

Interdependence Day

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Ancient Witness: Isaiah 2:2-4

I could hardly preach today and not acknowledge our national holiday this weekend. Thursday was Independence Day, and from a perspective of faith there is much worth celebrating:

Independence from a government that represented the will of only a small elite, independence from a system of rule in which the vast majority had no voice, and independence from colonialism in which an empire imposed its will and extended its influence around the globe for economic gain.

And in the Declaration of Independence, we have an incredible document that articulated the noble intentions of justice, equality and liberty, aspirations toward which an emerging young nation would strive.

It was the birth of something new and radical: a representative democracy. Since then, this nation has evolved and changed, as all governments that are based upon the will of the people should. And while freedom and independence are high virtues, they alone do not make a nation great. They set the stage for greatness. There must be a continual struggle toward values that would make a nation great.

At the close of the Constitutional Convention in 1787 a woman asked Benjamin Franklin what type of government the Constitution was bringing into existence. Franklin replied, "A republic, if you can keep it."

The German people used their freedom of their democratic Weimar Republic government to empower Hitler and the Nazi movement, which later evolved into something hideously cruel and violent.

And so, yes, let us give thanks and be grateful for the precious freedom and liberty we have inherited. But let us not squander our independence; let us use it for the continual transformation of this country. The highest form of patriotism, it seems to me, is to be highly informed and to participate in the political process. Simply voting is not enough.

One of my mentors, William Sloane Coffin, has said some great things about patriotism. Here's one:

There are three kinds of patriots, two bad, one good. The bad patriots are the uncritical lovers and the loveless critics of their country. The good patriots are those who carry on a lover's quarrel with their country.

And so I propose that we celebrate with a kind of patriotism that can only extend our minds and hearts, a patriotism that holds a vision of human unity and recognizes our interdependence with all nations and with the earth. Coffin also said,

How do you love America? Don't say, "My country, right or wrong." That's like saying, "My grandmother, drunk or sober"; it doesn't get you anywhere. Don't just salute the flag, and don't burn it either. Wash it. Make it clean.

Many years ago on the Fourth of July, I went down to Louisville, Kentucky to spend some time with some friends. We attended a gathering of all the peace and justice groups in the area, and they called it "Interdependence Day." Environmental groups, civil rights advocates, hunger organizations, homeless groups—they all were there, celebrating on the Ohio River. Make no mistake about it; this was a spiritual event—all of these gentle, loving people. Since then, I have associated this word, with the highest form of patriotism.

The word, "Interdependence," though it is not found in the Bible, is based upon biblical reflection. It is a basic concept upon which the scriptures themselves rest. And this is true, it seems to me, of other religious traditions, as well. Interdependence is a foundational spiritual reality.

There's a wonderful quote in a letter from Chief Seattle to President Polk written in 1852 concerning the sale of land:

This we know: The earth does not belong to the people, people belong to the earth. All things are connected like the blood that unites us all. People did not weave the web of life, they are merely a strand in it. Whatever they do to the web, they do to themselves.

We are interdependent—connected. And what we do to the web of life, we do to ourselves.

Many have said that to deny this reality and assert our independence is at the heart of all destructive behavior. Coffin put it well when he said,

Our sin is only and always that we put asunder what God has joined together. Human unity is not something we are called on to create, only to recognize and make manifest.

One way to read the creation myth is that when First Man and First Woman decided to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, they were asserting their independence from the divine Mystery. As a metaphor for human existence, this story shows that by attempting to live apart from the unity that is beyond knowing and the peace that is beyond understanding and the ancient wisdom that is beyond comprehension, we suffer and spiritually perish.

The church, unfortunately has done little to challenge the cultural heresy of total independence, the idea that: “I don’t need anyone and they don’t need me; I’ve got mine—you get yours; I’ve made it on my own, and you can too; just pull your boot straps a little harder.”

We must be clear: No one has made it on their own!

But this hyper-individualism should not surprise us since the dominant model of God has been a God who is totally independent. Theologians used the word, “aseity,” to describe God who doesn’t need the world or anything else. (Aseity = something exists of and from itself alone) This kind of God is invulnerable and impervious, unaffected and unfazed by others—a John Wayne kind of God. And if this is our image of God, it is easy to see how it can become something to which we would aspire.

By the way, we can find a superior image that flows from the life of Jesus: a suffering, vulnerable image of God who is affected and changed by others, who exists in a mutual dependence with the world.

Martin Luther King, almost 50 years ago, once wrote:

Before you finish eating breakfast this morning, you’ve depended on more than half the world. This is the way our universe is structured... We aren’t going to have peace until we recognize this basic fact of the interrelated structure of all reality.

