

Interdependence

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We Unitarian Universalists tend to be individualists, stressing, to begin with, “the inherent worth and dignity of every person,” but, as you heard in today’s reading, our spiritual lives are meaningless in isolation from the religious community.”¹ In fact, our whole lives are meaningless in isolation from the human community. We live in a state of interdependence.

When life is going well, we probably are unaware of just how much we are a part of that “interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” However, when trouble occurs; when conflicts arise; when passions are aroused--then, we are challenged to comprehend and deal with this interdependency.

What holds us together in Unitarian Universalist communities are our principles, our values that we affirm and promote as we attempt to “transform ourselves to create a more just and compassionate world.”

We are challenged now that our country has a president whose words and actions daily violate our UU principles. His supporters seem prepared to follow him, regardless of his abuses.

And they--all of them--are a part of that same interdependent web of which we are a part. It seems to me that we need to go beyond reacting and resisting. It seems to me that we need to make progress in understanding the critical situation we are in and in finding new ways to build relationships.

We need to learn and practice some new ways of thinking. For example, the traditional thinking most of us have learned focuses on linear cause and effect. Simply put, that is to say that A causes B, which in turn causes C, which in turn causes D, and so on, rather like billiard balls striking in sequence. That model is much too simple.

The alternative is to recognize that these crashing billiard balls all effect each other. “They are not independent forces themselves. They are interdependent with one another. Their presence as a group is a system.”² Each ball is connected to, or can have an effect upon every other ball. What happens when one of them moves is not a matter of its nature, but rather a matter of its position in the network.

That image of billiard balls knocking about is an oversimplified introduction to the field of Family Systems Theory. My experience with Systems Theory comes from the books and teachings of Edwin H. Friedman, who was both an ordained rabbi and a practicing family therapist. I was in a group taught by Dr. Friedman shortly before he died, and I have treasured his teachings ever since--and I wonder what he would have to say about our government if he were alive today.

I suspect he might remind us all of the basics of family systems thinking. Thinking systemically is perceiving the world as interdependent structures. To begin to explain how this works, Friedman presented some basic concepts.

First, consider when problems occur in a family--for example, if one family member is identified as a drug addict--then traditionally all the focus would be on that person, getting him or her into treatment, and all that involves. Systems thinking teaches us that the dynamics of the whole family system must be considered. The problem is not isolated in one member.

In a like manner, consider when problems occur in our government. Today, we most likely are tempted to focus on one person, the person at the top, who we think is the cause of all the turmoil in Washington today. We may find it easy to list all his faults and to blame him for what is going on.

That is too easy and not helpful. Sometimes we forget that sixty-three million people voted for this person, and that he has massive amounts of support from, as he would say, “very, very rich people,” and

a base that seems willing to disregard what many of us consider unacceptable, dangerous, and perhaps criminal behavior.

If we can think for a moment of our country, the United States of America, as one massive system, then we need to be aware that we are a part of that system. We need to revise our thinking from “us versus them” to opening up to new ways of knowing who they are and of why they are believing and acting as they do.

Another basic concept of systems thinking is homeostasis or balance. Whether the system is an individual family, a congregation, or a nation, and I quote: “if the system exists and has a name, it had to have achieved some kind of balance in order to permit the continuity necessary for maintaining its identity.”³ We have systems--families, congregations, nations--that have names and have continued to exist because they have some sort of identity, some sort of balance, something generally agreed upon as the status quo. That balance is the status quo, and the dynamics of all systems are to maintain the status quo. A change of one part means changes in all parts. And so it is in our government that massive changes are taking place, and all of us, including peoples worldwide, are affected. At this point, we remember what we think it used to be and struggle to comprehend what it has become, the bottom line being that everything seems out of balance.

Another concept of systems thinking is differentiation of self. What that means is that even when you are a member of a family or a group, you need to be able to define your goals and values clearly, independently, without letting others define who you are. You exist without a need to call upon group goals and values to define yourself. You say “I” rather than “we”: “I think” rather than “we think”; “I believe” rather than “we believe”--all this in the presence of pressures to conform. Friedman notes all this requires “the capacity to maintain a (relatively) non-anxious presence in the midst of anxious systems, to take maximum responsibility for one’s own destiny and emotional being... to have the capacity to be an ‘I’ while remaining connected.” (Ibid. p. 27)

For a year now we have been witnessing political rallies that demonstrate the dynamics of demagoguery, where the speaker can say just about anything, true or false, and the crowd roars approval. “Lock her up,” they chant. “Throw him out,” the speaker shouts to great cheers. No differentiation of self here.

Or consider the massive demonstrations and marches with people hoisting signs vilifying the other side. Nowadays we need the police to separate demonstrations and counter demonstrations from resorting to violence. We need to reach a point where the size and volume and even the threat of a group does not sway our ability to make a rational independent decision. My point being that more self-differentiation is needed all around, not the “we thinking” of us against them.

Another basic concept is the emotional triangle. Triangles may be formed by any three persons, groups, or issues. The dynamics are complex, so let’s consider a typical triangle: let’s say that wife asks husband to be nicer to her mother. A favorite quote of mine from Friedman illustrates how this most likely will play out. He wrote: “It well may be that, in the history of our species, no family member upon trying to correct the perception of another family member about a third has ever received the response, ‘You’re right honey. I don’t know why I didn’t see it that way myself.’”⁴

Not only that, but trying harder to bring two people together will generally increase the distance between them, while trying to separate two people, will more likely bring them more closely together. And, the third party trying to change the relationship of the other two is more likely to wind up with the stress of the other two.

