

A RISING TIDE

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A fascinating drama has been playing out over the past week across the rural and often mountainous countryside of northern Spain. This is the third and final week of the Vuelta a Espana, a prestigious three-week professional cycling race like the Tour de France and the Giro d'Italia. Early in the week, it became clear that a cyclist from the team currently dominating professional cycling would win the Vuelta, since the three riders leading the race were all from the dominant team, Jumbo-Visma. But that's when things got complicated.

The riders in second and third place were Jonas Vingegaard, who has won the last two Tours de France, and Primoz Roglic, who has won three previous Vueltas and one Giro d'Italia. They are the superstars of the Jumbo-Visma team, and all the resources of the team — six other riders and extensive support personnel — focus on enabling Vingegaard and Roglic to win. The problem was that the overall leader of the Vuelta, a cyclist from Colorado named Sepp Kuss, wasn't doing the job the team hired him to do.

Professional cycling teams assemble riders from a variety of cycling sub-disciplines: sprinters who focus on sprint stages, climbers who focus on mountain stages, along with one or two superstars who focus on winning the overall race. There are also support riders, known as domestiques, who serve the needs of the superstar riders by setting the pace, allowing them to draft, fetching water, chasing down opponents, relaying messages, and so on.

For the past five years, Sepp Kuss has been an exemplary domestique for Jumbo-Visma, consistently and tirelessly paving the way for Vingegaard and Roglic to win races. In other words, Kuss isn't supposed to take the overall lead. He's not supposed to win races. Because of an extraordinary performance in one of the mountain stages, however, he found himself on top. The question has been whether his two superstar teammates would allow him to win, or whether they would team up to take him down.

On Wednesday, it appeared as though Roglic was determined to attack Kuss's lead. The response of cycling fans around the world to what they viewed as an outrage was swift and vicious — against Roglic and the Jumbo-Visma team leadership. After years of tireless servitude, fans insisted on social media, Kuss deserves to win for once. After all, he's in the lead, and unless his teammates betray him, he likely will win.

One commentator put it this way. Two decades from now, when Roglic is fifty years old and sitting in his mansion overlooking the sea, it probably won't make much

difference to him whether he won three Vueltas or four in his career. But it may make a difference knowing he intentionally sabotaged a loyal teammate's chance to win one.

Over the past few days, it appears that Roglic and Vingegaard, along with the Jumbo-Visma team, have relented to the pressure from fans. Entering the final day of the race, Kuss remains in the lead. Professional cycling is a risky and uncertain enterprise, of course, and accidents can upend the race at any time. But if Kuss wins, it will be a professional triumph for him and a moral triumph for the sport.

I would like to draw an analogy between the structure of professional cycling, which is designed to keep riders locked in specific roles, and our economic and political structure as a nation, which has also been designed to keep people locked in specific roles. It's an imperfect analogy, but I believe it illustrates a key point. In any structure of human endeavor, it's morally necessary to provide people with opportunities to better themselves — maybe not end up at the very top, but at least end up in a better place.

Last April, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan gave a speech at the Brookings Institution. As reported by the Boston College historian Heather Cox Richardson in her Substack newsletter "Letters from an American," Sullivan traces the economic challenges currently facing the US, which have profound security implications, to the economic ideology that has shaped US policy over the past 40 years.

Over this period, the idea has been that cutting taxes, slashing business regulations, and privatizing public works would enable markets to spread capital to where it is most needed. This trickle-down approach would thereby create an efficient and effective economy — a rising tide that would lift all boats, as the neoliberal mantra put it. Also, as countries lowered their economic barriers and became more closely integrated with each other, they would also become more open and more peaceful.

That's not what has happened, Sullivan says. The US has lost supply chains and entire industries as jobs have moved overseas, while countries like China have closed off markets in favor of artificially subsidizing their economies. Rather than ushering in world peace, China and Russia have aggressively expanded their international influence, both economically and militarily. With the world order becoming more fragile and more fractious, climate change has mostly been set aside as a priority. Most of all, inequalities of income and wealth have continued to expand, threatening not only stability but also democracy.

In his speech, Sullivan notes that the phrase "a rising tide lifts all boats" came from President John F. Kennedy, not from later supply-side ideologues who used it to defend tax cuts and business deregulation. "President Kennedy wasn't saying what's good for the wealthy is good for the working class," Sullivan says, "He was saying we're all in this together."

