



*The Unitarian Church in Westport*

## **SERMON TRANSCRIPT:**

### ***The Journey Toward Interdependence***

*By the Rev. Dr. John Morehouse*

*Sunday, February 28, 2021*

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The Principles that guide our faith are not creeds. They are not faith statements that we must adhere to. But they are aspirations. When we covenant to value and promote such things as the inherent worth and dignity of every person (being?), we are saying that by virtue of being human, a human being, we have a value to life, liberty, health, meaning and consciousness. Now we may do bad things, even evil acts, but we have a value in existence. We are a priori valuable each and every one of us. Such a principle is challenging to say the least. My colleague and the Past president of the UUA, the Service Committee and Amnesty International Bill Schulz does not believe in inherent worth. He has seen too many tortures to think that torturers have worth.

The problem with that position is where do we draw the line between those who have worth and those who do not? And who gets to choose that line? You? Me? A committee? The Nazis? I remember arguing this point with a friend once who was certain that life is not at all equal. The problem with this proposition is that it leaves us with a world of haves and have nots. I knew a man once who had committed murder as a youth and was never caught. It was a reckless act of violence one night when he was drunk. He came from a poor and abusive home. He went on to steal from stores, and hijack cars. But it was only when he was confronted with his mother's death and the abuse she had inflicted upon him that he opened up and his soul came out into the sun. He broke down, sobbing, and I helped him get help and he eventually admitted to murder and the judge suspended the sentence for time served while he was awaiting trial. Who was worthy there? The man, me, the judge, certainly his victims were worthy of life and property. But wasn't he a victim as well?

Our Universalist heritage calls on us to see the worth in even the vilest acting person. It doesn't see the worth in corporations, but it might see them in communities like this one. As a collection of souls, covenanted to make worthy what is lost.

On Tuesday I wrote a column about the power of interdependence in our lives and for the future of our planet. I implied there was a circle in which we make our faith. It starts with the first principle and comes close to completion with the seventh, our belief in the interdependent web of all life. We affirm the individual as worthy of living but realize that we are interdependent for everything we have and do. A circle of faith if you will that holds us as one to another.

This reflects that age-old tension we have as fierce individualists in the tradition of Whitman, Emerson and Thoreau as it comes into contact with the necessity of communities in the tradition of Parker Palmer, the Feminist UU Scholar Sharon Welch and our departed Denny Davidoff.

We exist in beloved community, true to spirit of Dr. King, as concerned with justice and love for all people. We exist in beloved community because we marry our individualism with the interconnection of all life, into a theology of interdependence. We need one another in more ways than we know.

Our interdependence is critical to our existence. Ironically, as we have been driven apart physically by the pandemic we have been drawn together virtually by the necessity of being in community. In some ways, we are watching The Unitarian Church in Westport, going into a 2.0 existence, the UU Congregation in Westport. We are becoming something more. Much more.

Unitarian, masculine, individualistic, the very best of the Enlightenment with our Universalism, feminine, interconnected, at the heart of our community, a *communitas* in Latin, a gathering of souls. In her essay “Liminal Communitas and Feminist Solidarity”, the feminist scholar Athena Bellas, draws a connection between the way individualism without community robs all of us but especially girls and women, of their identity. Community is the “us” to our sense of “me”. Or as the feminist writer bell hooks put it: “All efforts at self-transformation challenge us to engage in on-going, critical (lens) ....(Our) individual commitment, when coupled with engagement in collective discussion, provides a space for critical feedback which strengthens our efforts to change and make ourselves anew.”

It takes an individual commitment to collective engagement to build the beloved community. Frankly, every time I hear the criticism that we are not spiritual enough, I think of this imbalance. Spirituality is not just what you get out of it. Spirituality is what we create together. This is the heart of our interdependence, yin and yang, light and dark, gender flowing into one, a spiral dance of new possibilities. It just might not be about you.

Last week during our story, Nate displayed an image that was racist and painful to people of color. He explained this in his video today. This is a real learning moment in our life as a community. Part of journey of interdependence is the very messy and sometimes uncomfortable realization that racism pervades our culture. This doesn't make those of us who are white “racists” but we can do racist things even if we don't know we are doing them. That is what is so insidious about racism. Most white people don't even know they are acting in racist way. We are on a journey to change that. Not by asking our friends of color to explain it to us but to do the learning itself. Racist actions can be understood and turned to anti-racist actions. It will be uncomfortable for many of us, but then that is part of the journey. What I am hoping we don't do is to throw up our hands and walk away from this journey, retreating into the cold polarity of our sacred individualism. The work of our Racial Justice Council and

our Black Lives Matter Task Force is part of our journey. I will have much more to say about this learning as the weeks unfold.

After I helped the man I was counselling to reach out and come to clean with his better self, I remember planting trees on our new church property in Maryland. They were small trees but they would grow. After the planting, I offered a blessing from the Interfaith minister Vern Barnet, I offer it here as my closing:

Infinite Spirit, sometimes called Grandfather, Grandmother —  
Father Sky, Earth Mother, Creator:

We gather to praise your creation,  
to honor the swimmers and crawlers,  
the four-leggeds and the winged ones;  
we give thanks for the beauty and glory of creation  
and open our hearts to new ways to understand  
our place in the universe—not the center or focus,  
but a humble and balanced place,  
where every step we take becomes a prayer,  
where every word we say  
makes harmony with the vast, vibrating cosmos,  
and where we know we are singing the song of life.  
We pray to know more deeply that we are in the Garden  
where every plant and animal and speck of dust  
is a living prayer.

Without our brothers and sisters  
of the plant and animal and mineral kingdoms,  
the human family would end.  
So we want to bless them, as they bless us.  
We pray for humility—  
not to humble ourselves before presidents or priests,  
but before the ants and trees—  
for if we cannot be in true relation to the ant,  
we shall be outcasts of the garden.

Let us cast the pollution from our eyes  
so we can see the glory and live with thanksgiving.  
Great Spirit, let us remember it is not how we talk but how we walk  
Wondrous trees, breathing life into the atmosphere:  
your gifts of fire and shelter, fruit,  
and sailing are precious to us.  
And in many ways you offer us leaves of knowledge.  
May the vision of mutual interrelatedness,  
cosmic interdependence,  
the seamless process of generations,

not end in cough-filled skies blotting the sun,  
but rather may clear air, healthy forests,  
wholesome water, expansive prairie, and pungent earth  
nourish paths for all creatures  
through mountain and valley, and the salt sea,  
and through a protective atmosphere,  
as we rejoice in the inhabitants.