

The Façade of the Individual

By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD April 7, 2024

I wonder how often we have been in a space filled with a multitude of bodies, and yet felt utterly alone. Perhaps we step into a subway in New York City, surrounded by commuters and tourists alike, and yet stare at the floor in isolation and indifference as do others. Or walking down a city street so close to others we have four different people within arm's reach and yet so many of us remain focused on self, our own destination, apathetic towards the journeys of those in our midst. I wonder how often we have focused on "I" instead of "we." I need, I require, I demand. What if we juxtapose this to "we." What do we want? What do we need? How can we heal and thrive as a sacred collective? With this understanding of "I" we become siloed, not part of a larger group but trapped within our own selves, our individual bodies and thoughts and desires. "We," conversely, invites us into a beautiful web of life; web of creation. These are vignettes of the basics of individualism versus collectivism. What matters most in the philosophy and ideology of individualism? The individual – community falls to the wayside. This harms us, each of us when we slip into individualism. We are deprived of the beauty cultivated when love is pervasive in our web of life, that which is nurtured when we care for one another, unconditionally. We are harmed – so focused on self we are unable to comprehend the world around us and all she has to offer. We are centered in self and as such become apathetic. And yet we can be healed. We can be healed if we open our eyes to the abundance of beauty around us, the awe of each human life, the compassion required to care for those in our midst.

And so today I want us to learn and grow from a reflection on this detrimental individualism so pervasive in our culture. What, exactly, is individualism? It is this focus on self versus the group – that overarching importance of "I," not "we." It is those attributes that can be and are healing from time to time, and yet also serve to the detriment of society. We prioritize, I quote, "uniqueness or individuality; personal goals; independence, self-reliance, self-sufficiency; and

privacy.”¹The theme? A pervasive focus on self. An indifference and apathy towards the other souls in our sacred web of life. It is us on that subway, that city street – each of us surrounded by others yet utterly alone. Think of our story for all ages – a single stick breaks easily, a bundle of sticks remains unbreakable and whole. What are we in individualism but a single, breakable stick?

Culture and worldviews and values do not simply happen – they are cultivated. Here, in the dominant culture in this country, we have the history of the “Self-made” person – a Protestant ethic pervasive to this day. In this philosophy we are thriving or suffering because of the work we have done or have not done as individuals to get there. There is tension. We become a dichotomy of deserving and undeserving. In this framework, extremely affluent people believe they deserve all that they have – wealth, property, accolades. Those with less become undeserving. We – this country we call home – in all of our excess in wealth - do not adopt policies to care for the public good. Providing any form of assistance quote “rewards the undeserving.”² Which leads me to the question: Who are those who are theoretically undeserving? Why are they deemed undeserving? It becomes the poor. The destitute. Those born and raised in systemic injustice residing in the inner cities. These become underserving – these marginalized become deprived of basic human necessities as individualism flourishes – as the rich become richer. Why are the marginalized deemed undeserving? It is this “self-made” philosophy that dictates the destitute are failures of their own creating. This creates hell on earth.

I want to highlight three pervasive cons of this individualistic culture. The first, a decrease in unity. When we become an isolated collective of self-focused beings, we diminish the cohesiveness of the group, we are no longer integrated into one greater whole. We emphasize

¹ <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/individualistic-culture>

² <https://www.uvm.edu/news/cas/myths-and-truths-individualism-america>

difference, resulting in disharmony in the larger group. We focus on that which separates, not on that which unites. What would a land of harmony look like? Of unity? One where the well-being of the whole leads to sacred integration of all beings. Where differences are celebrated, and we learn from one another.³

The second, we lower our ability to offer empathy. Each being becomes increasingly self-focused, thus disregarding the plight of others in their midst, devaluing relationships with and sympathy for all beloved siblings in humanity. It becomes about “I,” all about the individual, further and further from a compassionate, healing, collective, holy “we.” We no longer try to assist and support one another; we no longer try to understand another’s journey. There becomes a separation of self and other, and self wins. Instead, may we cultivate a culture of collective healing, of egalitarianism, where each soul is committed to assisting another.⁴

The third, a lessened sense of support. Individualism leads to a sense – a reality, even – of isolation. We are not tended to by society as a whole, we rely mainly on self, perhaps immediate family. We lack a web of support so pervasive in other cultures. Think of the difference of a community tending to the care of a newborn, not simply the parents. Think of the difference in reverence and companionship for the elderly, not being dismissive of their worth or their wisdom. Think of illness being tended to by a web of support, care, and empathy. We are often called to do as individuals what could otherwise be shared by a loving collective. We are currently held in a space filled with others, and yet utterly alone.⁵

I return again to historical individualism – this one a narrative of racism and sexism. In many ways, individualism was a philosophy created to lift up the value of white men above all others – establishing and maintaining a social hierarchy. In our nation’s mythology, those celebrated through the emphasis on individualism were white men. As such, the privileged were granted the authority and the freedom to lessen the value of women, to exploit indigenous peoples, to

³ <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/individualistic-culture>

