

Practicing Interdependence

Amanda Udis-Kessler. Flame of Life Universalists, Pueblo, October 20, 2013; updated June 14, 2022

Last week was music Sunday at my regular church, and I was delighted to be back playing with the church band after recovering from a hand injury. Even better, the musician we were covering was Dan Fogelberg, one of my favorites. After playing three gentle, meditative pieces during the service, we were going to end with the up-tempo, hard-rocking song “Part of the Plan.” And we sang and played our hearts out on all of the songs, but perhaps especially on this final one. The service ended and I headed off to see friends. One of them came up to me, cleared his throat and said, “Maybe I shouldn’t tell you this but we couldn’t hear the vocals at all during the final song. I think the vocal mikes got turned off somehow just before the song.” Oh well. I guess it wasn’t part of the plan that the powerful lyrics to this great song actually be heard by the congregation, or that the superb vocal harmonies be appreciated by anyone past, say, the third row.

Last month, we talked about imagining interdependence as a step toward living more ethical lives. We considered several reasons why it is so difficult to truly foster interdependence in our lives, while also contemplating some reasons why we ought to do so, indeed must do so if we are to have any chance of living in a more loving, less violent, more open-hearted, less fearful, more empathetic world.

Now it’s time to consider practicing interdependence, or at least practicing the imagination of interdependence. I thought the opening story was, if not an ethical take on interdependence, a sad tale of what happens when interdependence doesn’t work right, albeit in a very small way. Someone responsible for running the sound board at church messed up, and as a result, all the power and love we poured into that final song got dampened by virtue of the vocals being lost. Interdependence at work.

We all need each other, in so many ways. We need each other in the small things of life and the large things of life, and we in this room know we need each other because we gather here, not least to help each other in our needs. How then shall we learn to take proper care of each other and so to take proper care of ourselves?

Life gives us great gifts sometimes if we are patient enough. As it happens, within the past few weeks I ran into two different meditations on interdependence, neither of which actually used the word once.

The first meditation comes from Philip Gulley, a progressive Quaker who has written several excellent books including one called *If the Church Were Christian*. In this essay he’s writing about how to increase human happiness in workplaces. At one point, he says this:

“Let’s understand something. We all employ others. Bill Gates may employ more people than you or I do, but we all employ other people. I depend upon others to grow my food, prepare it, and serve it. I depend upon others to make my clothing, fix my car, heal my body, repair my home, cut my hair, maintain my computer, represent and manage my business interests, get me

from one place to another, clean my home, tend my farm, nurture my spiritual life, provide financial counsel, and loan me money. As a taxpayer I employ others to fix roads, teach children, provide health care, and ensure my safety and well-being. Please don't ever think you don't employ anyone. Every day you engage hundreds of people to work on your behalf. In fact, next time someone asks you what you do, you can tell them, 'I am an employer.'"

The second meditation comes from a *Tikkun* blog by Cat Zavis. The post is called, "Consumerism: Religion of the Masses?" and reflects on a recently released version of the iPhone. Davis asks a variety of questions, including the following:

"We do not know or bother to ask who made these phones. How much did they earn? Do they have enough money to afford shelter and food for their family? What about an education for their children? How is their health care? And how is the never-ending productivity stream impacting their environment and health as well as our own? If the actual costs of these products were included in the price, would we be so quick to buy the latest and greatest gadget that looked pretty or was in our favorite color?"

Gulley and Zavis appear to be making somewhat different points, about how other people take care of us, and about how little we know about those who make our products, respectively. But let's think instead about these quotes as excellent examples of interdependence practices.

First, Phillip Gulley's quote. What an odd way to think about interdependence: as the idea that we employ people. And yet, it's true. We pay people money to do all the things Gulley lists and many more. When we are not paying them money we are bartering with them or rewarding them in some other way. Phoebe and I take care of each other's emotional needs to the best of our abilities. One might call this a barter of sorts. Does that seem like a callous way to think about a spousal relationship? It doesn't need to be. Iris Murdoch, the 20th century British philosopher once said, "Love is the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real." When I care for Phoebe on hard days, what is that other than the extremely difficult realization on my part that something other than me is real? Or, put more tenderly, love? And is that not the same on her part?

Our interdependence might be more obvious than some other interdependences in my life, but every product and service I buy, for example, puts me into interdependence with a wide range of other people: whoever made the product, whoever shipped the product, whoever sold the product, whoever provided the service, whoever employed the person who provided the service, and depending on the nature of the service, whoever trained the person who provided the service. Interdependence may characterize my relationship with my doctor, for example, but my life is also interwoven with whoever taught my doctor. Considered in this way, it is shocking just how many lives intertwine with each of our lives.

