men for the benefit of white men, and I'm in favor of confining citizenship to white men instead of conferring it upon Negroes, Indians or other inferior races."

In every historical era, equality was a choice

We can say, “Well, that's just how people thought back then. People were ignorant of how we think today.” However, there were always those Outsiders *and* Insiders in

America who protested enslaving people, taking people's land or refusing *anyone* the vote or the right to decent jobs and housing. Believing and working for equality was a choice for them, just as it is a choice for us.

Privilege is the ease with which we can exercise our rights

It's important that we understand how severe the Insider and Outsider system was in the United States in order to understand the problems we have inherited that continue to challenge us today. Today the worst of our discriminatory laws have changed. For the most part, we share similar rights. However, *the ease* with which we can exercise those rights is often radically different *because of how the inequities of the past are still affecting the present.*

Invisible “isms” need no discriminatory laws

When the advantages have been tipped in one group's favor for so long, those in power may not even see their extra privileges any longer. The “way things are” seems natural and free of bias to them. When the special advantages become that imbedded in the systems and institutions of a country, you don't need laws or other blatant discrimination to keep them going. It's as if they keep whirling along on their own. The inequities don't need to rely on the Insiders' dislike or active oppression of the Outsider groups. In fact, in most cases, the Insiders are very good people who want the country to be fair; they are just unaware of how the system has a life of its own, discriminating on the Insiders' behalf without the Insiders' consent or active participation.

That's why we call the systemic discrimination of today “invisible.” An invisible “ism” is the result of prejudice plus power plus time — the advantages going to one group for so long they have become ingrained in the system and are taken for granted with no need for discriminatory laws.

Let's take a non-racial example. At one time, right-handers who were in the majority used to tie left-handed children's writing arms behind their backs to force them to write the majority's way. Today we no longer put Left-handers at such blatant disadvantage; the discrimination is much more subtle. For example, if you walk into many college lecture halls you will still see seats where the tabletop can be pulled across a student's lap so he or she can write. Right-handers would call these seats with the movable tabletops “desks.” However, Left-handers know they are not “just desks.” There is nothing neutral or bias-free about them; they are *right-handed* desks. The tabletops come up on only one side — the side that supports a student's right arm.

Discrimination can happen with no ill intent

When Left-handers write long essay tests, they are often writing for an hour or more with no support for their arms. The Insiders are so used to things being set up for them that they don't even *see* that the desks are biased in their favor. They need have absolutely no bad feelings toward the traditional Outsiders for the system to continue discriminating

against lefties. All they need to do is stay unaware of their special privileges and keep having the power to set things up for themselves.

The Insider's past advantage keeps giving them present and future advantages, for instance, a better chance to do well on tests. They can blame the Outsiders — “Why are those left-handers always whining? Why are they so slow? Why don't they do better?” Without being aware, the Insiders believe that their system runs on merit — “Whoever works hardest succeeds. My success comes from my hard work; people who don't succeed have only themselves to blame.”

And the Insiders who succeed *are* working hard. You don't get an A on a test without working. However, some lefties might be working just as hard, but not achieving the same results because of the *systemic barriers* in their way. We're using the left-handed and right-handed examples as an analogy. While it's annoying for lefties to pick up scissors and knives and screwdrivers that weren't designed for them, for the most part, their outsider status doesn't affect where they live, go to school or work.

Past advantages beget present advantages

So let's imagine what it would truly be like to live under an invisible institutional “ism.” Let's do a Turnaround. Imagine that you are an able-bodied person and that people with disabilities are in the majority in this country and have been for centuries. They are the group in power. From the beginning, differently-abled people had the economic power and with their much higher educational levels they continue to accumulate the most wealth. They are the ones who are elected to office and make the laws. For sake of this example, suppose that this majority shares many different abilities in common. For example, they can all read Braille, understand sign language and maneuver well in a wheelchair.