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

enslave Black Americans. White men were and are seen to have those traits prominent in this philosophy of individualism – “rationality, self-reliance, and self-discipline.” In contrast, the marginalized were deemed “irrational, dependent, and undisciplined.” This serves to justify exclusion and oppression and prevails to this day. Racism and sexism remain. Culture does not simply happen; it is intentionally created. Systemic injustice infiltrates our society in a plethora of ways.⁶

There are achievements in this philosophy of individualism, yes, notes Charles Taylor. We chose our own pattern of life, we cultivate our own convictions, we determine the overall shapes of our lives. And yet do the pros outweigh the cons? “The dark side of individualism,” Taylor notes, “is a centering on the self, which both flattens and narrows our lives, makes them poorer in meaning, and less concerned with others or society.”⁷ Individualism flattens and narrows our lives. A richness is lost as we no longer focus on the collective beauty all around us. It narrows as we focus on our own ego, our own mind, forgetting that there is a whole world beyond our own needs, wants, and desires. It is that “me,” that “I,” instead of that “us,” that “we.” We have a chance to fully engage with the web of life, and yet we ultimately neglect it. We lack meaning in our lives by not fulfilling the basic human need to care for one another. It is our story of the bundle of sticks.⁸ As individuals, we are easily broken, discarded, injured in mind and in spirit. As a collective, we form a strength and a conviction and a wholeness that allows for survival, vigor, care, and perseverance.⁹

Let us pause and shift our attention. How can we, conversely, remember and highlight our interdependence? How can we eradicate this façade of self, of the individual, instead realizing and celebrating that which ties us together in a web of community, trust, care, compassion, and love? We know, now, the detriments of individualism. Let us highlight the joys when we discard this philosophy. Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer writes, “sometimes I feel it... our shared

⁶ <https://press.princeton.edu/ideas/alex-zakaras-on-the-roots-of-american-individualism>

⁷ Charles Taylor from *Soul Matters Worship Resources*

⁸ *Doorways to the Soul* edited by Elisa Davy Pearmain

humanity.” We are together, she notes, “the way blades of grass are alone, but exist as a field.” The way blood cells “join in one body to become one blood.” The way individual notes become a symphony.¹⁰ Look at what seemingly small, inconsequential, lone entities become when sharing and working together in harmony. They create and maintain beauty and life. Each one of us is an individual, yes. We are each akin to a blade of grass. And yet, just as with grass, we are an interconnected piece of something much greater. We are each a piece of a collective humanity. Interdependence becomes nearly impossible to ignore. Blood cells are not indifferent to one another, nor symphony notes ever found in isolation. No field, no blood, no symphony could exist in the mindset of “I” – it is a sacred, crucial, undeniable “we.” These inanimate things know, we need one another. So, too, may it be with each of us.

I want to lift up another understanding of our interdependence, this one offered by Thich Nhat Hanh. I offer a reading that indicated, to me, that we are interconnected in ways that are powerful and crucial yet perhaps not easy to intuit. “If you are a poet,” Hanh writes, “you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either.” A cloud and a piece of paper “inter-are,” as he calls it.¹¹ Would you ever intuit this interdependence of cloud and paper? Would you ever think rainfall and book “inter-are”? To me this lifts up such a multitude of possibilities – how are we interconnected in ways that we may never intuit? What entirely unseen effects do apathy, indifference, and self-centeredness have on our collective humanity? What are we harming that we could never even intuit? Likewise, what does a heightened sense of community affect? What can thrive because we are an intentional, loving part of all that is? We can choose, through indifference, to destroy. Or we can choose to help all of life flourish.

¹⁰ “Belonging” by Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer

¹¹ *The Other Shore* by Thich Nhat Hanh

All of these metaphors and allegories serve to highlight what I hope to be a fundamental take away from this time together. Individualism harms. Interconnectedness heals. I have not yet named what I hope to be so very apparent. We are interwoven – privileged and marginalized alike, healthy and ill, wealthy and poor, accepted and distained, welcomed and untouchable. We are each blades of grass in a field, notes in a symphony. Part of our “web of mutuality.”¹² When we practice indifference, poverty, violence, addiction, and apathy grow, to the detriment of all of us. When we care, when we engage in interdependence, we heal. We heal the body, mind, and soul. We heal individuals, we heal communities. The hungry are fed, the unhoused are housed, the addicted find sobriety as empathy and compassion grow, and the idea of interdependent wellbeing thrives. This is the calling of our faith. Beyond our faith, this is the calling of humanity – of our beautiful collective. We join together, we heal together. With intention, the world blooms. So may we rid ourselves of the handcuffs of individualism.; that which binds us, to our own detriment, to selfishness, apathy, and detachment. May we not diminish but cultivate a sense of unity, empathy, and unconditional support. As, together, we are a symphony. We are inescapably, enterally, faithfully, and lovingly bound in a web of care and compassion. We are part of a beautiful, profound, sacred web of inescapable mutuality. May we care for it. May we love it. May we heal it. May we thrive.

May it be so, and amen.

¹² *Why We Can't Wait* by Martin Luther King Jr.