

On Interdependence

Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver

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Reflection on the Theme by Lacey Stokes

The word interdependence is a hard one for me. It's the pesky "dependence" bit, you know? Raised in a family that valued self-sufficiency and, as Stephen quotes his mother as saying, an attitude of "keeping myself to myself", the idea of any type of dependence immediately makes me shudder. I have long equated dependence with weakness because needing someone else means I can't do it on my own.

I'm not sure I'll ever move to a point where I can sever in my mind the connection of those two words, but diving into my own reflection of this theme, I realized I could better understand and accept it by replacing it with a similar word that didn't hold the same connotations for me.

One of the benefits of my childhood was that much of it was spent in nature. And nature has wisdom for us, if we take the time to pay attention. Perhaps the most obvious lesson is that of reciprocity. I was observing this lesson long before I had a word to describe it and I think it ties into interdependence in a way I can better understand and embrace.

I think Robin Wall Kimmerer explains the beauty of reciprocity best in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass* when she says, "Something essential happens in a vegetable garden. It's a place where you can't say 'I love you,' out loud, you can say it in seeds. And the land will reciprocate in beans." Reciprocity then, much as interdependence really, is an expression of love. A connection, binding us in relationship.

Both of these words run counter to our culture which has, for quite some time, exalted the idea of individualism in an effort to isolate us from each other. After all, when we are isolated, it's easier to exploit us. We no longer see each other as people, just "other". It's an easy trap to fall into. I have many times. Social media has done even more to separate us from one family into an us vs. them mentality with an overblown sense of self-importance. Main character energy. I think with these pressures, it makes sense that the idea of interdependence would cause some of us discomfort.

Maybe, if like me this word makes you cringe a bit, we can take the lesson of reciprocity from nature and remember that we are a part of that nature. None of us is an island. The communities we build, the interdependence we develop, and the reciprocity we practice bind us together as something so much more beautiful than just the individual. A single drop of water becomes majestic when it joins its siblings in a rushing river. One flower is beautiful. A meadow full of them is breathtaking. A human united in community with others experiences the beauty of love and support and maybe even more than that, the beauty of giving those things in return.

Interdependence isn't a weakness. It's a super power. It's the end result of reciprocity in action. Even though the word still brings me some level of discomfort, I am learning, through the natural world and the relationships I am building right here at UUCV, that it is a value to embrace and celebrate. The way human beings have always been meant to exist.

On Interdependence© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

That song (*Wimberly Eclipse* by Stuart Campbell) was written for a Campbell family reunion – Stuart, his surviving brothers and their families met in Wimberly, Texas this last April and watched the solar eclipse. They grew up in Texas, but chose Wimberly because of the view they were to have of the eclipse. It was cloudy, but they got a better view than I had on the Oregon Coast where I couldn't even identify where the sun was. The photo on the title slide for his song was one of the many pictures he took of the eclipse.

His family includes a wide range of political viewpoints with Stuart's being the most liberal of the original six brothers. There are nieces and nephews who are more progressive than their uncles, but also some that are very conservative. Let's just say that when the family used to have reunions regularly, there was a standard sign put on the door to whatever room was the common gathering area that said "no politics, no religion" and as long as those topics were not discussed, the family got along beautifully. I missed this family reunion because I was, ironically, completing a course in family systems. Ironic because I'm married to Stuart and he and our son, Theo, were in the midst of his family system while I was alone (in an online class) just studying family dynamics.

Because he's retired, Stuart "gets to" attend three family reunions this year – the one I missed in Wimberly, and then two this summer with my family, both on the Washington coast. The first of the two is with my dad's family, though my mother is included – and we are compatible politically speaking. I'm not entirely sure about the newest part of our family, my cousin Katy is getting married to Maureen and this is the first time many of us will meet Maureen's family – although given Katy and Maureen are both women, Maureen's family is as least as progressive as that would indicate, given they are supportive of her new marriage.

The second of my family reunions this summer is with my mom's family. This family hasn't gathered intentionally for a reunion in years – and there are some geographical, financial and political reasons for that. There is a clear divide among the siblings in terms of political loyalties – though they do sincerely love one another - and some real distrust among the cousins – my generation – and frankly, I'm mostly going to support my mother and because it became a homework assignment for my family systems class. We've never posted a physical sign declaring an embargo on the topics of politics and religion, but that *love* I mentioned before I believe had been nurtured over the years by this reciprocal understanding. Like in our wider world, I believe the divisions in this family were smaller fifty years ago than they are now.