When the differently-abled majority was setting up this imaginary country, they set it up to benefit their group. They set up their schools, buildings, medical institutions, legal and transportation systems and so on to work for them. They celebrated *their* heroes and *their* holidays. They couldn't help looking down on able-bodied people who were clearly physically weak and less intelligent. The common saying was, “Look at how lazy those able-bodied people are. They always want to take the easy way out – walk right up the stairs or reach with both hands for an object on the highest shelf.” Posters, books and television show ridiculed able-bodied people. Most humor, such as cartoons showing able-bodied people signing the wrong words, revolved around how inferior able-bodied people were.

Segregated schools

Since the country's inception, able-bodied children were not allowed to go to school with differently-abled children. It was a common belief, backed up by much research, that the able-bodied as a whole were not intelligent enough to read books in Braille or learn from the teachers who used sign language. In the past, able-bodied schools were nothing more

than falling down shacks with few supplies, equipment or teachers. The differently-abled teachers, for the most part, treated the able-bodied children with barely disguised disdain or felt sorry for them. They tried to teach “those lazy children” about the great accomplishments of the differently-abled. They tried to get their students to stop reading with their eyes or talking with their mouths. However, the “lazy” able-bodied children just didn’t seem to learn. They kept trying to do things their way and were a constant discipline problem, proving over and over that the able-bodied are just not “civilized.”

Employment “standards”

When it came to employment, the differently-abled were interested in making sure that they and their children got the best jobs, and so enacted laws making it illegal for able-bodied people to even apply for certain positions. However, the differently-abled didn’t mind able-bodied people doing the grunt work of caring for their lawns, cleaning their houses and washing their dishes in restaurants. If the able-bodied would persevere, they could work their way up.

Housing discrimination

Housing discrimination was the law of the land. Able-bodied people were forced to live in specific overcrowded sections of towns with the worst housing, far away from jobs and cultural activities. Because they weren’t allowed to work in the most lucrative fields, most able-bodied people couldn’t afford to buy their homes and so were at the mercy of the differently-abled majority who owned the homes in their neighborhoods and charged sky-high rents. Of course, there were always a few able-bodied people who managed to buy their own homes, which just proved that if they could make it, all able-bodied people could make it.

Finally, the able-bodied fought back hard enough and long enough to change the blatant discriminatory laws that barred them from schools, jobs, housing, medical care, the voting booth and so on. Now, in the law books, able-bodied and differently-abled people have the same rights. Now *you*, as an able-bodied person, can apply for any job, live in any neighborhood and legally you can attend any school.

Invisible “Insiders Only” signs on the school door

So the first thing your parents do is enroll you in a previously segregated school that has the reputation of preparing students for successful entry into the best colleges. However, even though you’re accepted (and clearly making all the administrators of the school happy because now they can point to you and say how “open” their school is) when you arrive, it still feels like the Insiders’ school. All of your teachers are differently-abled and you only study about the accomplishments of the Insiders. The other students and teachers see the history they are learning, for example, as just “history.” You see it as “differently-abled history.” But the teachers were never taught the accomplishments of your group and so they don’t even know what they *aren’t* teaching.

You are expected to deliver all your reports in sign language, however your previous school never taught you how to do sign interpretation. Even your parents are asked to sign when they come in for parent-teacher conferences. You want to go out for the track and basketball teams, your best sports, but when you arrive at tryouts you discover that you must use a wheelchair for both events. You are now the slowest one in track and you can't hit the basket. You don't make either team. When you graduate, you do get accepted into a college, however, it's a less prestigious college, proving to your teachers and staff that able-bodied students can only go "so far."

Invisible "Outsiders Need Not Apply" signs on job applications

After college, you apply for a job. In the front window it says, "Everyone welcomed." However, when you inquire about the requirements for the job it says, "Must have five years on-the-job Braille experience or pass a Braille test." This seems like a perfectly legitimate requirement to the differently-abled people who already work there. They studied Braille throughout their school years and all their books at home were in Braille. Your old school didn't teach Braille and so by the time you went to your "better" school where they did teach it, you never quite got the hang of it. In addition, until recently, you were legally barred from even applying for a job that used Braille.

