

Imagining Interdependence

- Amanda Udis-Kessler, Flame of Life Universalists, Pueblo, CO, September 15, 2013

Last Sunday, I took Klara, our foreign exchange student, to the Manitou Springs arcade, a fun set of buildings in the middle of downtown Manitou where one can play pinball, skeeball, air hockey and video games, shoot hoops, and otherwise spend time and quarters. And oh, did we spend time and quarters. We played games. We sat and ate ice cream. Klara panned for gems in an artificial creek set up by a store that sold Native American artwork and knickknacks. She watched the creek that runs under the arcade and drank mineral water from one of the springs. I also drank some mineral water and learned the very useful lesson that I find mineral water unpleasant to drink. I showed Klara Adams Mountain Café, a wonderful restaurant where we will take her sometime.

But all was not fun and games among the fun and games. Adams Mountain was open, but still clearly bearing the effects of the damage from the flood that nearly destroyed the restaurant. Without any prompting from me, Klara pointed out water lines low on some of the arcade buildings where recent flooding had left markings. I pointed out wood near where we were sitting with our ice cream that should not have been wet but definitely was. And of course, on Thursday, four days after our hot time in the old town, parts of Manitou were under water again and the creek under the arcade had risen dangerously. The street next to the parking lot we used was awash in sewage when a manhole cover was popped out of place by the sheer force of the water running underneath. The road we drove up to get into town was under six feet of water at some points.

What does this story have to do with interdependence? Everything. We could zoom in on Klara and me at the arcade and see the interdependence of two people, as well as the interdependence between those two people and an arcade in a town center. But if we zoom out just a bit, we see that both before and after our skeeball Sunday there was flooding that negatively impacted the arcade and disrupted the lives of hundreds of people. And if we zoom out more and count the flooding across the entire state, we can talk about roads washed out, houses flooded, people stranded, people dead. Okay, then, why the flooding? To zoom out even farther, partly because summer rains have been getting worse, which is related to global climate change. Now we're talking about interdependence on an earth-sized scale. But we need to zoom back in for a minute. Not every single part of the state flooded. Why Manitou? And that answer has something to do with the burn scar in the Waldo Canyon area above Manitou, given that water runs down off burn scars because the land becomes hydrophobic. Okay, then, why was there a burn scar in Waldo Canyon? Because of the large Waldo Canyon fire last summer, which destroyed the homes of several people I know and killed several people I don't know. And why was there a fire in Waldo Canyon? Because someone started it.

There's the interdependent web of all existence, writ small and writ large. Two people playing skeeball and eating ice cream. Someone I will never meet starting a fire that led to a flooded town center in which I sat a more than a year later, and that flooded again soon after. Climate disruption across the whole planet. And how we think about this interdependent web has a huge

impact on how we interact with it, which comes down to the choices we make, which in turn brings us back to the topic of ethics.

This is the second sermon in a series where I talk about different actions that we can take to help us live more ethical lives. Last time we talked about slowing down, capturing a sense of spaciousness by quieting our minds. Today we are going to begin a two-sermon process of imagining interdependence and what that has to do with making ethical choices. I hope you will agree that a quiet mind has more spaciousness to imagine interdependence, which is why today's topic came second. Today we will focus on why it is hard to imagine interdependence and why we must, nonetheless, learn how to do it. Next time we will actually practice imagining interdependence.

First, though, what does it mean to imagine interdependence? Let's say that interdependence as a principle says that what we do impacts others and that what others do impacts us. In that case, imagining interdependence is an exercise in seeing ourselves in others and others in ourselves so that we can do our best to make decisions that benefit both ourselves and others.

This sounds almost straightforward, right? So why is it hard to do? I think there are three primary reasons, all important, and all of which go very deep.

First, if we are honest, we have to acknowledge that we live in a society that socializes us to see ourselves as separate individuals and not as interdependent for the most part. One way to argue this point is to consider what a society that deeply embraced interdependence would look like. Such a society could not possibly value greed or teach hatred, or encourage us to look after number one, since at the end of the day who would "number one" even be? Such a society would probably develop coalition politics rather than the kind of agonistic, two-party, horse-race system we have here, and such a society would probably have higher voter turnout, since people would realize that the people and political parties elected would have real impacts on real people's lives, and those real people's lives would matter to everyone. And, though I offer this last example with some trepidation, a society that truly valued interdependence might be more comfortable than we are with funding public services through some form of taxation or voluntary collective support. Why? Because such a society would believe that everyone is entitled to flourish, and would not object to those who have more helping those who have less to flourish.

