

The Yearning for Freedom and the Illusion of Separateness

*sermon by Rev. Ken Jones, delivered March 14, 2021
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Several years ago I attended an installation service for a Unitarian Universalist ministerial colleague. For those of you who have never been to an installation service, I'll say that it is a wonderful occasion of celebration for a new relationship between Minister and congregation, and typically is attended not only by members of the congregation, but also many visitors from both the local interfaith community and the wider community of Unitarian Universalists from around the region. Speaking at this particular service down in Hood River, Oregon was a local United Church of Christ Minister, who admitted that her own denomination's acronym "UCC" actually stood for "Unitarians Considering Christ;" also a Buddhist monk from the nearby Trout Lake Abbey, Rev. Kozen Sampson, who followed her by characterizing Unitarian Universalism as "Buddhism Lite."

There were, of course, several other speakers, including many card-carrying Unitarian Universalists, and just about all of them echoed the sentiment of the day, which was: this is the beginning of a mutually supportive and loving relationship between Minister and congregation, and how each has wonderful potential to share with the other with love and respect. This was a congregation that never had a settled Minister, so an underlying message was also loudly proclaimed: this was a milestone in the life and development of a new congregation. So it was quite a shock when, toward the end of the ceremony, one of my colleagues, a wise elder from our district, stood up and said straight away that he had bad news to share: in spite of all the proclamations to the contrary, the congregation

celebrating this day doesn't even exist. He then immediately followed with some equally distressing news, that the Minister being installed that day also doesn't exist.

No, my colleague went on, these entities that we think of when we talk about a whole congregation or even a specific person are not actually real things, they are figments of our imaginations. Because in reality, he said as a died-in-the-wool Buddhist Lite, we are not entities at all but are really parts of a vast network of interconnected relationships, what Buddhist Monk Thich Nhat Hanh calls "Interbeing." Maybe it's what we "Buddhist Lites" call the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part. This concept means that we are not separate individuals at all, rather we are all everything, or a part of everything, that just so happens to take form in human bodies with a human consciousness. The fundamental nature of the cosmos in this scenario is not of a whole bunch of discrete entities that add up to the whole, but of a network of relationships – a web, if you will – that forms an incredibly complex and continuously evolving universe. Buddhists spend much time in meditation to help themselves feel this reality, which is not always physically apparent. If we don't concentrate, we are easily deceived by the illusion of separateness.

Perhaps surprisingly, my colleague's dire proclamation was actually received as good news at the installation service. After all, if we don't exist as separate individuals, then being in relationship can't be too hard, can it? I mean, if you and I and all the dogs and fishes and spiders and mosses and amoebas really are all different conscious manifestations of the same life force – not to mention all those aliens on other worlds – then surely we can get along, right?

Well, only if we think it so. And thinking it so might sound easy for a preacher like me to proclaim, but it is hard to actually live as one, especially since we've got a human culture that has been for the past five thousand years or so promoting this other idea that we're all separate, discreet individuals with our own free will, and the only thing that unites us is this other discreet individual often called God who has power over nearly everything. This is the story of western civilization, the story that has facilitated, among many other not so dire things, the sixth mass extinction of living species from the Earth, the first mass extinction caused by the actions of just one species.

So maybe it's time to start believing in a different story.

Those of you who pay close attention to my sermons may have correctly surmised that my topic today is more or less a continuation of topic from last month, which was "The Illusion of Certainty." Last month I talked about the way many people cling to absolute beliefs even though all the information available to us leads to a much harder-to-swallow reality in which things are fluid and changing, and we can seldom be sure about anything. This holds true, I said, not just for religious fundamentalists, but also for much of mainstream culture, including much that seems to be rational, scientific thought. Science itself often presents more questions than answers, and the more we learn about life in an empirical sense the more uncertain we are about ultimate purpose and meaning; yet people cling to various "truths" both mythical and scientific and just about anything they read on the internet as a way to explain complex and seemingly random realities.

This tendency is itself, I believe, a symptom of this story problem we're having in Western culture – the problem of figuring out how we all exist as discreet individuals in a world that we in the West may be beginning to understand is actually a network of relationships. But even as we begin to grasp the fundamental truth of our unity, our thinking is still deeply entrenched with these misguided assumptions. Whether we are conscious of it or not, we almost always cling to an explanation that starts with an assumption that we – as well as all animals and plants and rocks – are all individuals, and the universe is made up of all these discreet components – the parts make up the whole. The next logical step in this assumption is to presume that we human beings have control over all these components, including ourselves. This is expressed in the Biblical injunction for us to have “dominion” over the Earth, and persists through most disciplines of study to the present day. Our work of explaining often stems from this – we look at separate parts first, and assume that relationships emerge from them. What I believe we need to do is to consider the possibility that relationship precedes entity – relationships create us, rather than the other way around. When we do this, our very understanding of cause and effect changes profoundly.

Our universe, and more importantly the experience of human life, is essentially an illusion – an illusion of separateness. The illusion is perpetuated by the existence of boundaries, such as our skin, and walls, different states of matter that make things manifest as solids, liquids, and gasses. But beyond these illusions there is a reality, a unity in which these borders are transcended on an enormous scale outside of our sense perception. For example, I've heard various estimates of the number of

cells in a human body. Recent scientific studies have pinned the number of human cells at something around 37 trillion. But that is *human* cells only – it is estimated that at the low end there are as many *non-human* cells as human cells, and at the high end, including viruses and other extreme variable, there could be as many as 10 times the number of non-human cells living in and on our bodies than cells we can rightly call our own. Our bodies themselves are networks or relationships more than we think. We're living in a matrix, much like Keanu Reeves' character in a famous science fiction movie from the nineties, and it might be time when we need to stop, free our minds, and say "whoa."