So you take a lower paying job where you are passed by for many promotions. The traditional Insiders seem to be making more money and, when you ask, your boss says that all the studies show that the differently-abled workers are more productive. Their pay scales are justified and, he says, you haven't quite "fit in" at the company; you're not a "team player."

From your point of view, your differently-abled co-workers just seem more comfortable with each other. You don't talk about the same things or socialize the same way. You live a far distance from work and have to take the train. You can't afford a car and find the cars with all the gears set up for the differently-abled difficult to drive anyway. The transportation systems to the able-bodied neighborhoods have always been inadequate and although the city government (which is 95% differently-abled) says they are working to improve the system, only one train runs to your neighborhood at 6 PM. You cannot stay and earn overtime pay or take on extra assignments as easily as your co-workers who live near to work and drive.

Invisible "Insiders Only" signs upon entering certain neighborhoods

Somehow you manage to scrape together enough money to buy a house in your neighborhood. However, you discover that you can't afford the insurance on the house and, legally, you can't purchase a home without buying fire insurance. You call the insurance company to inquire about the astronomical cost of insurance. The insurance company says that "in that neighborhood" (they never say "an able-bodied neighborhood") statistics show there's more fires; therefore, the insurance company is taking on a greater risk and *must* charge more.

You reply, “But able-bodied people were forced into the most overcrowded sections of town *by law*. We *had* to live where the housing stock was the oldest and least cared for. Without enough housing, the landlords knew they could rent out their buildings no matter what shape they were in. My people had nowhere else to go, so the wealthy, differently-abled people who owned the apartments didn’t take care of them. They wired their buildings with the cheapest electrical wire, for instance. That’s why there have been so many fires here! We aren’t responsible for the amount of fires in our neighborhood! Now, a lot of people like me are trying to buy our own homes and improve our neighborhood. And you’re making it almost impossible for us to do that!”

The insurance salesperson says, “I’m sorry. We aren’t against ‘you people.’ In fact, our policies don’t allow us to discriminate. We only go according to statistics. The statistics don’t lie.”

The Insiders’ perspective

Let’s back up a bit and think what’s going on for this insurance salesperson. As a differently-abled person, she was never taught in her school that her country started with Insiders and Outsiders. She was taught that the country was open and free. Although she lived in the same town, she never really met any able-bodied people until she was in college. She didn’t know about the overcrowded, inhumane conditions the able-bodied lived in. Yes, she *saw* the dilapidated and burnt out houses when she rode by on the differently-abled trains, but she was told, “Look at how ‘they’ live.”

The way your group, the able-bodied, actually lived and all you’ve gone through is so horrendous and so far from the insurance person’s experience it seems like fiction. It’s easier not to let in your reality. It’s painful and confusing; she’d have to rethink everything she has been told about how the world works.

The salesperson has sincere sympathy for you and certainly doesn’t think of herself as a prejudiced person. She is just following company policy. She works very hard to stay polite on the phone as your voice rises in pitch with frustration. But, frankly, she is getting a little tired of hearing the able-bodied — so many of them! — talk about how hard they have it. The discriminatory laws were changed years ago. Why do the able-bodied live in the past? Why can’t they let it go?

You won’t give up

Finally you thank the insurance person and hang up the phone in disgust. You seem to run across these kinds of barriers in so many areas of life, yet you know you can achieve great things. Injustice is never an excuse for not doing your best. At the same time injustice exists, there are always, simultaneously, opportunities and things that *are* working. You have started to read books you rarely saw in school or in your home, stories about the incredible achievements of able-bodied people. You want to be one of those people. You make connections with differently-abled allies who understand how the past is still impinging on the present. They, like you, are working to make your

country fairer *for everyone*. They understand the benefits *they* will receive and that they are not free until everyone is free. And, as always, you reach out for the support and wisdom that thrives within the vibrant culture from which you come.

Rights are different than privileges

When you read this imaginary scenario, ask yourself:

Even though your group, the traditional Outsiders, have the same *rights* as the traditional Insider group, do you have the same *ease* in exercising those rights?