And in this age of globalization, this basic fact has become even more evident. When we forget or ignore the *interrelated structure of reality*, the fragile balance of interdependence is upset. When electric companies in Tennessee and Kentucky burn soft coal—the dirtily burning kind—often because they have been able to buy pollution rights from other companies, when they act as if what they do has no effect on others, then the clouds of poison drifts northward over untouched, pristine parts of Canada. When the acid rains come down, small micro-organisms die, algae rages out of control, the fish die, and then the lake itself “dies.” Today there is virtually no place on earth one can go and not limit how much fish one can eat because of high levels of mercury and other poisons found in them, even in Alaska and northern Canada.

The creation is a huge web of existence where everything is connected to everything else. You—who you are, what you do—affect everything in creation. The effect may be great, or the faint tug might hardly be felt. But it is all tied together and interdependent. The poet is correct:

*All things by immortal power,
Near or far,
Hiddenly
To each other linked are,*

*Thou canst not stir a flower
without troubling of a star.*

(Francis Thompson)

Mystics have always known what is being confirmed by physics and ecology—all things are interconnected. “All of us are born mystics,” writer Ann Gordon tells us, “for the capacity to experience wonder and a primal sense of connectedness with all life is our birthright.”

Buddhist writer Thich Nhat Hanh uses the term “interbeing” to express the idea that nothing can be by itself alone, that everything in the cosmos must “interbe” with everything else. He writes,

Looking at anything, we can see the nature of interbeing. A self is not possible without non-self elements. Looking deeply at any one thing, we see the whole cosmos. The one is made of the many.

God pleads for greater interdependence, greater love, respect and care of others. The vision to which God draws us is one where *all people* come together and *fulfill* their freedom with justice and righteousness. According to the prophet:

*In days to come
the mountain of the Holy One’s house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.* (Isaiah 2:2)

The reign of God is the vision of everything united and fully connected, when interdependence is fully recognized, when the dividing walls of hostility are broken down and the once broken creation becomes one, becomes whole.

Paul wrote, “in Christ God was reconciling the world...” (2 Cor. 5:19). All things—the entire world—reconciled to God and, therefore, reconciled to each other. The individual cannot be separated from the whole. To be reconciled to God means to be part of the reconciliation of the whole world, to be part of the reign of God. This is the eternal truth of interdependence. Jesus proclaimed salvation and reconciliation of the whole world—all people. To be in a right relationship with God means to be in a right relationship with the world, including the widow, the orphan, the homeless immigrant, the outcasts and the forgotten—those who have been disconnected.

In John’s portrait, Jesus says, “I am the vine, you are the branches... abide in me as I abide in you.” There is a reciprocity here, a mutual dependence.

I believe that part of what John was trying to convey is that Jesus was aware of being connected with the Sacred reality in which we all “live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28), and that this same awareness is available to us all. John was saying, “Look, you want to be tapped into this life-giving source? Here’s how. Be connected. Be

connected to the Sacred Presence. Be connected to others. Love one another, even to the point of laying down your life. The more we help others, the more we help ourselves.”

There is the world *around* us that we can see with our eyes, but Jesus and other spiritual teachers draw our attention to the world *within* us. We are certainly connected on the surface, outwardly. But there is an *inner life, an inner connectedness* to all people and things. It is in this hidden part of reality that the Spirit of God’s love resides. God is at the heart of all things, and to be open and connected to God is to be connected to the cosmos. The vine connects all the branches together.

Thomas Merton once wrote,

The begging bowl of the Buddha represents not just a right to beg, but an openness to the gifts of all human beings as an expression of this interdependence of all beings...Thus when a monk begs from the layperson it is not as a selfish person getting something from someone else. He is simply opening himself to his interdependence.

This is the reality to which the ritual of communion points. It is a celebration of our interdependence. It calls the world together in love and harmony. In taking the bread and the wine, we acknowledge that when we abide in God all things abide in us.

“Let us dare to see,” wrote Bill Coffin,

that the survival unit in our time is no longer an individual nation or an individual anything. The survival unit in our time and henceforth is the whole human race and its environment.

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, available online and on CD at the church, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)

Call to commitment: "Appreciation of Interbeing" by Thich Nhat Hanh

If you are a poet,
 you will see clearly that there is a cloud
 floating in this sheet of paper.
 Without a cloud there will be no water;
 without water the trees cannot grow;
 and without trees,
 you cannot make paper.
 So the cloud is in here.
 The existence of this page is dependent
 on the existence of a cloud.
 Paper and cloud are so close.

Let us think of other things,
like sunshine.

Sunshine is very important
because the forest cannot grow without sunshine,
and we as humans cannot grow without sunshine.
So the logger needs sunshine in order to cut the tree,
and the tree needs sunshine in order to be a tree.
Therefore, you can see sunshine in this sheet of paper.

And if you look deeply, with the eyes of a bodhisattva,
with the eyes of those who are awake,
you see not only the cloud and the sunshine in it,
but that everything is here,
the wheat that became the bread for the logger to eat,
the logger's father--everything is in this sheet of paper...

This paper is empty of an independent self.
Empty,
in this sense,
means that the paper is full of everything,
the entire cosmos.

The presence of this tiny sheet of paper
proves the presence of the whole cosmos.