

The Parable of Ups and Downs

What makes an Up an Up and a Down a Down is that an Up can do more to a Down than a Down can do to an Up. That's what keeps an Up up and a Down down. The Ups tend to talk to each other and study the Downs, asking the Downs about what's up—or what's coming down, for that matter. The Downs spend a lot of time taking the Ups out to lunch or to dinner to explain their Downness. The Ups listen attentively, often in amazement, about the experiences of being down. They contrast one Down's experience with another Down's experience and don't worry too much about what the Downs are up to because the Downs never get together. If they did, the Ups would have to shape up.

After a while, the Downs weary of talking to the Ups. They tire of explaining and justifying their Downness. They think, "If I have to explain my Downness one more time, I'll throw up." And so they form a process which they call "networking and support groups." This act makes the Ups nervous. Three Ups together is a board meeting; three Downs, pre-revolutionary activity. Some Ups hire Downs, dress them up, and send them down to see what the Downs are up to. We sometimes call this "personnel and affirmative action." This creates a serious problem for the Down who is dressed up with no sure place to go. That Down doesn't know whether he or she is up or down. That's why Downs in the middle often burn out.

Sometimes what the Ups do to smarten up is to ask the Downs to come in to a program one at a time to explain their Downness. The Ups call this "human relations training." Of course, the Ups never have to explain their Upness; that's why they're Ups rather than Downs.

There's good news and bad news in this parable. The good news is, we're all both Ups and Downs. There's no such thing as a perfect Up or a perfect Down. The bad news is that when we're up it often makes us stupid. We call that "dumb-upness." It's not because Ups are not smart. It's that Ups don't have to pay attention to Downs the way Downs have to pay attention to Ups. Downs always have to figure out what Ups are up to. The only time Ups worry about Downs is when Downs get uppity, at which time they're put down by the Ups. The Ups' perception is that Downs are overly sensitive; they have an attitude problem. It is never understood that Ups are underly sensitive and have an attitude problem.

I used to think that when Downs became Ups they would carry over their insight from their Downness to their Upness. Not so: smart down—dumb up.

This parable was illustrated vividly for me at a conference at a university. I was working with the Physical Education Department and the Athletic Department. I asked each group to define its mission. The mission for the Athletic Department was to provide resources for the highly competitive athlete. Naïvely I asked, "Well, what about someone who's disabled?" A man from the Athletic Department stood up and said, "No. People with disabilities have their program in Physical Education, that's where they belong." I said, "There was nothing in your mission statement that said one way or the other about physical ability. It merely said one had to be competitive." He reiterated his point that their program was in Physical Education.

There were two ironies in this event. First of all, the man who was making the statement was Black. Second, he had been an advocate in ensuring that African-Americans be included in the Athletic Department program. As an advocate he came out of his Down category. When he skipped into Upness—able-bodiedness—he went dumb-up and relegated a down group to the back of the bus.

Another example: I was working with a group of Black and white men in a large corporation. The Black men were playing a game which I call “watch the honky run.” One Down is worth five Ups in a conversation on Down turf. The whites were getting frustrated with the game but eventually understood the up-down conversation. In the afternoon, a white woman lawyer was coming to speak to this group of men about sexual harassment. Almost as soon as she opened her mouth, these men locked arms. Color went out the window and they went dumb-up together. They said this woman had an attitude problem, she was out to get them, she was not interested in their issues. The “honky run” game ceased and the men joined forces to stand pat against this woman's contribution.

I find this parable helpful to gain insight in my work and life. Very rapidly we move into up and down categories and misunderstand each other. If Downs want to understand why an Up doesn't understand an issue, all they have to do is think of their own Up category and see why that issue is not understood. Downs know more about Ups than Ups know about Downs, yet we tend to come out of our Down category first to make sense out of our experience. The Up category is taken for granted and is rarely under review.

Who often has more insight about how the society functions, how organizations function, what's really going on? Frequently, it's Downs, not Ups. Ups are too busy trying to maintain the system rather than generate insight about what's really going on or how to change it. So our source of new insightful information comes from Downs, not from Ups. Yet it's Ups who are the ones whom we often call leaders.

Leadership is critical as we work to realize our dreams. Considering the recent flurry of activity surrounding leadership and leadership education, it is my hope this parable might help us as we assume leadership roles.

For many, I am afraid, leaders are magical persons who will sweep in and solve our problems. That is dangerous. Our leadership is not magical. It is the empowering of people to engage with their world. It is crossing up-down relationships to ensure we understand one another and act together. Leadership is less *command over* others, more *service with* others. Our leadership comes from being grasped in such a way that we have to deal with the justice issues that surround us. It worries me that somebody might set out to be a leader. Somebody can set out to have a career of upward mobility, someone can set out to learn a few skills, but I'm not sure someone can set out to be grasped by a burning issue.

The tests for leadership are: Are we grasped by the injustice of the issues that need to be addressed? Are we in dialogue in up-down relationships so that we do not have blind spots? Are we in motion to address issues in collaboration with others?

Our goal is to get rid of arbitrary up-down power relationships. We should not have up-down relationships based on color, gender or anything else that is arbitrary and capricious or has to do with how we're born. Rather, we need to find ways to stand side-by-side, so that as we look out at the world together, we can eliminate any of the barriers that keep us from building an authentic, vibrant, human community.