

Interdependence: Three Reflections

Amanda Udis-Kessler, First Unitarian Church of San José, July 4, 2021

1. Independence, Dependence, Interdependence

Thanks for allowing me to be here with you today so that we can think together about interdependence on “Independence Day.”

When I was a teenager, I wanted more than anything else to be independent. I wanted my freedom. I wanted to go where I wanted, when I wanted, and to do whatever I wanted with whoever I wanted. Once I got my freedom, I have to tell you, it got boring pretty quickly. I realized that what I wanted even more than freedom was connection with others, relationships, love. Yes, I needed some independence, but I needed interdependence even more.

Ultimately, after decades of thinking about the values and limits of freedom, I’ve come to see human beings as the most amazing mix of independence, dependence, and interdependence.

In our society, the independence component may be the most obvious, given how important freedom is as a value, sometimes for better, sometimes for worse. But it is absolutely true, on Independence Day and on all days, that human beings need a degree of freedom. We need to be able to make our own choices, build the lives we choose, love the people we love, understand ourselves in ways that make sense to us, and develop the capacities that can help us live the fullest possible lives. Unitarian Universalists particularly value independence put to constructive use, as in the free and responsible search for truth and meaning or the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process.

At the same time, we come into the world as dependent beings and we remain dependent on others throughout our lives in important ways. We depend on others to provide the food we eat, build our houses and roads and restaurants and hospitals, teach us, heal us, train us, entertain us, and love us. We rely on others to give us the social cues that let us know how we are doing. We need others in order to be fully human, from the moment of our birth to the moment of our death. We need others every day of our lives if we are to remain alive at all. And in the anticipation of who we will be before we are born, and in the remembering of who we were after we die, our dependence on others actually extends past the boundaries of our own lives.

For me, though, today’s most important topic is interdependence, particularly human interdependence. I could bore you with a sociology talk about how society makes individuals and individuals return the favor, how we all co-create society with every word and every act, every acceptance of the way that things are and every rejection of the status quo in favor of something more loving. But two weeks ago, I attended your brilliant, moving Father’s Day service and realized that you already know everything you need to know about interdependence if you think about your relationships with your families and how complex and beautiful and challenging and profound and terrifying and wonderful those relationships are. Our lives are inescapably tangled together, often for better, sometimes for worse. This may be most obvious with our families but

really, we are entangled with everyone we meet, and in some ways, with many people we never meet.

That trucker who drove the produce to the supermarket where we bought it? Our lives are interwoven with his though we will never know him personally. The professor who trained the teacher who teaches our son? Our lives are connected to the life of that professor, to her passion and talent, and to the teacher she taught, and on it goes. And we in turn co-create the world that will be experienced by people we will never know. That money we donated to a racial justice organization will have a positive impact about which we will never learn the specifics. The kind word we offered to the checkout clerk may make her daughter's day a little better. That's before we even talk about where our taxes go or how our fair-trade coffee purchase ripples back to Central America.

I've found it very powerful to think about human beings as simultaneously independent, dependent, and interdependent. Powerful and humbling. Trying to keep this complexity in my head is a struggle. Recognizing both how powerful and how limited we are as individuals, is stunning. And acknowledging that we need each other and that we also love each other into being is among the most profound things I've ever learned. We make each other. We sustain each other. We change each other. In certain important ways, we complete each other even if, in other important ways, we are always alone with ourselves. As the opening hymn I wrote for this service puts it, we belong to one another.

These ideas have certain implications for our ethical lives and our justice work. I'll come back to a few of those shortly. First, though, here's another original hymn for the First Unitarian Church of San José, to which I hope you'll sing along. This is "For the Weaving of Our Lives," to the tune of "For the Beauty of the Earth." The text will be on the screen.

2. Interdependence Ethics

If interdependence is so important, surely it is important for our morality, for our ethical lives. I've spent the past few years developing what I call an ethic of flourishing. It's an approach to morality that puts people above principles, claiming that justice and equality and freedom and rights and all those other abstract principles only matter as means to an end, not as ends in themselves. Specifically, they matter as means to the end of human well-being, human thriving, human flourishing. Freedom, or rights, or morality for that matter, can be used to contribute to human well-being but each of these can also lead to avoidable, unnecessary suffering. Rather than simply lifting up values or principles, we need to see whether their concrete use is helping specific people have good lives or making their lives worse. Any morality that takes seriously the claim that all people have inherent dignity and worth must help every single person have the opportunity to flourish and to avoid unnecessary suffering.

Arguably, for instance, the right of same-sex couples to marry contributes to human well-being and harms no one, whereas the right to own as many guns as one wants with extremely little restriction or regulation plays a concrete role in human suffering and death. From this ethical perspective, we don't begin by asking what's right or what's just or what's fair or what enhances freedom. We begin by asking what enhances human well-being and we build our values and our

actions and our organizations and our institutions from there. (As a side note, we could also talk about environmental well-being but that would take me way beyond my time limit today.)

There are many ways to think about what people need to thrive, some of which have to do with the kind of beings that people are. For example, knowing that people are embodied, we know that people need safety, food, water, clean air, shelter, and access to healthcare to survive. We also need the opportunity to use our bodies for joy, pleasure, creativity, and agency in the world in order to flourish as embodied creatures. Just knowing that much gives us a lot of information about how to treat ourselves and others, and also tells us a lot about how moral or immoral our society is. Hint: it's pretty immoral.