One of the truths about our families and our existence is this fact of interdependence, or reciprocity as Lacey calls it. We not only depend upon one another for our survival – indeed a human baby can't survive without a caregiver – but we are also shaped by those who surround us.

I have long thought that our celebration of Independence Day – the day the United States officially declared our break with Great Britain – should instead be a celebration of our Interdependence because we remain in relationship with Great Britain, though are no longer governed by them. In our celebration of independence and freedom, we sometimes forget that ties remain and that we have an ongoing responsibility to others. Freedom from oppression, yes. Freedom from responsibility, sorry – not so much. Or at least I don't want to live in a world in which we are free from responsibility.

In the reading, Peter T. Coleman talks about "rules" that guide us. In the science behind family systems work, we are referring to evolutionary biological instincts. Family systems researchers look at the science of other mammals and the tendency to "herd" when under threat, or "separate" in times of too much crowding.

We have competing instincts toward belonging and acceptance on the one hand, and authenticity and individuation on the other. Add to those instincts the development of our frontal lobes and its high-level cognitive functioning, and we can also decide to which group we wish to belong and where we need to individuate and express our authenticity. But it is often true that we think we are using our frontal lobes when our temporal lobes and instinct have actually been driving many of our decisions. We think *we're* rational, but you know, the *other* guy, not so much.

Which brings us to Coleman's book, *The Way Out*. I've preached on it before. It's not an easy read, and I admit to not understanding great chunks of it. This social psychologist explores how conflict resolution and complexity science provide guidance for dealing with seemingly intractable political differences. It's the complexity science, that for me, is difficult to understand, but the glimpses I get do make me hopeful.

In fact, this time, as I looked up information on the internet related to the book, I came across a research study at Columbia University that I signed up for called the *Polarization Detox Challenge* – a four week challenge that focuses on different skill building blocks to address polarization in different areas of your life, addressing your own divisive habits, reintroducing honesty and tolerance within your political in-group, overcoming tension in your more politically-estranged relationships, and mobilizing together in cross-partisan groups to tackle shared concerns. Since I just signed up for it on Friday, I can't tell you more about it quite yet, but I'm excited to try. I want to support any research that will help us find "the way out" of this political polarization.

Not just for my own family reunions and family systems, but for the larger groups of which I am a part – the Unitarian Universalist Association, and the Portland area UU congregations. If you attended General Assembly of the UUA this year, you heard intense and difficult debates regarding the Hamas attack on Israel and the ongoing violence in Gaza. Another difficult and painful conversation centered on a business resolution that passed "embracing transgender, nonbinary, intersex and gender diverse people as a fundamental expression of UU Religious values." I think it's easier to understand why the Gaza conversation was difficult, with both Muslims and Jews within the UUA. It's harder to understand the difficulty with a resolution embracing transgender people, except that so much misinformation about gender diversity continues to be circulated – and sometimes those asking sincere questions fail to recognize how their language lands on people who fit the categories they are questioning. They are difficult conversations. I didn't even mention Article II of the bylaws, which passed by the way, but which has been painful for many who are sincerely attached to the previous language of the 7 principles. If you don't know about Article II, I invite you listen to or read the sermon I gave on May 19 entitled *Where Are We Going?* There's too much content to that conversation to recap it here.

That is one of the problems with our toxic polarization – there are too many nuances and complexity to most of these issues and we are fundamentally impatient. We want the Cliff Notes version of events so that we can quickly understand what, in many cases, is not comprehensible, or not easily comprehensible. Sometimes we don't have access, can't have access, to all of the information. Such is often the case with church conflict. When a beloved music director is fired, for example, the congregation feels entitled to know details that are not legally shareable. Churches function like families – in fact, that is why I study "family systems" because we bring to church communities what we've learned in our families and often respond to others in the system as we do in our own families. The better we understand our own upbringing and automatic functioning, the more power we have to override automatic reactions and build healthier, thoughtful responses.

There is an attraction, an appeal to being right in a polarized conflict. We sometimes don't wish to examine the grey area. It spoils our fun. We prefer to be certain and right over uncertain and confused.