So here I am, face to face with a supporter of our president, a classic triangle. I recite the many

complaints I have about the president. Maybe you have tried this. Did it work? No. I end up with the stress of failure while the president and his supporter move merrily on.

I wish I had a simple solution to all this, but I don't. However, I think we are all much better off if we have a better understanding of the dynamics of the problem, after which we might make some progress in finding solutions. Systems thinking is essential. In my opinion, the focus on interdependency is a key to reaching new understanding as we deal with conflicting ideologies.

Ed Friedman had a playful streak, most evident in his book of enigmatic stories, *Friedman's Fables*, all written to illustrate aspects of Systems Theory. Today I offer a fable entitled "Burnout." Instead of telling what happens in a human system, it tells about what takes place within an aquarium, a fish tank. There is something quite wonderful in seeing a well-balanced, well-kept aquarium full of different kinds of fish living together in harmony and peace. I'm told that watching fish swim in these circumstances can be mentally beneficial, relaxing, stress relieving for us human beings.

But of course, that is not quite the fish tank Friedman gives us. His is clearly and I'm sure intentionally mythical, designed to shock. The main character is a "scavenger fish" whose chief duty, we need to understand, is to eat whatever falls to the bottom of the tank, to clean up the mess dropped by other fish. I won't read the whole fable, but this is how it begins, and I quote:

"Once upon a time there was a scavenger fish that lost its taste for (excrement). (Friedman used a grittier word...) She was your normal, garden-variety scavenger and had never previously shown any signs of being different from the other members of her species. She lived in a normal-sized tank with the members of several schools and, from the very beginning of her association with this ecosystem, had functioned in perfect harmony with her environment. She never got in the way of the others and they reciprocated, allowing her to do her thing.

"She always knew her place, the bottom, never let things pile up, never rose to the surface unless some debris had failed to settle, and, even as more and more fish were added to the tank, never, absolutely never, tired of taking crap from the others.

"Daily she swam below, keeping the tank clean. Though, in truth, she was not out to keep it clean; the orderly environment was more the accidental result of the scavenger doing what came naturally. Nor, for that matter, did the others leave her alone because they understood how they benefited from her actions. In other words, to an outsider the scavenger might have appeared to be playing a role. This is a far different thing, however, from saying that she, or those who benefited from their association with her, ever thought in those terms. After all, one might just as well have said, 'The others were there to give her something to do.' Yet, on the day she stopped eating (excrement), the effect on the entire tank was a title wave. Every aspect of this living environment seemed to be affected, and almost all at once."⁵

End quote. At this point, I want to think of the systems in which we live our daily lives as fish tanks. I like the fish tank. It's gritty. It's cut down to basics. There we are, all of us humans, experiencing life in a fish tank. OK, we inhabit more than one fish tank, but each one is a functioning system in which all members have roles to play to maintain the status quo. My focus is on our national fish tank: the USA.

In Friedman's fable, what happened when the bottom feeder stopped bottom feeding was chaos. Guppies no longer swam together. Baby piranha--yes this is fantastical--went wild, darting about aggressively. Angelfish huddled in a corner, one rolling over on its side. A seahorse lost its familiar "s" curve and rolled into a ball. "No living part of the system was unaffected."⁶

Eventually, the scavenger fish swims in circles and is finally removed by an unseen hand and tossed in a refuse pile, while a new scavenger fish takes her place, doing her job "with diligence and relish." End

of story.

While the protagonist, the main character, of this fable is the bottom feeder, the story is one of a system, the major function of which is to maintain the status quo. That's what needs to be done in a fish tank: when the bottom is not kept clean; when the temperature becomes too hot or too cold; when the water becomes acidic or alkaline, the system fails. So it goes in our human systems: when our air becomes toxic, when we experience global warming, when our water sources are fouled.

By now it is clear that Friedman intended for us to recognize the bottom feeder, the scavenger, as a particular type of person within the system. His fable helps us to focus on one part of the interdependent web. It gives us a sense of what happens when a part of the web begins to unravel, when the individual's action or lack of action threatens the balance and well-being of the system. At the point where the status quo is threatened, everyone, everything is threatened. Something must be done.

One of the reasons we may be experiencing great anxiety today is that our national fish tank appears to be in a kind of chaos. We don't know how all this will end.

My goal in speaking today is to present a way to understand interdependence. As is so often the case with us Unitarian Universalists, I have given more questions than answers. There still is that guy who obviously lives in the same tank as you or I, but whose perception of that world is an upside down version of mine, where fake news is real news, where bigotry is OK, where logic and reason are liabilities. And he and I are both Americans, living in that fish tank called America. Both of us are fighting for what we believe to be the status quo of America, except, for him, that means looking backward to the old days of racism and homophobia, to make America great again, and, for me, looking forward, to making America better than it has ever been. I have to remind myself that he has "inherent worth and dignity." That is our first principle: "the inherent worth and dignity of every person."

References

¹Collier, Kenneth W., *Our Seven Principles in Story and Verse*, 1990, Skinner House Books, p. 103.

²Friedman, Edwin H., *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, 1985, The Guilford Press, p.15.

³*Ibid.* p. 23.

⁴*Ibid.* p. 37.

⁵Friedman, Edwin H., *Friedman's Fables*, 1990, The Guilford Press, pp. 181-2.

⁶*Ibid.* p. 183.