We all know that this hypothetical society is not the society in which we live. We are encouraged to imagine independence a hundred times a day, interdependence far less often. And it's hard to cultivate an individually interdependent imagination in a society without a collective one. It's hard to trust other people as a general principle when we are taught to fear them. It's hard to acknowledge and struggle with our internal mix of good and evil when we are taught by movies and the news and political organizations of all sorts that there are good guys and bad guys and it's just that simple.

There's a man in Colorado Springs who is my main music person. I play with him on his gigs and he is currently playing on my album. I think he would say that my keyboard enriches his guitar-and-vocals music, and I can say with confidence that his guitar work on my album is a great gift for the album. To complicate matters, though, we have profoundly different

perspectives on politics, so much so that this caused us a lot of trouble for a while. His support of the recent recalls breaks my heart and infuriates me, and I can't count the fights I've had with him in my head since then. But somehow, I have to get past that, have to refuse the narrative that says I'm the good guy and he's the bad guy because we have a lot of music yet to make. And the music will exist out in that spiritual zone where no one talks about good and bad, we all exist as imperfect people, and there is, nonetheless, a lot of joy to be had.

Beyond societal training that stresses independence, fear, and simplistic good/bad thinking, there's the issue of groupism, by which I mean the tendency to care for and look after those closest to us, even at the expense of others. Our group in this case refers to those with whom we identify because we are family members or share political affiliations or ethnic identities or careers or any of a hundred other markers of commonality. Political philosopher Michael Sandel has pointed out that we find it natural to take care of our group, however we define our group, and I suppose it might even have had some prehistoric evolutionary value. Fair enough. But we no longer live in a world where we have the luxury of caring only about those we already care about. The opening story should indicate why interdependence is not just sunshine and rainbows and lollipops and puppy dogs but has serious, sometimes fatal, consequences.

A third reason that cultivating an interdependent imagination is hard is because our lives are busy and full of hassles. Who has the time and energy? Sometimes I call this phenomenon the "hassle factor," the fact that our lives conspire to keep us on the path of least resistance because we are already so hassled it's hard to willingly sign up for more work. And an individualistic society and groupism are serious enough challenges to interdependent thinking and feeling that it definitely takes work to retrain ourselves.

Perhaps the hardest part is that individualism, groupism, and the hassle factor don't take turns; they all exist at the same time. Here are two examples of how they intersect. The first is a simple cartoon. The second is a real-life Facebook situation that I encountered recently.

The cartoon has two panels. The first panel shows a family giving thanks for their food before they eat. There's a beautiful pile of produce on the table. Their heads are bowed and they are saying, "Thank you, Jesus." In the second panel, a Mexican man picking produce under what is clearly a brutally hot California sun says, "You're welcome." The cartoon panel identifies him as "Jesús." Our society has not really prepared the grateful family to think about the interdependent web that brought their food to them. The cartoon represents them as white and middle-American, implying that they have no connection with anyone whose name might be Jesús. And hey, they are probably all at the end of a long day and relieved just to be sitting down for a tasty meal. I get it. Dinner time is often the first time in the day I take off my reading glasses, the first time I relax just a bit. It's not when I want to be trying to figure out how many degrees of separation there are between Jesús, who grew my produce, and me.