There's a line by Jane Austen that I love in the book, *Pride and Prejudice*, that illustrates this very human tendency to prefer the clarity of conviction to the uncertainty of complex ideas. This is in Chapter 8, when Elizabeth, our main character, is staying at Netherfield, the country home of Mr. Bingley where Elizabeth's sister, Jane, is recovering from a bad cold. Mr. Bingley's sisters are staying with him and Elizabeth doesn't really like them, though Jane sincerely does. In the first paragraph, Austen writes that "Jane was by no means better. The sisters, upon hearing this" – and these sisters refer to Mr. Bingley's sisters – "upon hearing this, repeated three or four times how much they were grieved, how shocking it was to have a bad cold, and how excessively they disliked being ill themselves, and then thought no more of the matter." This is the part of the sentence I like: "and their indifference toward Jane when not immediately before them restored Elizabeth to the enjoyment of all her original dislike."

We don't think of disliking someone as enjoyable, but... the truth is, when we feel justified and we have evidence, we often do. Elizabeth appreciates Bingley's sisters when they express their sympathy and affection for Jane, whom Elizabeth loves deeply, but the truth is, she doesn't generally like his sisters, so when they expose their indifference or ambivalence toward Jane, she is able to return to her original conviction that they are not worth liking. She prefers the clear conviction that they are unlikeable to the possibility that they are more complex and have likeable qualities as well as unattractive qualities.

It is just so descriptive of human nature that it makes me chuckle each and every time I read that line. And it's human nature I don't think we like to admit to. At least I like to think I'm above all that, and don't enjoy disliking people – but...

one of the basic teachings of family systems theory is the triangle. We humans love a good triangle. When the tension between two people is too great, either party in that dyad will discharge their tension by involving a third person. We're mad at so-and-so but don't want to confront them directly, so we express our anger to a third party and hope that they will do the confronting. Or we simply have had a negative interaction with someone we need to keep on our good side. Rather than risking the uncomfortable conversation with that person we value, we direct all that negativity to someone to whom we aren't accountable or whose relationship doesn't matter as much to us. We might feel better later, but it hasn't resolved anything in the original relationship.

The dynamic that is difficult in our families of origin is the same dynamic at work in congregational life, and the larger UU Association, as well as in our local and national political life. One of the problems with our toxic polarization is that there are too many nuances and complexity to most of these issues and we are fundamentally impatient. We want the Cliff Notes version of events so that we can quickly understand what, in many cases, is not comprehensible, or not easily comprehensible.

As Coleman says,

"One of the more ancient rules that we have been programmed through evolution to follow is, 'Move toward similar others and away from different.'"

- This is that herding tendency I mentioned from evolutionary biology – Coleman goes on to say:

"For ages, this rule helped us to avoid harm by moving us away from personal threats from the unknown."

The unknown includes those nuances and complexity that are hard to see and understand. Coleman says that

"Even brief exposure to images of members of out-group triggers activity in the amygdala, the fear center of the brain. But today it also inclines us to sort ourselves into tribes of similar others and makes

us all the more susceptible to being intentionally divided, conquered, and controlled by political actors seeking power.”

I believe we are susceptible to being intentionally divided, conquered and controlled by political actors seeking power. One way to reduce that susceptibility is to address our own divisive habits, re-introduce honesty and tolerance within our political in-groups, overcome tension in our more politically-estranged relationships and mobilize together in cross-partisan groups to tackle shared concerns.

I don't understand all the strategies in this book, but I am looking for *The Way Out*. It starts with us. <https://startswith.us/pdc> That's the website where you can join me in participating in this Columbia University research study, the Polarization Detox Challenge.

I just think the answer can't be for me to dig in my heels and suggest that me and my tribe are right and that the other side is entirely wrong, as much attraction as that strategy may hold. I think we're seeing in real time that it's not helping us find *the way out*, it's only continuing to polarize us and make us susceptible to those seeking power who have no compunction about dividing, conquering and controlling.

To break free from this cycle, we're going to have to try something different. I'm open to what the research says about how I can contribute to the solution and free myself from the forces that would divide and control. We need to gain freedom from those forces, so we can take responsibility for our part in reciprocal relationships, our part in our interdependent relationships. I invite you to join me in this challenge, for the health of our families, for the health of our communities, for the health of our world.

Our final hymn was adapted during the struggle in South Africa to support and empower black South African people during their decades long struggle for Freedom. The original lyrics were about the coming of Jesus, but it got changed to freedom as they sought to free themselves from apartheid. We might sing it this morning as an expression of our hope that we can free ourselves from those seeking political power who intentionally try to divide, conquer, and control us. *Freedom is Coming*. May it be so.