

“Learning the Practice of Ubuntu”

I recently heard a story that captured my heart. There was an anthropologist working in Africa who wanted to play a game with the children of the tribe she was researching. This event took place a couple of days before she finished her work. She thought of a fun way to engage with the children before leaving. She gathered some goodies and candies from among her belongings and placed them in a bag. She set the bag under a tree some distance from where she had the children line up. She told them that the winner of a race to the tree would win the bag of goodies. Upon giving them the signal to run to the bag to claim the prize a most remarkable thing happened. The children held hands and rather than run, they walked together to reach the bag. Then they sat down in a circle, evenly distributed the goodies and candies among themselves, ate the goodies, and talked happily with each other. The anthropologist asked them, “Why did you not run to the tree so that you could claim the prize for yourself?” A young girl answered, “How can any one of us be happy, if some are sad?” They were practicing Ubuntu.

Ubuntu is an African philosophy which can be summed up in this phrase, “I am, because we are.” It is something taught to children in parts of Africa. Unfortunately, here in the West we are taught from a very young age something quite different. Our own needs and wants are emphasized from early on and much of our energy throughout life is spent trying to satisfy that individualism we have been taught. Looking out for others and sharing doesn’t come as natural as it does for the children and adults of these ubuntu practicing communities.

Ubuntu reflects the basic tenet of most of our world’s faith traditions, yet those very tenets can seem foreign when you look at how some nations, who earnestly proclaim their faith traditions, conduct themselves. One might wonder, how can this be? Loving your neighbor as yourself, treating others as you would wish to be treated, are what people of faith say they aspire to. The wording may vary somewhat from faith tradition to faith tradition, but the idea is the same. The culprit that works against this idea of ‘love your neighbor as yourself’ in the United States of America is this proclivity toward individualism, a proclivity toward nationalism that looks very little like pride and self-respect in one’s origins and place in the world striving for the best it can be, together with others. Rather, it is a nationalism that more often resembles hubris. It is this idea that we are better than others, that we are entitled, and that we must protect and defend ourselves which, unfortunately, flies in the face of working together with others. Nations acting in this way rob themselves the chance of becoming better because of others. We see this on an individual level as well as a national level. We can call ourselves Christians, Muslims, Taoists, Buddhists, Hindus, Judaists, etc. but do we live into and according to our basic tenets? I wonder.

Brene Brown talks about hubris in her latest book, [Atlas of the Heart](#). She defined hubris as an inflated sense of one’s own abilities that is tied more to the need for dominance than to actual

accomplishments. Does this sound familiar? Unfortunately, it does. My call to all of us who care about our people, our nation, and our future is to remember having group pride and self-respect is one thing, hubris is another, and it does nothing to move us to place of solidarity with the world, while in the world.

Earlier this week I practiced singing a song with a friend. We were recording this song for my 15-month-old granddaughter. At first our voices were not harmoniously in sync. It took us several attempts and moving the recording apparatus further away from where we were sitting. After some time, our voices began to come together, blend, and the music was richer. Finding harmony and solidarity takes time and we can only experience the richness of this if we are willing to be creative and if we are willing to be open to learning. What can be understood and improved in ourselves? It is the presence of others in our lives and the strength of our faith which guide us. We have been given our core tenets of faith to live by. They're not just words. They are meant to be the essence of who we are.

Sadly, what I see here in my own county is that there are a great many who could learn from the children of Africa who live ubuntu. They don't just practice it. They live it. Living it means living in harmony. It means living for and with each other. This has been offered to us all from the corners of the earth, from the corners of our traditions. Here in the U.S. (and elsewhere) we may have to unlearn to relearn and to live fully into our faith's tenets.

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