The second example is, if anything, more disturbing, though it is mostly about individualism and groupism. I got into a Facebook conversation because a friend posted some information about the horrific spread of measles in the US, which is overwhelmingly linked to more and more parents choosing not to vaccinate their children, which in turn weakens or eliminates what is called "herd immunity" – the point at which enough children are vaccinated that a single

unvaccinated child is not at risk. The problem is not the single unvaccinated child, it's the breach in herd immunity when the proportion of parents choosing not to vaccinate grows above a certain point. Well, a woman entered the discussion, someone who chooses not to vaccinate because she just doesn't want that vaccine stuff in her children. The tenor of the conversation was heated but what matters for the purposes of today was that this woman's defense of not getting her children vaccinated practically screamed individualism and groupism. First, she leaned heavily on her right to choose in a completely acontextual way, even when scientists responded that a virus doesn't care about your choices, it just takes advantage when it can. The woman's defense of her right to choose not to vaccinate was remarkably silent about the consequences choices can have. She cared about choosing as a principle but not about the outcomes of her choices in any broader way. Second, her language was very much only about her and her own family, as though no one else existed, as though her contribution to the weakening of herd immunity was completely beyond her concern. Those are other kids, after all. What does she have to care about them? Maybe her kids will be fine and will neither catch the measles nor spread them. Nonetheless, her perspective was disturbingly lacking in interdependence.

So, interdependence is hard. No surprise there. Why should we push against all that is easy in our own lives to cultivate interdependence when it is pretty difficult to do? Since I suggested three challenges, I will suggest three reasons we need interdependence in our minds and hearts and then bring it back to our original topic: ethics.

To start, let me go back to the Manitou arcade story and flip a couple of things around. Now I'm the person up in Waldo Canyon a year ago in June. I have the choice to start a fire or not. Remember, whether I start the fire on purpose as opposed to accidentally is not the point; it's whether I start the fire at all, or, if I started it accidentally, whether I put it out immediately. Maybe I don't live in the area and don't really care what happens to it. Maybe I will never visit the Manitou arcade or eat at Adams Mountain Café. In an individualistic world, who cares if I drop a cigarette carelessly or light a fire carefully? But if I have an interdependent imagination, I could make a huge difference. I could make sure the fire doesn't start or gets put out instantly. Which would mean no fire, which would mean no burn scar, which would mean less flooding, which just might mean less trouble in Manitou. And all of this would happen because I cared about people I would never meet, never know, never know anything about. Yes, it's profoundly hard to contemplate alternate realities in the real world, but imagine an interdependent person a year and three months ago up in Waldo Canyon. Imagine all the suffering that would not have happened if that fire had never been started or had been put out instantly. Imagine lives saved, houses still standing, buildings undamaged, fear and grief and stress never occurring in the first place. Imagine a fabulous restaurant that could not afford flood insurance never having to ask whether it could afford to remain open at all. That example is complicated enough, but it is barely a drop in the bucket of the ocean that is interdependence in our lives.

Here's one more counterfactual. Let's say those parents that choose not to vaccinate their kids start vaccinating them. Up goes herd immunity. Down go epidemics of the measles. Less suffering all around.

So, the main reason to imagine interdependence is to mitigate suffering, plain and simple. All kinds of suffering. The suffering of people in cars being washed down Manitou Avenue. The

suffering of kids with measles. Even the suffering of Jesús in the hot sun, since we know the real people in those circumstances are paid terribly and have nothing resembling benefits like health insurance. And, of course, to prevent suffering that has not yet taken place and that won't take place if we use our interdependent imaginations to take care of each other in real life.

Why else should we imagine interdependence? Maybe it can help us become less angry, especially if we work particularly on imagining how we are interdependent with people we hate or fear. I've already mentioned my conservative musician friend in Colorado Springs and how angry I am with him. But when he walks into my house to record my music, I can't afford to be that angry with him. He is woven too deeply into my life, his music and mine now intertwined, for me to hate him in any clear and simple way. To hate him would be to hate myself, and I can't afford to do that either. And while I do fear his politics, to fear him as a human being is to reject his inherent worth and dignity and to poison the music we make together. My music is about love and hope, not fear, even if my heart doesn't always get there at the same time. The more interdependently I think about the two of us, the more my anger is tempered with sadness, which is, I think, the correct response under the circumstances.