In addition to being embodied, we are emotional beings, social beings, creative beings, beings that need to make sense of our lives, and beings that need to feel that what we do makes a difference in the world. Understanding these and other aspects of humanity help clarify for us what it means, concretely, for people to flourish or suffer. Once we have some understanding of human flourishing and suffering, we can start developing ourselves as ethical beings, people committed to supporting human flourishing and working against human suffering. And this, in turn, means cultivating virtue in ourselves.

If interdependence is a key part of what it means to be human and indeed to be alive, we might ask what that means for our ethical choices and our ethical development. What virtues should we cultivate? What kind of people should we be? What traits should we have? There are many possible answers, but here are three that I think are important both in light of our interdependence and in light of our commitment to supporting flourishing and working against suffering. When we live by any or all of these virtues, we make love visible in the world.

The first virtue is compassion – the ability to feel with or alongside other people, to face their suffering and allow it to impact us. The Hebrew word for compassion is etymologically related to the word for “womb.” We might, therefore, think of compassion as “wombishness.” But that does not limit compassion to women or to people with bodies assigned female at birth. Anyone can feel someone else’s pain or joy in their own body. Compassion is when someone else’s situation gets you right in your guts. Cultivating compassion connects us with others, bringing us closer to them and honoring our interdependence with them.

The second virtue is courage – the capacity to act bravely on behalf of our own or others’ well-being even when doing so frightens us. Courage is not about fearlessness; it is about the willingness to take risks to do the right thing. This is especially true when the right thing means helping someone, or some group, flourish, or working against the suffering of someone, or some group. Cultivating courage makes it more likely that we will act ethically in the world even when we are afraid, and it makes us more useful partners in making both interdependence and love visible.

The third virtue is generosity – the inclination to share what we have with others in service of their well-being and to reject selfishness in recognition of our interdependence. When we offer our resources, including financial resources, our time, our energy, our gifts and talents, when we put our bodies on the line between the devalued and the people attacking them, we are practicing

self-discipline and sometimes even self-sacrifice. While this is true for all people, it may be especially true for members of socially valued groups. Cultivating generosity makes our contributions to the interdependent web more mindful and helps us become more grateful.

3. Inequality, Justice, Interdependence

Once we take human interdependence seriously, and particularly once we commit ourselves to supporting the flourishing of all people and to working against human suffering as broadly as possible, we are forced to confront systematic inequality in all its forms. And once we confront systematic inequality, we are forced to ask what justice has to do with interdependence.

Earlier, I considered the positive aspects of interdependence: the trucker who brought your produce to the store, the donation you made that helped a social justice organization, all the many ways that we conspire to co-create beauty in the world and to make love visible. And all of that is true and very powerful. It justifiably gives us hope.

At the same time, all forms of systematic inequality are also interdependent, and in disturbing ways. The nature of systematic inequality is that members of socially valued groups benefit from inequality precisely because members of socially devalued groups suffer from inequality. The good-faith treatment I receive as a white person is interdependently connected to the bad-faith treatment received by members of Black/Indigenous/People of Color communities, also called BIPOC communities. Every time I speed past a police car and am not pulled over, I benefit from my whiteness; every time an officer pulls over a driver of color on a hunch that they might be able to find that person doing something wrong and arrest them, that person suffers from the white supremacy that harms BIPOC communities.

And, to be clear, that person's suffering and my benefitting are interrelated. Broadly speaking, I benefit because they suffer and they suffer because I benefit. Every time I receive the benefit of the doubt and they don't, the interdependent web of systematic inequality is built up a little more. This is not just an issue of white supremacy; I could make parallel cases having to do with sexism, heterosexism, and all other forms of systematic inequality. All of them involve differential uses of good-faith treatment and bad-faith treatment. All of them involve people assuming the best or the worst of someone and acting in accordance with those assumptions.

Systematic inequality is, of course, a justice issue, but it is also an issue of flourishing. If, for example, people need bodily safety to flourish as embodied beings, members of BIPOC communities can never truly flourish under white supremacy. If people need bodily self-determination to flourish as embodied beings, women will struggle to flourish in a sexist society. If people need access to quality healthcare to flourish as embodied beings, the flourishing of LGBTQ+ people may come down to whether they live somewhere that affords them access to respectful, quality medical treatment. Working against systematic inequality is a demand of justice. It is also a demand born of the acknowledgement that our lives are interwoven with the lives of others – all others.

Black liberation theologian Cornel West once famously said that justice is what love looks like in public, and that's true. I would add that justice is also what interdependence looks like in

public. Working for justice is a way of loving people we will never meet and as such, it is a powerful acknowledgement of our interdependence with them. Pursuing justice is how we honor the inherent worth and dignity of each individual, how we honor the importance of human flourishing for all people, and how we honor the profound reality that we belong to one another.

Because we belong to one another, it is not right that I should benefit as a white person from social assumptions and practices that cause members of BIPOC communities to suffer, nor that I should suffer as a queer person from social assumptions and practices that enable heterosexuals to benefit. Because we are bound together, ultimately your suffering hurts me and ultimately my suffering hurts you.

And so, we work for the flourishing of all and the suffering of none, which is to say, we work for justice. We bring all the compassion, courage, and generosity that we can muster to this work. In doing so, we make interdependence visible, and in making interdependence visible, we make love visible. May our lives be gifts to this work.

Our closing hymn is another worship song of mine, called “As You Go on Your Way.” It is a short sending-out song and it repeats once. The text will be visible; please start singing along as soon as you have a feel for the melody. Here is “As You Go on Your Way.”

Benediction

And now, as we go on our way, may our words and actions honor the complexity and power of human independence, human dependence, and human interdependence. May we show our commitment, day by day, to human flourishing and to mitigating human suffering so that all people might ultimately get to have good lives. And may our justice work make love visible by making interdependence and its demands visible.