Three main points can be derived from this made-up setting that apply to many systemic Insider/Outsider situations.

1. The Insider (and some of the Outsiders) is unaware of the setup, how the system benefits one group over another. The Insiders are in a kind of dream believing that the “playing field is even” and that everyone has an equal, fair chance. If people don’t succeed it is their fault (blame the victim). Sometimes, the Outsiders fall into the dream as well. They don’t see the setup and blame themselves for the barriers they face (internalized oppression).
2. If the Outsiders speak up about their situation, they are often branded as “whiners” or “trouble makers.” Since the Insider perceives the playing field as equal, any suggested change is seen as asking for “special privileges.” The Insider doesn’t see that they have been getting special privileges all along.
3. With absolutely no ill will from the Insiders, the system of advantages for some and disadvantages for others, can churn along on its own accord. In our imaginary scene, the job person may like you very much. He is just “following” the job requirements, which, by the way, make a lot of sense to him. The insurance person is merely quoting “statistics.” Once one group has the upper hand it’s easy for them to keep it. The effect of having an advantage in the past is that it is so much easier for you have an advantage in the present.

If something is still going on, it’s not over

When it seems that a traditional Outsider group “can’t let go of the past” it is most likely because the past is still affecting the present. The discrimination hasn’t ended for the traditional Outsider group because it hasn’t ended. If we do not know our history, if we do not know the severity of our country’s past inequities, it is hard to see how many present-day inequalities still exist.

Remember, most of us, are Insiders some of the time and Outsiders some of the time. We can *all* fall into the Insiders’ dream of unawareness. This does not mean we’re bad people. It does mean that we need to become aware now and find ways to work for

justice. We will not have peace until we do. We will not be free of guilt and fear until we do. We will not benefit from everyone's contribution until we do.

Our country is great, but it is only one tenth as great as it could be. Think of the diseases that could be cured, the rivers and streams that could be saved, the books and songs that could be written, when all of us are living to our full potentials.

A special time for students to be alive

We are living in a unique time. It is not enough to think about our personal prejudices and our interpersonal interactions — though behaving inclusively is essential. We live in a time in history when many of the doors have been opened. However, the *systems* of our country have not. *We* have the chance to finish the work of the Civil Rights and other great justice movements of the late 20th century. We are called upon to do nothing less than making the invisible visible. To finally *share* this country as equals, to transform all the unseen advantages and biases into a mutually beneficial landscape where all of us have the opportunity to reach our highest vision of our community and ourselves.

Our country has produced some of the greatest achievements ever *and* because it was set up and run with the idea that some groups are superior, we have also committed some of the cruelest acts against each other.

Appreciating the best and taking responsibility for the worst

If we want to solve the challenges around difference in our society, we need to embrace our country the way parents can embrace their children. Parents know that their children have done rotten things at times. When you're a parent you witness your children being wonderful, charming, smart, insightful *and* unfair, selfish, cranky and even downright mean at times. However, you never stop loving them; you never give up on them; you stay involved.

As a parent, your children's mistakes don't diminish the pride you feel for your children's accomplishments. If they do something wrong, you want them to admit it, make amends and learn from the experience so that they don't repeat it. You know that you do them (and your neighbors) no favor to look the other way and pretend their bad behavior doesn't exist. The way to make our country a fairer place is to love our country dearly while admitting our mistakes.

Fully living our ideals

The United States is a lot like that first grade classroom we talked about at the beginning of this article. Our history of justice and injustice, our struggles over who gets the ice cream and who has to do the homework has set us against each other. When you have justice, you have a chance for peace. Imagine the pride we will feel when America is fully *living* its ideals, re-awakening parts of our humanity long numb from trying to stay sane within such an insane landscape of unrelenting injustice.

Within us is an inborn drive to excel, to do our best, to fulfill our potential and wildest dreams. When the institutions and systems of a society including our libraries are truly open and reaching out to all patrons, people will be free to make their contributions and we will all reap the rewards. In our libraries, one of the most important institutions in our society, we have the opportunity to make the phrase “all men are created equal” finally mean *all of us*.