

Acting on Interdependence: The Systems View

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Purpose

The purpose of this service to offer some ideas, language, history, and stories from the “Systems Thinking” field. I’m hoping you find it helpful as we all work to put into practice our seventh Unitarian Universalist principle – “respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part.”

Song

U2 - One

Is it getting better
Or do you feel the same
Will it make it easier on you now
You got someone to blame
You say...

One love One life
When it's one need In the night
One love We get to share it
Leaves you baby if you
Don't care for it

Did I disappoint you
Or leave a bad taste in your mouth
You act like you never had love
And you want me to go without
Well it's...

Too late Tonight
To drag the past out into the light
We're one, but we're not the same
We get to Carry each other
Carry each other

One...

Have you come here for forgiveness
Have you come to raise the dead
Have you come here to play Jesus
To the lepers in your head

Did I ask too much
More than a lot
You gave me nothing
Now it's all I got
We're one

But we're not the same
Well we hurt each other
Then we do it again

You say
Love is a temple
Love a higher law
Love is a temple
Love the higher law
You ask me to enter
But then you make me crawl
And I can't be holding on
To what you got
When all you got is hurt

One love One blood One life
You got to do what you should
One life With each other
Sisters Brothers
One life
But we're not the same
We get to Carry each other
Carry each other

One...life

One

Readings

This first reading is from the letters of Martin Luther King, Jr.

“All life is interrelated.
We are all caught in an inescapable network of humanity.
Tied in a simple garment of destiny.
Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.

When we get up in the morning, we go into the bathroom where we reach for a sponge provided for us by a Pacific Islander. The towel is provided by a Turk. We reach for soap created by a Frenchman. In the kitchen you drink coffee provided by a South American, or tea by a Chinese, or cocoa by a West African, and butter toast from an English-speaking farmer. Before you've finished breakfast, you've drawn on the labor of much of the world.

This is the way our universe is structured.

This is its interrelated quality.

We aren't going to have peace and justice on Earth until we recognize this basic fact of the interrelated structure of the universe.”

And now, a poem by Rumi, the great poet of the 13th century, one of the founders of the Sufi order, a brotherhood of mystical Muslims:

This moment this love comes to rest in me,
Many beings in one being.
In one wheat grain a thousand sheaf stacks
Inside the needle's eye, a turning night of stars.

Hymn

From you I receive.
To you I give.
Together we share.
From this we live.

Reflections

The world works much better when we respect its interdependence.

Fifteen years ago, I was living in Colorado and working on water policy, trying to keep more water in rivers and aquifers. Our approach was to help communities use water more efficiently, so I traveled around and wrote editorials to encourage cities like Tucson to invest in water-saving toilets, showerheads, leak detection systems, re-use contraptions in industry and efficient landscaping. It was going well – on average, each family and business was using less water.

But one day I received a letter from an environmental activist: “Dear Mr. Jones, you are making things worse!” he wrote. He acknowledged the improvements in efficiency, but asked us to look at the results on rivers and aquifers where total withdrawals had actually gone **up**! Our programs had helped people be more efficient, so something else was going on, but what?

He argued that population was growing at the same time, and **we** were driving it.

Consider how things worked before water efficiency improvements in a desert city like Tucson. What was the main limit to population growth? Water. So after the water efficiency programs helped people and local businesses use less water, developers were able to build more houses. Growth in population wasn't just an external force over which Tucson had no control. It was something that we were helping to spur. So, like the letter-writer said, our efforts didn't bring any improvements in rivers and aquifers

And it didn't stop there. The writer argued that when people and businesses are inefficient in their water use and there is a drought, people can cut back their water use to make up the difference – shorter showers and less lawn watering and so on. But with high efficiency, there isn't a buffer anymore. During a drought, the difference is made up by taking water from the rivers and aquifers. Nature carries the extra load, not the old buffer of wasted water.

Ouch! At best, we didn't help much. At worst, we hurt this system. What was going on?

John Muir said, "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe."

This story of increasing water efficiency is an example of an approach to working in the world that goes back 3,000 years.

We can trace the reductionist view back to around 500 BC when the Greek philosopher, Parmenides, made the case that the universe is composed of divisible parts. "Nothing comes from nothing," he wrote. Flash forward to Newton and Descartes in 1700s and 1800s, describing the universe as collection of separate, distinct parts that all fit together like a big, orderly clock.

This kind of thinking served us just fine in many ways. And yet at some level, it has led us to think of our world as unconnected, so, for example, we spew untested toxins to the point where mother's milk contains dozens of unnatural chemical compounds.

And it doesn't stop with Nature. Consider other ways we create artificial separateness. Think about the United States' actions in the Middle East, as if we could go catch the terrorists, remove a dictator, and have that be the end of it. What a mess!

