

Yertle the Turtle, Peace Begins With Me

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gqjEsttx-IU>

Dr Seuss, we all know, writes children's books. But what happens when we look deeper? Is this story just about one silly turtle named Yertle—or could this story be about the whole dynamics of oppression?

Oppression is a big word and it doesn't sound very nice. What does it mean anyway? In general, it is when one group of people, based on some characteristic, has rights and privileges that are denied others who do NOT have the characteristic. AND Oppression is the system of legal and social rules and pressures that keep the imbalance in place.

Before we go deeper into what oppression looks like, lets see how it got started in the pond of Sala-ma-Sond. Because it was a nice little pond. Clean and neat, plenty to eat and everything turtles might need. Hmmm... that sounds familiar. What do we know about our world? That it began clean and neat with plenty to eat and everything we might need. We know that even now there is truly enough—enough for everyone to eat, enough to share. So why does it not work that way? Why do some people not have enough to eat? Why do some people not have jobs and safe houses? Well in the story it is because Yertle doesn't **SEE** enough. He wants to be higher than all the other turtles. He believes he is entitled to more than the others. But in order for that to happen, he must make others give up something. In this case, they must give up their freedom. They must stack themselves up; no longer free to swim in the pond and lay in the sun and eat. And Yertle was happy on his short stack of turtles for a little while. But then he wanted **more**. He wanted to see farther and **more** turtles had to give up their freedom so Yertle could be higher. And eventually the turtle at the bottom of the stack—a little turtle named Mack—begins to protest. Well think of it. He has all the other turtles on his back!

So here is the thing. Everywhere we go, there are stacks. Stacks of turtles or stacks of people; every pond has some turtles that get to be on top. Yertle's characteristic is that he is the King! That makes him the top of the stack. Or at least for awhile.

Let's say our pond is the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in the United States of America—because ponds in Europe and Africa and Asia and South America—those ponds all have different stacks of turtles.



This is pretend but here we have turtles with purple, green and orange shells. Lets say you are a purple turtle. So you tell all the orange and green turtles they have to stack up under you. But people don't really stack up so how does oppression work with real people? Using the characteristics of gender and race, we will pretend that Purple Turtles have the characteristics of Caucasian Males. So the Orange Turtles are all the non-Caucasian men and the Green Turtles are all the women. Historically, in our pond, only the purple turtles could vote or hold political office or own land. In 2010, for every \$1 the purple turtle earned, orange turtles (male) earned 74 cents if you were African American and 66 cents if you were Hispanic. The green turtles (female) earned 80 cents if you Caucasian, 69 cents if you were African American and 60 cents if you were Hispanic. Unequal pay, unequal access to higher paying jobs and advancement are ways oppression works.

Lets say the green turtles are Christian. That makes the orange and purple turtles all the other religions including Judaism, Muslim, Buddhism, Ba'hai, Hindu, or no religion, atheists. The green turtles get the calendar holidays for closing the banks and businesses arranged around their religious holidays. The orange and purple turtles have to use vacation days if they want to observe their religious holidays. There are lots of cards and wrapping paper for the green turtles but the orange and purple turtles have to make up their own or search for something.

There are lots of characteristics that get to be on top of the stack and lots of ways oppression works in our pond. And we are seeing the effects of the pressure on the backs of the turtles at the bottom of the stack. The “Occupy” movement. The revolts in Libya, Egypt and Syria. There is no peace when turtles or people are stacked, with some able to claim freedoms, rights and benefits they deny others. Mack, the little turtle with all the others on his back, could hardly be blamed for a rude little burp; even if it brought all the turtles tumbling down. If only it were that easy. How then, can we bring peace to the pond? How can we work for peace in our own little pond?

The very first step, I believe, is to remember there is enough in God. God is enough for everyone. We sing it with our dancing tithe. It is my screen saver. God is enough. I will not lose **my** enough if everyone else has enough. I will not be distracted into believing there is only one channel for my good. When God is my Source, I don't need for anyone else to give up their good for me to have my good. God is enough.

The second step is where we have to really step into practicing principle; step into practicing Peace Begins With Me. The second step is to become aware of the situations in which I am the top of the stack. What characteristics give me an advantage over others? My race, my ethnicity, my gender, my religion, my physical and mental abilities, my education, my economic status. I am not ashamed of those characteristics nor do I try to change my characteristics but I am called to advocate for equality even more when I am at the top of the stack. The way I move down to a level pond is by speaking in favor of policies, laws and practices that provide equal pay, equal access to housing, healthcare and jobs. I may be free to marry but if everyone is not able to enjoy the civil benefits of marriage then I have work to do. I may have a good education but if others are denied access to higher education due to poverty or ethnicity or disability, then I have work to do. If someone is unkind to someone else, I can be the one to extend a kindness. If someone makes a joke about someone else, I can be the one who does not laugh and points out that there is something special about us all. I do not have to exhaust myself looking for every inequality but I must not fall silent when I have the opportunity to speak out and I must not ignore what I see is mine to do. The peaceful view from the pond is just fine. I have no desire to view the world from the top of a stack of others.