

# Social justice requires that we look at the little things

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## SPIRITUALLY SPEAKING

“Are you looking forward to starting school in September?” A 10-year old I know well answered the familiar question with, “Oh yes! I can’t wait to get back!” This was quite different from my answer at that age, which would have been, “No, not yet!”

Summer was freedom, a time for playing, eating fresh produce from the garden and endless sun-kissed mornings. Each day held opportunities for new adventures.

The late August Ontario ritual of receiving brand new school supplies made the return easier. It was an occasion. Parents would bring their children downtown to a parking lot. There were festive banners and free ice cream. Elementary school students would arrive first.

Once your name was called, you could walk up to a large table. A package with your name, grade and teacher’s name would be presented with ceremony. It was accompanied by an admonition to take special care of it. The package contained all that was needed for the school year: art supplies, pencils, pencil sharpener, erasers, colourful notebooks, a pencil case, ruler and text books. We would rush home to cover the textbooks with brown paper for “protection”. The covers were canvases for fanciful designs, not just names. Now school could begin.

There was no divide, rich or poor, everyone received the same grade appropriate package. When the program and tradition ended, we lost something important. No longer did families mark this new beginning together. The student with the best/prettiest/coolest supplies became the envy of their classmates. School supplies joined clothing as indicators of who was well to do and who wasn’t. In time, belonging was firmly based on symbols of wealth.

It is in the little things the seeds of stigma are sown. Jesus knew this. He was fond of ignoring the accepted social practices of his time. He would dine with tax collectors and “sinners”. He and his disciples would “harvest” food on the Sabbath. He used common prejudices to challenge those who were confident in their actions and role in the community.

In all this he addressed the economic manifestations of social injustice by targeting its roots in human intentions. Through parables and teaching Jesus refocused the people. He would lay open their greatest fears to the harsh light of reality. He knew the fear of losing individual security could be excessive. He saw that it could lead to

startling individual greed. For some, no amount of money or possessions seemed to be enough.

Human intentions and what drives them are seen in the little things. Social justice requires we pay attention to the little things. They are the foundation of larger systems. What values shape our laws and those who interpret and enact them? Where is prejudice and economic fear built into decision making?

Perhaps an inclusive and accessible program for school supplies might be a small step, and it surely wouldn't cost much. But [the](#) message that every child is valued equally could have a far-reaching impact. It might have the effect of creating community and tradition which have no room for stigma and prejudice

If all our decisions are based on fear and greed, without consideration of the effect on our communities we have lost the very thing we seek. Security and belonging.

“Is not life more than food? Is not the body more than clothing?”