

“Interdependence”

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January 14, 2018

“It really boils down to this: that all life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. We are made to live together because of the interrelated structure of reality. Did you ever stop to think that you can't leave for your job in the morning without being dependent on most of the world? You get up in the morning and go to the bathroom and reach over for the sponge, and that's handed to you by a Pacific islander. You reach for a bar of soap, and that's given to you at the hands of a Frenchman. And then you go into the kitchen to drink your coffee for the morning, and that's poured into your cup by a South American. And maybe you want tea: that's poured into your cup by a Chinese. Or maybe you're desirous of having cocoa for breakfast, and that's poured into your cup by a West African. And then you reach over for your toast, and that's given to you at the hands of an English-speaking farmer, not to mention the baker. And before you finish eating breakfast in the morning, you've depended on more than half of the world. This is the way our universe is structured, this is its interrelated quality. We aren't going to have peace on earth until we recognize this basic fact of the interrelated structure of all reality.” - A Christmas Sermon, December 24, 1967, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

One of the defining characteristics of our nation is independence. Independence is the foundation of the start of our country – gaining our independence from England. The Declaration of Independence is one of our most revered historical texts. It is such an important value that we have a holiday dedicated to it, the fourth of July, Independence Day.

On a personal level, when parents have children and they start reaching new milestones, many of the favorite milestones that we brag about are ones their kid did independently. The first time they walked by themselves. The first word they said, unprompted, by themselves. The first time they slept through the night all by themselves. The first time they went to the potty all by themselves. The first time, many years later, their kid moves away from home to live...by themselves! We see growth and development as a move towards independence, growth away

from needing someone to care for you or to do things for you. It is seen as a problem if you are too needy, or too dependent on someone else, or not able to stand on your own two feet, without any help, independent of any people around you.

Independence as a value and a virtue is not in itself a bad thing, but like all things, should be taken in moderation. Perhaps in addition to recording the first time a child walks by themselves, we should record and remember the first time a child approaches a loved one for a hug. Or we should record the first time someone reaches out to share their favorite toy with someone else. Perhaps in addition to Independence Day, each state should celebrate the day they were admitted to the Union – the day they formally recognized that they relied on their neighbors for economic prosperity and that we have a real need to be connected to one another.

Here in Michigan we would take January 26th off and shoot off fireworks in celebration of our connection to the 49 others states, in celebration of the relationships that have brought economic prosperity, diversity, and the opportunity to learn from one another. Independence is a fine value to hold, but so is interdependence, and our interdependence is often squelched in pursuit of our independence.

We see this in the way we remember history. The way we tell it, our history is made up of individuals throughout time who made amazing accomplishments all by themselves. We love to tell the story of the lone genius – the president that brought us out of war, the inventor who transformed the industrial age, and the scientist whose discovery cured diseases.

My favorite example of that is Alexander Fleming, the scientist who discovered penicillin. What we often don't hear is that Fleming discovered penicillin on accident and didn't realize what he had discovered. All he knew was that a strange fungus attacked the bacteria he was trying to grow. It took a team of scientists over the course of the next decade to take his

accident and transform it into a major scientific breakthrough. If Fleming was solely responsible, penicillin would never have gotten further than frustration that fungus was ruining his lab experiment.

Why do we default to the narrative of the lone genius, the independent operator, or the solitary hero? Is it because it makes it easier to shape the particular narrative we want to tell by highlighting or focusing on certain details, while omitting others? The more people we add to a story, the more complicated it becomes. The more robust the truth and perception of truth becomes, and the more we are called to hold accountable all the different relationships and perspectives that brought about the scientific achievement or the new invention or the end of war.

So here we are, talking about interdependence, on a weekend named for one man, Martin Luther King, Jr. When we frame Dr. King as another lone genius, we do him a great disservice by erasing the relationships, mentors, and black cultures that shaped him, walked beside him, challenged his beliefs, and inspired him to lead. When we talk about Dr. King, we must do so knowing that the wisdom he gained came from the church he grew up in watching his father preach, came from his peers and professors at Morehouse College who instilled in him a desire for public service and political change, came from the co-organizers and leaders who worked alongside him to train, rally, and lead marches and boycotts. Dr. King is the public face of a movement that was thick with women and men and youth leading and speaking in too many ways to quantify.