More personally, I'm surprised by my ability to separate myself from other people – I notice my brain quickly distancing myself from them, judging them as too old to matter, too different-looking to matter, too unattractive. I can feel my circle of empathy constricting, my borders closing in, and notice the protective loneliness that results.

It reminds me of a Buddhist saying: "the illusion of separateness is the source of all suffering."

Back 3000 years ago, there was a second line of thinking at work. A **Systems View**. Ideas that just didn't fit with the first view.

Roughly contemporary to Parmenides was the Greek Philosopher Heraclitus. Heraclitus said that everything was transformation and change.

One of his metaphors was that people and all life are more like **flames**. A flame is the transformation of matter. Never the same. The transformation of carbon and oxygen into a carbon dioxide and particles. Never static. Not really a THING like Parmenides suggests.

Our bodies are more like a flame than an object. The matter in our skin exchanges itself with the rest of the world every month. Our liver, every 6 weeks. Our brain, every year. Where does it go? Into the air, into earthworms and dogwoods and plankton and tigers and Dick Cheney. What replaces it? Stuff

from elsewhere, locked into our food and breathed in from earthworms and dogwoods. Every year, we are mostly a totally new physical person. As Lily Tomlin said, “We all time-share the same atoms.” We are more of a pattern through which matter passes – a flame.

Think about the **intimacy** of this. My friend Dee Eggers compared this to lovers breathing in each others’ breath.

It recalls the line from Rumi’s poem we heard –

**This moment this love comes to rest in me,
Many beings in one being.**

Heraclitus’ and others’ ideas have evolved through the centuries.

And then...since the 1940s, the blossoming of **the systems field**. The heart of it is that we no longer emphasize the parts, the cogs of the clock, breaking things apart into smaller pieces and trying to understand each component. Since the birth of this age, more people have learned to appreciate the **interactions** of the components and the parts.

- Ecologists don’t study a tree itself, but more how it interacts with soil, microbes, fungi, air, water, animals.
- Therapists don’t focus just on the troubles of an individual, but his or her relationship with parents, siblings, children, friends.
- Holistic doctors and healers don’t focus only on where the symptoms lie, but treat the causes and see a person as interaction of mind, body, spirit. And see all functions of the body as interdependent.
- And the Unitarian Universalist association codifies this in our seventh principle – we respect the interdependent web.

SO.....

How would we act if we deeply believed that we were truly interdependent?

We will think differently. We won’t see ourselves as victims of some unconnected external source. We’ll see the actions of ourselves and others as interdependent in what the Buddhists call “**mutual co-arising.**”

When, after 9/11, the media asks, “Why do the Arab extremists hate us? What do they have against the way we live,” we won’t choose to see those actions as unrelated to ours, but connected. A decades’ long trap we are all stuck in – the escalation of our interventions in the Middle East causing actions and responses, and responses to those responses.

When we propose to expand the bridge the crosses the French Broad River, we don’t say, “people are coming, so we need to make an extra wide bridge with 8

lanes to avoid traffic congestion.” We read the studies and accept the conclusion that if we build the 8 lanes, traffic will expand to fill the new capacity. Traffic and congestion mutually co-arise.

When my kids ask me to come home from work and play with them at 5:00, I don't just say “I HAVE to work”. With a systems view, I recognize how my choices of work and lifestyle have created the demands on my time.

As Winston Churchill said, “We shape our buildings; thereafter, our buildings shape us.” In the same way, we shape the world; thereafter, the world shapes us.

This is King's “inescapable network of humanity.”

This is the Buddhists' “mutual co-arising”.

Now, let's get more practical about this. When I heard the systems modeler and thinker Peter Senge talk about this topic, he reminded me that interdependence could boil down to two questions:

- Who or what do I depend on?
- Who or what depends on me?

We just sang this idea -- “From you I receive, to you I give, together we share, from this we live.”

First, who or what do I depend on?

First, we have the opportunity to experience full **Gratitude** for all we depend on.

Gratitude for all we depend on. Our parents, our ancestors, our partners, families, friends. The people who serve our society – law enforcement, mail delivery, firefighters, teachers, the people who fold the church newsletters and orders of service and set up the flowers and run the sound and hand out the programs and make the coffee. I suspect I am typically quite blind to all who create the abundance of the world...

What do we depend on? Air, water, soil, energy, stuff, a stable climate. And yet probably the most fundamental need is food. When we take the time to give thanks before a meal, [anyone notice how relaxing it is to give thanks before a meal?], when we take the time to grow our own food or to buy locally and know the growers, we engage deeply with the interdependent web.

Charles Olsen captures this in his poem “These days”:

These days

Whatever you have to say, leave the
Roots on, let them dangle.
And the dirt
Just to make clear where they come from.

The flip side of this coin is **Grief or Pain**. We are intimately connected to all forms of life on Earth, and when we look closely and open our hearts to the conditions of living for the bulk the world that doesn't have enough to eat, or to the destruction of Nature, we sense the loss.

