

## **I Am Because We Are**

**Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD April 14, 2024**

“A person is a person through other persons,” proclaim followers of the African philosophy of Ubuntu. Further, “I am because we are.” How can we interpret these notable declarations, these worldviews, these ideologies? No, we are not self, as we may so often assume, we are, instead, relationships. We are interactions, we are how we engage with one another. We are, inevitably, dependent on one another for our very humanity, as we become not one, but many – a collective – an intimate, interdependent, unbreakable group. I only exist because you exist. Archbishop Desmond Tutu elaborates, “The solitary human being is a contradiction in terms.” We cannot be both isolated and alive – our human essence is intimately tied up with one another. How can we thrive in implementing these profound ideologies? In practicing Ubuntu, we foster much more intimate connections with those who may seem on the periphery, we become far more intentional on our interactions, and we foster a greater, healthier, more beautiful reliance on one another. We highlight reciprocity, the common good, and peaceful relationships, with an emphasis on human dignity. We amplify the value of human life, fostering tolerance and mutual respect.<sup>1</sup>

In finding meaning through the idea of Ubuntu, let us unpack those simple yet profound statements we heard in our Story for All Ages. “When I look into your eyes, I see your heart.” With intention, love, and compassion, through simple engagement we can see the core of others and their inherent goodness. “When I look into your eyes, I see myself. I am you.” We are one another – I am you just as you are me. When I see you, I see myself. We are not isolated, we are one another. Furthermore, we may be different, “but our hearts beat the same.” We are each unique and that is to be celebrated, yet we share a common goodness in our core. Even with seemingly harmful differences, we acknowledge that we all have basic, beautiful commonalities. “To hurt you is to hurt myself.” In our deeply held interdependence, that which we offer the world is that of which we receive in turn. If we harm others, we receive

---

<sup>1</sup> “Ubuntu Ethics” <https://link.springer.com>

harm in exchange. So may we offer love, compassion, and justice. May these musings of childhood help us grow.<sup>2</sup>

Ubuntu – what is the etymology? What is the origin of this profound and powerful term? “Ubu” – humans are social in nature, interconnected, sharing one common humanity. “Ntu” – every individual is entirely unique. This is what is celebrated: Everyone is profoundly interconnected, and everyone is unique in their own, blessed way. In our uniqueness, each of us have distinctive gifts to offer the world. No one gift is held superior to others.<sup>3</sup> We are called to interact with and to celebrate that beauty of individuality as we learn, grow, and strengthen from one another. An artist, blessed with creativity and inspiration. A nurse, blessed with compassion and intellect. A mountain climber, blessed with a sense of adventure and dedication. What do we gain from interwoven gifts of creativity, compassion, and adventure?

And so, I hope we engage with some common themes – the importance of interdependence, shared humanity, and community, as well as our own unique identities. “I am because we are.” And with these reflections we may have our own assumptions. One, what is community? Well, it may be our interactions with other living, breathing, sentient beings. Yet, let us expand our horizons. In Ubuntu, community is what shapes us. As such, we realize we are not solely shaped by the individuals in our midst, but by all that has contributed to self, to our current being. And so, I quote, “community consists of all living beings in the natural world, the relations between humans and other living beings, but also the cosmos, social events, and the ancestors.”<sup>4</sup> It is all of these elements of community through which we are in relationship with. Our ancestors, the world around us – this has led us to “be” the individual we are today – and thus this unique idea of relationship is fostered – we form a bond with the cosmos, with our ancestors. We lift the veil between the living and the dead; we release that seeming dichotomy of humans and the cosmos, we lift up the profound effects of social events, we

---

<sup>2</sup> “I Am You: A Book About Ubuntu” written by Refiole Moahloli, Illustrated by Zinelda McDonald

<sup>3</sup> “I Am Because We Are”: Introducing Ubuntu Philosophy” by Maup van de Kerkhof [www.thecollector.com](http://www.thecollector.com)

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*

dismantle the understanding of self as we realize we are dependent on the trees, the stars, those who came before. We are reflective of these and we are shaped by these.

So, how does our perspective shift? Let us begin by identifying that which no longer becomes important in this worldview - individual experience. Perhaps this is understood as a journey through one's education, pursuing a hobby, receiving a promotion or a raise. These fall to the wayside – instead we value how we exist as a sacred collective – how we relate to one another. Are we compassionate? Trustworthy? Empathetic? Dedicated to healing our beloved community? How we treat one another is “vital to our essence” – to who we are and who we can be.<sup>5</sup> In this way life becomes primarily one of service. As we rise with the sun each morning, may we ask, how can I help my community thrive? How can I love another as a blessed individual? How can I help the wounded heal? These questions are another way of asking, how can I tend to my own heart, mind, and soul through acts of service, compassion, and love?

I want to return to this idea of interdependence and uniqueness. The only way truly to understand Ubuntu is through living it. As such, we are called to be intentional in learning from that which we experience. To live Ubuntu, we develop a sense of self, cultivate our own unique worth, realize our relationship with the community, and understand our impact on our community's overall well-being. Through intentional living we realize self, uniqueness, interdependence, and our own imprint on the web of creation. What can we foster within to bring to our beautiful community?<sup>6</sup>

Which leads to the question, how would we engage with one another as a recipient of this lived experience? How do we interact as students of Ubuntu? We are called to celebrate and care for others, allowing no space for indifference. We are called to look at the greater community as a blessed, living whole while simultaneously celebrating people as unique individuals. We are called to truly cherish and strengthen our relationships – with our beloveds and acquaintances

---

<sup>5</sup> What is Ubuntu Philosophy & What Can We Learn From it? <https://allisontask.com/ubuntu-philosophy/>

