

A Network of Mutuality

I'm sure many of you recognize the reading from Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. I love his language about an inescapable network of mutuality, explaining that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. This is a very basic concept that is the central call of many religious traditions, including our own.

For King, that network of mutuality meant that racism in Birmingham affected the entire country, and that we were all called to action. Injustice anywhere in our country called for everyone to speak out. Eventually King expanded his concern to a global equation. He began to realize and teach that the injustice of the Vietnam War and the military industrial complex was fed by Black poverty and oppression in the United States. It was all linked together. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality.

In academics and now increasingly in theology, there is a growing field called post-colonial theory. It's all about what happens in the process of one society exploiting or colonizing another. One of the central themes of post-colonial theory is that both the colonizer and the colonized, the oppressor and the oppressed are changed in the process. The colonizer, those in power, are scarred by the use of violence and force, just as their subjects are. And thus in oppressive situations everyone is transformed and degraded, both the colonizer and the colonized.

But this discussion of a network of mutuality isn't exclusively about political power or an academic exercise. It's a religious point to, Martin Luther King Jr. was after all a pastor. Much has been written about this concept, countless pages of poetry and theology, but the religious or spiritual concept is simple. We are profoundly interconnected with the Universe. For some of us that includes God, for others of us it does not. Still, we are all profoundly interconnected with the Universe.

As Unitarian Universalists we uphold the network of mutuality in a few different ways. Like King, we see our interconnectedness as a call to work for justice. For many Unitarians, their religious faith leads them to an awareness of deep relationship. Still others understand interconnection as an ecological concern, as a calling to care for our planet. The working of our Seventh Principle leaves the door open to all of those powerful interpretations of the Network of Mutuality. The Seventh Principle of the

Unitarian Universalist Association is respect of the interdependent we of all existence of which we are a part.

Sometimes that web can be difficult to see. Sometimes we have to think about it, but imagination can get us a long way. I think one of the best ways to see our interconnection is simply imagining what it might be like to be another person. But that can be hard. After so many years living in our bodies, coming from where we do, knowing what we know, liking the things that we like, it can be difficult to imagine what life might be like as another person. It's easy to get trapped inside ourselves, as if this is the only way of living in the world.

Well let me tell you, there are about 6.7 Billion people on this planet who have lived life differently from you. Your way is not the only way. It's difficult to do, but I'm convinced that if we take a moment, just a brief moment to step outside of our own experience to see the world from a different perspective, we become aware of the deeper truth of our interconnectedness.

Over the past year I have been on a bit of an adventure, imagining myself walking in someone else's shoes. Many of you are aware that I was adopted shortly after I was born and just recently, I have been in the process of reconnecting with my birth family. They approached me through social services a year and a half ago and we have been slowly getting to know each other since that time.

First we exchanged names and basic information. Of course with the internet you can find a good deal of information about anyone with just their names. Then we exchanged several intense letters. They filled in some of the health information that I was lacking, luckily there wasn't much that I needed to be aware of. We also patched together some of the holes in the story of my birth and adoption. Finally we talked on the phone a couple of times. It has been a strangely reassuring feeling to know that they are good, pleasant people. Conversation has been easy and enjoyable.

You may have noticed by now that I have been speaking in the plural, that **they** approached me. That is because they, my biological mother and father are still together. When I was born they were in high-school and didn't have the resources to raise a child so they made the difficult, but ultimately good decision to give me up for adoption. Of course the parents of high-school sweet-hearts didn't imagine that the relationship would

last. Well, they were quickly proven wrong. As soon as my biological parents graduated high school they eloped and were married. Just a few years later, they had their second child, my biological brother, Josh, then two years later another, my biological brother Matt.

Before we first made contact, the only piece of this story that I knew, was that my biological mother had been sixteen when she gave birth to me. Like anyone else would, I had created a narrative of the experience of that pregnant sixteen year old. In my mind, she had had an unplanned pregnancy, maybe not even with a long-term boyfriend. She became pregnant, had the baby, me, and moved on with her life. To me a concept of a *them*, a family, was completely foreign, so you can imagine my shock in finding an intact biological family that I come from.

That's the very rough shell of the story. It's necessary to explain that this family that I am biologically related to, a family that I never knew existed until recently, carves out a bizarre picture of what my life very easily could have been. This family lives in rural Arkansas. They are hard workers and have worked very hard for everything that they have. She is a public school teacher while he works for the state highway maintenance crew. Like most of their family and neighbors, they are Baptists. They have been in that area of Arkansas for at least three generations, and of course the children are still there, with no interest in leaving. My life story however, has been very very different.

What might my life have been like in these circumstances? Who would I be today? Seeing this alternate universe that I could have lived in makes me very aware that I could be a different person today. It becomes very easy to imagine living the life of someone else when that possibility is right before your eyes. This is my story, but I'm sure each of your lives has been filled with different coincidences and decisions made for you that have made you who you are today.

To understand and experience the network of mutuality a good first step is realizing that the lives that we know as our own could very easily have been different. They could be more like the lives of other people, even people that we disagree with.