Kennedy added, "If one section of the country is standing still, then sooner or later a dropping tide drops all the boats. That's true for our country. That's true for our world. Economically, over time, we're going to rise — or fall — together."

In other words, for any boat to rise over time, all boats need to rise. For anyone on a team to win, everyone must feel like they can in some way win as well.

The American singer Josh Ritter, one of our nation's most talented songwriters and most popular performers, wrote an uncharacteristic protest song midway through the Trump presidency. He wrote the song because, he said, "I've been so enraged I didn't know what else to do." In the song, titled "All Some Kind Of Dream," Ritter grapples with the divide between the dream of what America was intended to be and the reality of what it has become. He writes:

I saw my country in the hungry eyes
Of a million refugees
Between the rocks and the rising tide
As they were tossed across the sea
There was a time when we were them
Just as now they all are we
Was there an hour when we took them in?
Or was it all some kind of dream?

I saw the children in the holding pens
I saw the families ripped apart
And though I try I cannot begin
To know what it did inside their hearts
There was a time when we held them close
And weren't so cruel, low, and mean
And we did good unto the least of those
Or was it all some kind of dream?

Ritter rightly questions whether there ever was a time when our nation took people in, held them close, and wasn't so cruel and mean. Was there ever a time when we did good unto the least of these? While it's true that our nation has never fully embodied these ideals, it's also true that over the past 250 years, we've made significant progress toward embodying the American dream of a rising tide that lifts not just some of us, but all of us.

In recent years, however, the tide has gone down. Economically since the so-called Reagan revolution, and politically since the rise of the religious right in the 1990's and especially since the election of Trump in 2016, the tide of prosperity, equality, and dignity has been falling. The focus of the Biden administration, Jake Sullivan argues, has been to reverse the tide.

John Rawls, the late Harvard political philosopher, set out a theory of justice fifty years ago that has dominated the debate ever since. His approach is a variation on the problem of how to divide one piece of cake equitably between two children. The answer

is that one child cuts the cake into two pieces, while the other has first choice of which piece to eat. Since the child with the knife does not know which piece of cake she will end up with, she has maximum motivation to ensure that both pieces are as big as possible. This will happen only if the two pieces are the same size.

Using a more sophisticated version of this approach, Rawls sets out his theory of justice, which he calls justice as fairness. It includes a principle he calls the difference principle, which states that social and economic inequalities must be distributed to the greatest advantage of the least-well-off person. Rawls argues that people would choose this principle because they would follow what he calls the “maximin” rule: always maximize the minimum possibility. Or, in less elegant terms, if I do not know beforehand which piece of cake I will end up with, then I will do my best to divide the cake fairly.

Of course, our economic system is built on the premise that people are free to work hard and get ahead, which means securing a bigger piece of cake. Rawls is not saying that everyone’s piece of cake must be the same size, only that changes in public policy should not reduce the size of the smallest pieces or reduce the chance that people with small pieces can find ways to get bigger ones. Changes in public policy must enhance, and not diminish, the prospects of the least well off. Sometime, some way, somewhere, somehow, everyone needs to feel like it’s possible for them to win.

In the Rosh Hashanah service that celebrates the Jewish New Year and begins the ten-day period known as the Days of Awe, we find a commitment to live in the upcoming year with *tzedakah*, which is the Hebrew word for righteousness. The commitment to live righteously, the Rosh Hashanah service says, recognizes the obligations and mutual respect we owe each other as members of one human family. We are to help others in a way that enhances their dignity as human beings. Our task is to find the lost and feed the hungry. Heal the sick and cheer the sad. Build and keep a peaceful world.

In my view, spiritual communities like All Souls represent the symbol and constitute the substance of this principle. Our calling as a congregation is to both represent and embody the first principle of human dignity. We are all in this together — as a congregation, as a nation, and as a world community. Our mission is to testify to the moral necessity of treating everyone with dignity — spiritually, economically, and politically. Everyone needs to feel that they have a chance to win in life.

We have begun a new program year here at All Souls, and today we kick off our annual giving campaign, through which we support and sustain this spiritual community. At a time when many institutions of meaning are threatened and in decline, we need to expand our commitment to this fragile and fractious world. It is my prayer that a rising tide of generosity will demonstrate that we are responding faithfully to our calling.