

Dr. Andrew Tripp's October 6, 2024 Sermon

Ubuntu, Namaste, Interdependence is Spirituality

Many of you may be familiar with the work our association's General Assembly passed this summer. The principles and sources we have upheld for our tradition used to include the language we believe in the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part. The language we have now are specific words bound with love uphold Unitarian Universalist spiritual values, those words being Justice, Equity, Transformation, Pluralism, Interdependence, and Generosity. These words get unpacked in specific ways for our association's bylaws but are a great map of the UU terrain that has existed the last twenty years. For Interdependence the bylaws unpack the term with these words: *We honor the interdependent web of all existence. With reverence for the great web of life and with humility, we acknowledge our place in it. 24 We covenant to protect Earth and all beings from exploitation. We will create and nurture sustainable relationships of care and respect, mutuality and justice. We will work to repair harm and damaged relationships.*

Interdependence remains a core pillar of Unitarian Universalism, but we are not unique in considering interdependence as a spiritual value. In African theologies we have the notion of Ubuntu, that is my humanity is only expressed through my relation with others. Instead of "I think, therefore I am." Ubuntu says "I am because you are." Without others there is no me. Without relating to others I am not well. I could quip about narcissists demonstrating that lack of wellness, but you already get the point. My being and my wellness is tied up in your wellbeing.

There is a story of an anthropologist studying a tribe in South Africa. He filled a basket with candy and placed it at the base of a tree. He then gathered the children of the tribe and told them he was going to play a game. He hid a basket in the forest and told the children whoever found it could eat all the candy. When he announced the start the kids all left together, hand in hand. When they found the candy, they found it together and shared it among themselves. He asked them why they played the game in such a way and they told him if not everyone had some then someone would be sad and it would ruin the experience for everyone.

Such wisdom coming from the mouths of children. We all get some, and we all are happy. We celebrate together. Dharmic traditions are familiar with this idea. Before the phrase entered the pop culture lexicon as the yogic version of "live, laugh, love," *namaste* was used as a greeting and a farewell. The sacred in me recognizes the sacred in you. There is a story of a guru who was wise and enlightened, and because he was so good-hearted he accepted everyone into his ashram, even those who were spiritually immature. Unfortunately, that led to fights, arguments, and disagreements among his followers which upset the guru greatly. He prayed and meditated on the problem for some time before he saw an apparition of Bhagavan, the supreme Hindu deity, who promised the guru that he

would come to the ashram in the guise of a student looking for spiritual wisdom. The only stipulation was no one would know which student was Bhagavan.

The guru shared his vision with his students, and now instead of other students being rivals or competitors, each potentially was an avatar of the holiest of holies. They stopped fighting and bickering with one another out of petty contentions or minor disagreements. If one of them was Bhagavan, they should treat that student respectfully. The ashram changed and all were more generous and kindhearted to one another, letting everyone experience greater happiness and spiritual growth. Letting everyone act as someone holy, someone sacred, someone important, the whole community improved.

I would like to contrast these stories with those of American folklore. We have valorized rags-to-riches stories where a plucky and hard-working person can ascend to the highest heights of society. One person gets theirs while the masses continue on in poverty. Pulling one's self up by the bootstraps is a false notion, and with the horrific damage across Appalachia as a result of Hurricane Helen I've heard satire of the notion by saying congress will send an emergency airdrop of bootstraps across the effected region instead of supplying the FEMA aid they didn't include in the budget.

You might think Appalachia is rural and not so very important to American and global infrastructure, but one of the towns hit is Spruce Pine, NC. Spruce Pine, with its population of 2700 people, is essential to our global economy. It is the only place in the world with quartz crystal pure enough for our modern semiconductors. The mines in Spruce Pine produce the quartz that is used mostly in Asia for the silicon crucibles to make our computer chips. Much like when the Suez Canal was blocked and that small bit of water brought global shipping to a halt, you'll see a difficulty in purchasing electronics in the months to come as that small mountain town in the Appalachian mountains struggles to rebuild and return clean water and utilities to the region before the mines can reopen.

Reopening a mine isn't something any one individual can do. Reopening a town isn't something done by one person no matter the greatness of their bootstraps. Repairing the washed out interstates, flooded roads, septic and gasoline impacted damage to homes, it is a group effort, a communal effort, an interdependent effort. The lives of all are inextricably bound to one another. When a hurricane rages over all of Appalachia it is very evident with massive relief efforts showing human goodness. When Haitian immigrants are denigrated and their place in society threatened, you see that pesky human trait of us versus them, insiders versus outsiders even though we are one humanity.

It is important to remember we do not live in a world with only two sides. That kind of binary thinking makes some people become dehumanized. We approach the anniversary of the deadly October 7th attack where Hamas with the aid of the UNRWA invaded Israel and killed over 1200 people, taking hostages back into Gaza where still over 100 people are held a year later. In response, 41,500 people have been killed in Gaza as the IDF responded with significant force. No amount of wartime violence is good. Neither side has come out

the winner even though Israel is the dominant military force. Hezbollah rocketed Israeli civilians leading to Israeli military action on Hezbollah over the Lebanese border. Iran rockets Israel once again. The cycle of us versus them violence proliferates. The situation is a tragedy, and leadership throughout the Middle East could use greater diplomacy and acceptance for shared humanity.

We are among the High Holy Days for the Jewish people, having entered the new year and we enter into the days of atonement. The world has much to atone for, humanity has much to atone for. It isn't a way of beating ourselves up or walking through the streets in shame. It is a way of returning to our goodness and our best selves. What makes us good and just? It is our mutual care, our mutual regard, our service to one another. What is our best self? What is our best community? I think it is one where we serve, where we share. We as humanity can collectively return to that place of compassion, of mutual goodwill.

I need you to survive. I need immigrants to survive. I need Spruce Pine and the whole of Appalachia to survive. I need the whole of the Middle East to survive. I need this earth to survive. We need it all because our existence is tied and linked. None of us lives this life alone. We live in a world where some prey upon fear and division. We live in a world where money is made by raising anxieties about people who don't look like us, don't sound like us, don't have our culture, and who we might not understand. Political power is pedaled by the lies about immigrants eating cats and dogs. When I was a child this racist libel was used against people of East Asian descent in my rural backwater northern NY community. Thirty-five years later it is used to attack Haitian immigrants who are in our nation legally. It was false then, it is false now. It was ignorance then, it is ignorance now. Just society demands an acceptance of difference.

If my neighbor is hurting, I hurt. If my child suffers, I suffer, if people go hungry none of us are truly fed. Interdependence is about justice and ethics in a real world where our actions and choices impact our lives but also the lives of others and our natural world. Our tradition's spiritual value says those choices must be guided by love and justice. The stranger, the neighbor, the immigrant, the friend, they are all my human family just as this planet is our only source of life accessible to us. The choices we make impact this planet and its capacity to sustain us. I will choose based on my sacredness recognizing your sacredness, and my wellness being predicated on your wellbeing. My hope is you follow the same.