So far this conversation has been very theoretical, in the world of metaphor. For the scientist among us, I want to point out that the network of mutuality is also a reflection of scientific reality. Our interconnectedness is a basic understanding of ecology. We hear more and more every day about how the future of our planet is in peril. What is more, we are all in it together, because the resources of the Earth are not static. The pollution that we create affects people on the other side of the globe and vice versa. We know we are ecologically connected and we are slowly realizing that we are called to act upon the situation.

Science gives us another fascinating example of the network of mutuality, specifically of human beings. We are all way more genetically related than some would have us believe, especially when talking about racial groups. Evidence from the analysis of genetics (e.g., DNA) shows that the vast majority of physical variation, about 94%, lies **within** so-called racial groups. Conventional ideas of "racial" groupings differ from one another only in about 6% of their genes. That means that there is greater variation within any "racial" group than between different "races." Overwhelmingly, scientific study indicates that what we understand as "racial" categories, have no meaningful genetic reality. (1998 Statement on Race from the American Anthropological Society) <http://www.aaanet.org/stmts/racepp.htm>

That doesn't mean that racial categories do not exist. We know that people have been and continue to be treated differently because of the color of their skin. There is a long and complex history behind that. A history of some gaining power over others, by saying and attempting to prove that others are inherently different. "Look," They say, "those people are fundamentally different from me. Something about their physical person is different. They are different and not as good." The result was a rigid hierarchy of socially exclusive categories, races.

Today we know that physical difference between racial categories is fundamentally meaningless. Those categories, or races were constructed by society as a tool to oppress people. But if racial categories are socially constructed, if there is no basis for them in reality, it makes me wonder how many other differences that we see between ourselves and other people are less significant than we may think.

I want to tell you a little bit more about my story and understanding the network of mutuality. Recently, less than a month ago actually, I had my first in person encounter with my birth family, the family of an alternate universe in which I could have lived. We had exchanged several letters and talked on the phone a few times. We exchanged pictures and health information. Finally, it was just time to make the leap and meet in person. I don't get back to that part of the country often any more, so I decided to take a road trip while I was visiting my family in Oklahoma. A dear friend drove with me, four hours to have lunch with my biological family in Arkansas.

I didn't have any expectations going into the meeting. I had done that before, with the first letter, and then the first phone conversation. What do I say? Will we have anything to talk about? What do I call them? Most of all, how am I supposed to do this. There's no road map. Anyway, I had been through all that, so I decided that meeting them, simply being in the same space together would be enough of an accomplishment. The rest would take care of itself.

Well, being in the same space was a big step. It was actually a much stranger step than I had expected. The first thing that I said when we drove up to the restaurant where my biological family was sitting outside was, "Oh my God, I have a twin." I don't of course have a twin, but one of these brothers looked so much like me it was shocking.

I could tell he was slightly weirded out by the experience as well. It was the strangest thing, really straight out of the old movie "The Parent Trap." I was having lunch with someone who looked exactly like me. He was talking, but that wasn't my mouth over there moving. I'm here, he's there, but that looks like me. It was one of the strangest sensations I have ever experienced in my life. Having never in my life seen another person who was genetically related to me, suddenly I was confronted with my doppelganger. Well I used to use the word doppelganger to describe my biological brother Josh, until I looked more into what the word means.

"Doppelgänger" has come to mean a double or [look-alike](#) of a person. That's the definition that I knew. But, if you dig deeper, doppelgangers are supposedly [harbingers](#) of **bad luck**. In some traditions, a doppelgänger seen by a person's friends or relatives predicts illness or danger, while seeing one's own doppelgänger can be an [omen](#) of [death](#).

Hopefully my holiday adventure to Arkansas was not a harbinger of death! The doppelganger isn't just a random piece of superstition either. It is woven into a good deal of philosophy and literature, from Dostoyevsky's to Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man." The doppelganger usually takes on a sinister role in plots, sometimes driving people mad as their own identity is overcome by their evil twin.

The idea is terrifying. I can attest, losing a sense of your identity in relationship to another person is a very strange and disorienting thing. Seeing someone who looks exactly like you speak words that are not your own is a very very strange thing. But disorientation isn't always such a bad thing. Often, it's the only way we can get out of a rut, the only way to see beyond ourselves. To learn new things, we often have to leave the comfort of our homes. A moment of disorientation is often the path to deeper insight.

That's my hope, as we explore the network of mutuality today. I invite you for just a moment to imagine transcending your own life experience. Maybe it helps you to remember that the circumstances that have constructed your life are largely coincidence. You could have been born to different parents, or in a different country, of a different gender or racial category. Simple imagination can disorient our sense of self. Or if you are of a more scientific mind, remember that your genes, the building blocks of your body are incredibly similar to every other human on this earth. Remember that their eyes work the same way yours do. What might it be like to look at the world through their eyes for just a moment.

However you come to see this reality, I hope that you can for a moment, just briefly transcend your own identity, to look through the eyes of another person and begin to understand the world in a different way.

We entered this discussion with the words of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. He spoke of a network of mutuality because it was his understanding of justice in the world. Please understand that this experience of the network of mutuality is more than an intellectual exercise. It is more than theology or faith. Embracing our brothers and sisters and ourselves as a part of an inescapable network of mutuality is a tremendous step toward justice.

I firmly believe that when we are able to see ourselves in the other, whoever that other is, we are better people. When we can not only treat our neighbor as our self, but

see our neighbor as our self we become better people, and we make the world a better place.

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