<sup>6</sup> “I Am Because We Are”: Introducing Ubuntu Philosophy” by Maup van de Kerkhof [www.thecollector.com](http://www.thecollector.com)

alike. If this became our lived experience, I believe there would be a collective mindset shift that would increase our awareness of others. We would see, much more fully and intentionally, each person's full humanity. In this act of celebration and acceptance, what is perceived as problematic differences and separation diminishes. Through communal love and acceptance, we, I quote, "focus more on the things that connect us collectively rather than our differences as individuals"<sup>7</sup> What connects us? The gift of life. The curiosity of spirituality. The awe of natural wonders. The truth of death. The heartbreak of love. May we return to those children in our Story for All Ages, noting that we may be different, "but our hearts beat the same."<sup>8</sup>

Now that we understand the conceptual, let us transition to the practical. How does Ubuntu affect conflict and its resolution? How does Ubuntu affect spirituality? Let us begin with conflict resolution – a tangible example of this relational philosophy. A response to crime is all about gathering with the community and restoring relationships. What is the benefit of a fine or of incarceration in a community that values relationships? These punishments do nothing to restore the bond between the criminal and the victim – which is the key role of repair in Ubuntu philosophy. Through fines or traditional forms of imprisonment no one heals – which does little to help prevent a crime from happening again. Ubuntu communities adopt the concept of *unhu*, a belief that any crime done creates ripples of harm and consequences well beyond the perpetrator and the injured party – the whole community is affected. Thus, through a practice of mutual trust and dialogue, the larger community forms a response. What is the goal of this response? Again, it is not what we typically understand as punishment – no one is locked behind bars or put into debt. Instead, there is an intentional, restorative practice both with the victim of the crime and the community as a whole. Instead of traditional forms of incarceration, this often entails "dialogue, apology, and education." What more can be done to initiate meaningful, lasting reparations? This is holy interdependence – instead of banishing one

---

<sup>7</sup> What is Ubuntu Philosophy & What Can We Learn From it? <https://allisontask.com/ubuntu-philosophy/>

<sup>8</sup> "I Am You: A Book About Ubuntu" written by Refiole Moahloli, Illustrated by Zinelda McDonald

from our sacred collective, we reestablish relationships by restoring harm down.  
Interdependence – holding healing, learning, and reconciliation above all else.<sup>9</sup>

What about spirituality? Ubuntu is, at its core, a humanist philosophy. This is to say, there is no entity, spirit, or divine being that commands or sways or influences or informs individuals. Faith is entirely this worldly, not otherworldly, and as such what matters most is our existence in this beautiful and imperfect finite realm. It rests in experiences of love or friendship or nature. The ultimate tenet of this lived faith is that there is a “universal bond of sharing that connects all of humanity.”<sup>10</sup> it is a belief in one another and our inherent interconnectedness. Faith is what holds us all together as one cohesive, loving, web. We can have faith in reciprocity – what I offer the world I receive in return. So may I offer love. Kindness. Compassion. Spirituality is not theoretical – it is real, concrete, lived experience. It is how we are in the world. There is no God, no Spirit of Life, no Allah – only our lived experiences with one another. Yet there is something universal and eternal that binds all of humanity together. Not an entity, not a divine being, perhaps more of an all-encompassing essence. How do we express our spirituality? Through relationship – to be a spiritual being is to offer love, compassion, and care, it is to offer respect and dignity. This faith is not theology – we are not debating God or eschatology or omnipotence – we are debating the best way to live a full, relational life. We are presented a question: How do we interact with the world? With intentional, sacred engagement. How do we live life? Through love and companionship and a commitment to relationship. Through a belief in a universal goodness. Through a commitment to equity and justice – for this is the core of a healthy, thriving, interdependent world. We whisper to the wind, I love you, and all of humanity hears this gentle message. We become stripped of ego as we fully submit to something far greater than our individual selves.<sup>11</sup>

“A person is a person through other persons.” “I am because we are.” Or, more simply, “When I look into your eyes, I see myself. I am you.” It is this - “Ubu” – interconnection. It is this –

---

<sup>9</sup> “I Am Because We Are”: Introducing Ubuntu Philosophy” by Maup van de Kerkhof [www.thecollector.com](http://www.thecollector.com)

<sup>10</sup> “Ubuntu Philosophy” [wikiedpdia.org](http://wikiedpdia.org)

<sup>11</sup> “I Am Because We Are”: Introducing Ubuntu Philosophy” by Maup van de Kerkhof [www.thecollector.com](http://www.thecollector.com)

“Ntu” – uniqueness.<sup>12</sup> May we carry this with us in each of our days – Ubuntu – we are fully interdependent, and we are entirely distinctive, and both of these are sacred and holy. May our blessed differences strengthen the whole. And may reciprocity guide us. As we traverse life and all of her ills, may we work for the common good, and in the process may we create relationships of peace. May we, through the trials and tribulations of all society, work to emphasize human dignity. And may we, in all our individuality, know that which unites us – you and I are finite, yes. We will die, yes. We know the strength of love, yes. “When I look into your eyes, I see your heart,”<sup>13</sup> preach the children. So may we love and cherish and care for our beloved community: the finite, the infinite. May we find our spiritual center, fostering a sacred connection to all of humanity. May we engage in relationships. May we live. May we love. “I am because we are.”

May it be so, and Amen

---

<sup>12</sup> “I Am Because We Are”: Introducing Ubuntu Philosophy” by Maup van de Kerkhof [www.thecollector.com](http://www.thecollector.com)

<sup>13</sup> “I Am You: A Book About Ubuntu” written by Refiole Moahloli, Illustrated by Zinelda McDonald