Dr. King was effective at amplifying the voices and experiences of the civil rights movement. Movement meaning there were *many* people marching, writing, speaking, protesting, and putting their lives on the line for racial equality. Dr. King lifted up these stories – brought inspiration to the folks who were committed to this movement. In his last speech before his

death, he lifts up the students who led sit-ins at lunch counters across the South. He named the thousands of workers and citizens in Albany Georgia who worked toward desegregation. He acknowledges the folks who brought into being the Civil Rights Bill. He names Birmingham, and Selma, and Memphis – pointing towards entire communities of primarily black activists working together, building off of each other's successes and setbacks, slowly moving the laws of this country towards racial justice.

We do Dr. King a disservice when we say this weekend is only about him. His voice is important. His words are powerful. But his legacy was lifted up by generations of people who committed and continue to commit their lives to antiracism, some of whom also were murdered or gave their lives in pursuit of this work. Sometimes I worry that we proclaim this holiday Martin Luther King Jr. Day because it is less intimidating than declaring it Civil Disobedience Day or Black Freedom Fighters Day or Black Power Day.

The inverse is also true. We find it easier to name solitary villains than to look at our relationship with them. For example, if someone in power says something that is anti-immigrant and racist, if that were to ever happen, it is easy to vilify him and condemn his words. What is harder is to examine the long narrative of anti-immigrant racist policies that our country has long enforced and public sentiments that our culture has propagated. We want to blame the villain as if they are operating in a vacuum, instead of recognizing them as a product of a wider culture that we also participate in and in many ways benefit from with our silence. Our heroes are products of networks of people working together to lift them up. Our villains are products of networks of people working together to lift them up.

One of Dr. King's gifts was the ability to inspire people to listen as if for the first time. To hear about the evils of racism as if they are hearing it for the first time. To heed the lessons of

mutuality and interdependence as if we had never heard that lesson before. This weekend, in honor of Dr. King, I am not only listening to his words and reading his speeches, but I am listening for the prophetic voices who are continuing the work of antiracism and civil rights in my time. I am listening for the movements that are bubbling up, that are amplifying issues that have been present for a long time but which I feel like I am hearing about for the first time. I am listening for the voices that are part of the same tradition of civil disobedience and political change that Dr. King came from.

This practice of listening has led me to a group of 21 teenagers who are currently suing President Trump and the federal government for shirking their responsibility to protect them and the next generations from climate change. The case is called Juliana vs. The United States and their complaint asserts that, through the government's affirmative actions that cause climate change, it has violated the youngest generation's constitutional rights to life, liberty, and property, as well as failed to protect essential public trust resources.

These youth have not just been handpicked by a team of lawyers because they come from the right towns that are already being impacted by climate change or because they represent a diverse racial makeup that will be appealing to a judge and jury. These are multiracial, multicultural youth that from very young ages have been engaged in environmental activism in their schools and communities, joining organizations, forming organizations when there were none to join, and working to create a sustainable planet. They are an incredible, inspiring group.

Miko, a 16 year old girl from the Marshall Islands talks about the impacts of climate change in relationship to a larger narrative of racism and colonization that has impacted her people and her ancestors. She says, "ever since the islands have been colonized, the culture has been stripped away from them and now that climate change has come into the picture, the land is

slowly being taken away from them as well." Miko is a voice that is teaching me anew about the intersectionality of racism and environmental pollution.

Kelsey Juliana is 21 years old, and is the lead plaintiff. She describes herself as a lifelong climate activist. When she was 18 she walked across the country with the Great March for Climate Action, and when she was 15 she sued the governor of Oregon for similarly failing to protect children. Juliana has spoken on Bill Moyers and works as an educator about sustainability and the environment. Juliana is a voice that reminds me that advocacy is a full time commitment.

Isaac is 15 years old. When he celebrated his bar mitzvah a few years ago, he created a bar mitzvah project in the form of a campaign to get his hometown to divest from fossil fuels. He collected over 500 signatures in support of divestment, and so Isaac is teaching me the power of gathering a community together to work toward one shared cause.

The issues of racial justice that Dr. King fought for are bound together with the issues of climate change that these youth are fighting for. Our future as a world is bound together in the independence and mutual interdependence of all people, regardless of their race, their nationality, gender, sexuality, religion, or physical ability.

This weekend our charge is not to go out and sing the praises of one great leader, but it is to thank God for the communities that lifted up that leader, and the antiracist leaders that continue to emerge because of his legacy and deep network of connection. Our charge is to listen for the voices who are calling us to recognize our interdependence, who challenge us to see that it is only when we start to understand how we are connected to one another that we can begin to work for freedom and justice for all people. Our charge is to join up with the antiracist

movements that are in our communities. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, once said, “We may have all come on different ships, but we’re in the same boat now.”