Here's a different, larger-scale example. Matthew Shepard was beaten to death in 1998 in what has long been considered an anti-gay hate crime by many of us, and it is one of many examples of why I hate and fear people I think are antigay, despite my desire to hate and fear no one. I feel personally threatened by people who talk or act violently because they feel threatened by me. But a fascinating new book has just come out (so to speak) arguing that Aaron McKinney, one of the murderers, was not a simple gay-hater. Far from it, he and Matthew Shepard apparently had sex, maybe on multiple occasions. The book ultimately argues that McKinney's rigid and self-strangling masculinity, which is not all that different from the masculinity with which plenty of other men have grown up, made it completely unacceptable for him to understand himself as gay. So, when he found himself sexually involved with a man, he had to obliterate his gayness and failed masculinity somehow, and the "somehow" involved beating another man to death. Now don't get me wrong; the crime was still unspeakably heinous and I am not sorry McKinney and his partner in crime are in prison. But this new information makes McKinney tragic as well as frightening in my eyes. I remember being worried about my sexuality as a teenager, whether it was wrong, what it would mean for my life, and I can, in the smallest of ways, actually identify with a famous murderer. A tiny bit. I never wanted to kill anyone, except maybe my parents in that way teenagers sometimes do during hard stretches. And even that was more teen angst, drama, and exaggeration than anything else. But I do get, in a small way, why and how someone could be frightened of their sexuality in a setting where fear was the only permissible option. To my horror and sadness and wonder, I am just the smallest bit interdependent with Aaron McKinney.

There's one other reason to imagine interdependence beyond responding to suffering and mitigating one's own anger and fear, and that is that a sense of interdependence can lead to learning and personal growth. I knew nothing about biology when I met Phoebe except that I didn't understand biology and hated it. Seventeen years later, I'm no microbiologist but I have a profound respect for microbiology because I've learned about it from Phoebe – from watching her teach, listening to her talk, and reading books to her at night. I've learned that microbes are beautiful as well as deadly. I've learned that microbes keep us alive as well as killing us. I've

learned yet another truth of interdependence, which is that if we try to kill all the microbes because we see them as threats, we will destroy ourselves as well. And I've learned that microbiology never exists in a vacuum. It is related to everything else we can imagine, from art to politics and beyond. All this because I wound up intertwining my life with the life of a scientist. And perhaps the best part is that I am nowhere near as afraid of science as I was pre-Phoebe.

Since that was a rather serious story, here's a funnier one, also personal. I started composing instrumental music in high school and was offered the opportunity to take a piece of mine for two flutes and piano and arrange it for the high school band. This was, of course, an incredible opportunity and I got to work. I even hand-wrote out every individual score and there must have been close to 30 of them. All of them in the key of C. Finally, the big day came. I sat there as the music teacher raised his baton and the band raised their instruments. The first note was a big one, all of the instruments playing, and it was unspeakably horrible. The discordant clash of sounds lingered in the air just long enough for everyone to put their instruments down and gasp, and for me to contemplate moving to Aruba. Then there was a long silence. Then the band director, who had not actually seen the scores, asked me, with the barest smile on his face, whether I knew that clarinets, saxophones and trumpets were transposing instruments. I asked what that meant. It turns out that transposing instruments need to have their scores written in keys different from non-transposing instruments. And about half the band was made up of transposing instruments, and most of them did not transpose to the same key as each other. No wonder there was cacophony: my nice opening C chord had E flats and Fs and B flats and all sorts of other wrong notes in it.

Needless to say, this particular lesson in interdependence was extremely helpful. I learned how to write correctly for every instrument in that band and went on to compose for a variety of instruments in college. I came to appreciate the beauty and depth and difference across orchestral instruments, and from that experience I came to appreciate classical music far more than I ever would have if I had not written the wrong scores in tenth grade out of ignorance. I still listen to classical music in the car virtually all the time, and every so often I remember that disastrous day and smile.

If we want to relieve and prevent suffering in the world, if we want to heal our own rage and fear, if we want to keep learning, interdependence is our friend. But interdependence is also the mindset within which we have the best chance of acting ethically when that means treating others well. For interdependence is not merely about avoiding or recovering from bad choices, it is also about how we make good choices: caring, compassionate, loving choices. We make good choices when taking care of others is like taking care of ourselves. We'll think about this in more depth next time. For now, let us go out into the world aware of the challenges to cultivating interdependence and committed to doing so anyway. Let us be moved to mitigate and end and prevent suffering in others and ourselves, and let us be inspired to keep learning more about ourselves, others, and the world in which we live. Let each day of our lives be interdependence day. Amen and blessed be.