This is heavy stuff, to be sure, and a full explanation of it is not remotely possible in one or even a series of Sunday sermons. Indeed, I don't believe any one person can explain it fully, for it is an emerging and largely unknown field of knowledge – although, as I intimated, it is much easier to grasp and see from a Buddhist or Eastern perspective. And many indigenous cultures have developed cosmologies that are also quite consistent with this way of seeing things. But I believe the emerging truth is something that is coming about through an intersection between ancient spiritual practices and new scientific paradigms. It's not that either one is complete on its own; truth, or at least our new story, will be a product of both free and open-minded inquiry and attention to careful spiritual disciplines.

One implication of all this is summed up nicely in an article from ["Yes!" magazine](#) by Richard Schiffman that was published a few years ago. He said "The idea of stewardship is too small. It's not that we need to take care of the Earth – it's the Earth that takes care of us." Mr. Schiffman

introduces us to a handful of prophetic seers: people like the late Catholic theologian (who preferred to be called a “geologian”) Fr. Thomas Berry, Native American activist Winona LaDuke, former US astronaut and founder of the Institute for Noetic Sciences Edgar Mitchell, and Harvard University biologist Edward O. Wilson. These are people who, through some combination of cutting edge science and adherence to ancient spiritual wisdom traditions, are helping us break free of the Western conception of the cosmos as a collection of discreet entities – and of people as separate individuals.

For now, let me offer one example of the inherent bias we have toward this mechanistic, cause-and-effect universe that can be found in our broadly accepted interpretation of an ancient and well-loved scriptural injunction: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” goes the golden rule, and it is indeed good advice. But some scholars have translated this verse differently, so it reads more like “As you do unto others, so you do unto yourself.” Whether or not the ancient sage of Bethlehem actually meant it this way is an open question, but the difference between these translations is significant. The first, commonly accepted rule is rooted in assumptions of cause-and-effect and human free will: you should make your choice on how to treat others based on how you would wish others to treat you. But the other translation suggests a more subtle reality: whatever you do, whether it be your choice or not, affects all. Whether you intend to or not, whether you like it or not, whether you actually see it or not, when you treat others – or any aspect of existence – with violence, disrespect, or oppression, then you are acting with violence, disrespect, or oppression against yourself. Likewise, when you act with

empathy, compassion, and love for others you also nurture these qualities in you. To this we can also surmise the reverse: when you treat yourself with love and kindness you bring that love and kindness into the world; everything you do affects all. To believe that we treat some people one way and others differently is to engage in a profound delusion, as is our assumption that the way we treat other people is independent of the way we treat animals or plants or ecosystems. Violence is violence, no matter who it is directed toward; and, similarly love and compassion directed toward any is automatically directed toward all. So when you engage acts of loving kindness – even when they are unseen or unappreciated – you bring that much more loving kindness into the world, and feed a thousand generations with that love, just as you feed your own soul.

I'm reminded of the Bob Dylan song "My Back Pages" with its cryptic chorus "I was so much older then, I'm younger than that now." This line conjures up the image of one who has come of age enough to know that the utter certainty with which he believed things when younger has given way to a more mature attitude in which he simply admits he doesn't know as much as he thought he did. I think this is relevant because I suspect Western Civilization may be at a point in which we're ready to take a similar leap – or even if we're not ready, the state of the world and the reality of our place in it might finally force us to. It is time for us to grow up – to let go of our absolute certainties, and of our adherence to a worldview in which we can actually control or even predict consequences. We're not as smart as we think we are, even those of us with lots of degrees following our name and those of us with tremendous power to unleash untested technologies on a world that we're better off thinking of not as the one we

should care for, but the one that cares for us. This world, this cosmos, this interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part is indeed what created us – or, perhaps more accurately, with which we are co-created and continue to evolve.

As we acknowledged earlier, one year ago we were confronted with the emergence of the coronavirus pandemic, and our collective reaction to it can help us learn this lesson. It is perhaps best understood in the difference between traditional notions of “health” in the Western mindset, which begin with healthy individuals, and the newer sciences related to “public health” which begin by looking at communities and relationships. Although our public discourse has a long way to go, I believe that many people have come to a greater understanding of the need to seek health not just for individuals, but for communities, for populations, and for the world. We are also beginning to understand that we can’t have healthy people if we don’t have healthy ecosystems, for it is from these ecosystems that our own health emerges. I’ve been reading some articles speculating as to the reasons that the COVID pandemic has been much less harmful in Asia and Africa than the Americas and European continents. There are many possible reasons for this disparity, one of which is that maybe it is because traditional cultural knowledge on Africa and Asia is more oriented toward systems and relationships rather than individuals. It is possible that people steeped in such knowledge were able to more quickly and more thoroughly understand the need for measures to keep everyone healthy, especially the most vulnerable, rather than just focusing on individuals.

If we are able to make this shift in thinking in western culture, we might finally begin to see that we are not separate from the world that

created us, and we do not exist as separate mind and body entities. We are whole, all life is whole, what we do to one affects all. We are embraced and held in the love and compassion of the generations that have come before us, and in turn we hold all life past, present, and future in that place in our hearts where compassion and love nurture us and bring us life.



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