For all of us, it's very painful to see photos of people in the slums of Nairobi Kenya or aerial pictures of coalmines in West Virginia, the ones that supply coal for our electricity and lighting. We grieve over those pictures of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib, with the hoods on and in the Jesus pose.

We are interdependent. The pain we feel – sometimes just the “blues” -- is the awareness of the “interdependent web” calling us to act. Just like pain from a cut on a toe compels us to put on a band-aid, pain from feeling the suffering of another part of this Earth-system compels us to take action.

So we are called by fractures in the web of interdependence – injustice, environmental destruction, poverty, individual sorrow – to ACT.

Remember the line from the U2 song that we heard –
***“We are one
But we're not the same
We get to carry each other....”***

Carrying each other in today's world means listening to the evidences of pain and doing something about it.

The second question we ask is: who or what depends on me?

What impacts do I have on the world?

Who depends on me? Family, friends, and neighbors. The person driving their car the other way on Charlotte street depends on me to stay in my lane to avoid a collision. The birds, squirrels, worms, snakes, bears around here.

The same would dependence would have been true for our grandparents. And their grandparents.

And yet, in today's world, much more depends on us.

Consider that the carbon dioxide that came out of my car's tailpipe as I drove over here is warming the Earth, causing drought in Africa, flooding in India, and intensifying hurricanes. This shirt I'm wearing was made in China, where I have no idea of laws protecting workers. We truly live in each others' back yards. How do we deal ethically with such a level of interdependence?

Yes, we should act. But for all we *haven't yet figured out*, **We should forgive ourselves**. This age we live in is SO UNPRECEDENTED. Because we are inexperienced with acting ethically within an arena that has expanded from our familiar back yard to the whole earth and its atmosphere, we often get so wrapped up in guilt and blame that we give up entirely.

So, we should, as Peter Senge says, "clean off our windshield." Improve our ability to see and sense and get our hands around the long term implications of our actions. Engage with all that depends on us. WITHOUT GUILT.

This isn't a new idea. In the 17th century the mathematician Pascal said, "In each action, we must look beyond the action at our past, present, and future state and at others whom it affects, and see the relations of all those things. And then we shall be very cautious."

How can experience, today, the long term implications of our actions?

In the 1970s in Norway, most apartments had their electric meters in the basement or out back. But there was one block of apartments in one city that had the meters in the front halls. Over the years, these apartments used 40% less electricity.

I once led an experiment along these lines.

My college friends and I had grown frustrated with recycling. We decided that recycling was just a weak bandaid on the problem, and looked for a way to help us use less. So I proposed that we carry around our personal trash in clear plastic bags. For a week. Eventually we got 120 students, faculty, and administrators to do it. To class, across campus, to the gym, to the dorm, to parties we carried our pizza boxes, junk mail, plastic forks, paper napkins, newspapers, beer bottles, beer bottles. Day one ... day two.... three... The bags got bigger and bigger. And we agreed not to change our behavior. Use exactly what you've always used. Day four, five, it became impossible to behave the same.

And, when everyone was carrying ten pounds of trash on their back, avoiding junk was a matter of SURVIVAL. It was like wearing a new pair of glasses – we saw the world THAT differently. Throw that away! What is AWAY??? There is no AWAY anymore.

Despite the rule, we innovated. We started carrying a coffee mug on our backpack with a carabineer. We used bandanas instead of paper napkins, metal silverware instead of plastic, We cancelled junk mail, canceled the newspaper and read it in the library. We drank beer by the keg... out of principle!!

It was a profound experience.

I believe the viability of a life-sustaining society depends on our ability to experience, now, the long term effects of our actions. So I challenge you to make this happen.

We've talked about the Buddhist's idea of mutual co-arising, our actions in close connection with the inevitable reactions – whether they be people using water in the West, or Arab extremists, or drivers across the French Broad.

We talked about our physical selves in intimate exchange with the rest of the world – earthworms and trees and each other.

This opens opportunities for us:

- expressing gratitude and appreciation for the abundance of life;
- responding to the pain of the world – our world, the extension of ourselves – with effective action – we hear the call to “carry each other”;
- and, in this unprecedented time, when we global citizens live in one another's backyards, we work to experience, today, the long-term implications of our actions.

It all boils down to this – We each of us declare ourselves to be an intimate part of the holy, the universe, the web of all existence -- everything smaller and greater than ourselves. THAT is our sacred work.

Meditation Period

In the spirit of meditation and prayer...

- On whom do you depend?
- On what do you depend?
- Who depends on you?
- What depends on you?
- How are you interconnected?

Closing Words

As we go forward today,
May we find gratitude the abundance of our lives
May we listen to the pain in the world and turn it into action

And may we see ourselves as part of something greater and sacred.

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