Cat Zavis's questions lead us more directly to thinking about interdependence as involving moral obligations on our part. If someone makes something for us, or does something for us, or sells something to us, or helps us in some way, are we morally accountable to them? If so, why? In what ways? Should we know, let alone care about, the conditions in which workers make the things we buy? Thus far, the default answer to these questions in our society has been, "no, not

really,” but that may not be the best moral option. After all, it is our blessings that lead to their situations, and if the products we buy are made in ways that cause others to suffer, we need to acknowledge that we ourselves are responsible for their suffering in some small way. Of course, we don’t want to do this because we figure it leaves us with guilt and no way to improve the situation, but if enough people thought interdependently about this issue we might actually be able to make a difference in the working and healthcare conditions of people who make the things we care about so much. That would need to be an awful lot of people, true. But large-scale social movements have come into existence often enough for me to believe that we can learn to take better care of those who make our goods if we are willing to be a strong voice for prioritizing their well-being over our discounts.

Today’s sermon is entitled “Practicing Interdependence” in acknowledgement of the fact that most of us are not very good at acting in awareness of interdependence except in the smallest, most local ways, and hopefully last month’s sermon convinced you that this is insufficient. So where exactly shall we start?

When we are in a situation that requires a quick decision about the most ethical thing to do, we want to be able to summon up an interdependent understanding of the situation just about instantly. Right this moment, we all have the luxury of sitting together in a relatively stress-free environment. So let’s practice imagining interdependence together for a few minutes. And let’s do it interdependently, in conversation together.

Before we start, remember: interdependence is about seeing our lives in the lives of others, and seeing their lives in our lives. It is a perspective that ideally allows us to be more compassionate. If I have no relation to you, I don’t care what happens to you. If you and I are connected, it should theoretically matter to me what happens to you, and vice versa.

Think about a time in your past when you faced an ethical dilemma. It should be an experience that you are willing to talk about with this group. Don’t tell us what you actually did in the circumstance. Instead, talk about what you would have done if you had been thinking about interdependence in the way I have been describing it. Here’s an example: my job description does not include pastoral counseling or indeed any kind of counseling. Yet people at Colorado College have seemed to find me a good person to talk to, and they knock on my door more often than I would expect. What should I do? It may be true that I bring some work home for evenings and weekends, but one would think nine to five should be strictly work time, and listening to people is not in my job description. What is the ethically right thing to do? For me, this is a no-brainer, especially as long as I get my work done: all of us must take care of each other, and if I can help someone in this way, it is the interdependent thing to do. Nor, of course, is it a one-way street: I have sometimes found it very helpful to talk with friends at work. Interdependence at its best is like that.

Now it’s your turn. What are some of your ethical dilemmas and how would you solve them if interdependence was the most important criterion on your mind and on your heart?

I have come to believe that an interdependent imagination is like a muscle. It gets stronger the more you exercise it. Fortunately, every day we spend on the planet gives us many opportunities

to think interdependently, both in the people with whom we interact and in virtually everything we do.

Are you sitting at a computer typing? Someone made that computer. What do we owe them? Someone somewhere in the world can't afford to own a computer. Why not? Is there something we can do about it? Someone got rich selling that computer, and someone else may have rung it up at the cash register for you and put it in a bag and not be making enough money to feed her children. What is our role in all this beyond booting up the computer and typing at it?

Are you trying to decide where to go pick up some food for the week? Does it matter, interdependence-wise, where you spend your food money? Is it better to go to a mom-and-pop shop or a chain? What impacts will either decision have for other people, people you don't know, people you will never meet? Should you strive to buy and eat locally grown food if you can? Should you join a cooperative agricultural association? What do these actions have to do with interdependence? Broadening the idea of interdependence even further, should you make an effort to buy only ethically raised meat even if it costs more? Are the interdependent benefits worth the costs?

You know what your days are like. I am sure they are filled with interdependence opportunities that I can't begin to imagine. But if you can imagine them, your opportunities to live interdependently and not merely to think interdependently will be boundless and the only question for you will be what the most ethical, interdependent action to take is in any given moment.

If we are willing to stop what we are doing long enough to call interdependence to mind, it can guide our thinking and our actions and make the world a more caring, empathetic, loving place. I hope we choose to practice interdependence well and often, and to open our hearts to ourselves, each other, and the many others who make up our world. I hope we choose to make each day interdependence day, for it is a choice, and if it is our choice, the world will be far better for it. Amen and blessed be.