

Being Together, Becoming Human

Readings: 'Ants' by Daniel Hoffman
'String Quartet' by Carl Dennis
'Famous' by Naomi Shihab Nye

If you were suddenly put in charge of everything, what's the first thing you would do? (Anyone want to shout out an answer?)

Once, a student of Confucius, the ancient Chinese teacher, asked him this question. He responded by saying he would rectify names, make sure everything was called by its proper name. When I first read this, I got the mental image of that ancient sage getting out a label maker and labelling everything around him with what it thought it should be called, and instructing everyone to abide by his labels.

That isn't what Confucius meant, though. He didn't want to dictate new labels, but to use precision in our language. We must call things by their correct names if we are to have any hope of approaching the truth. One comparative religion scholar describes Confucius' interest in the rectification of names like this:

'If terms be not correct, language is not in accordance with the truth of things, affairs cannot be carried out to success... Therefore, a superior person considers it necessary that the names he uses be spoken appropriately. What the superior person requires is that in his words there be nothing that is incorrect.'¹

Confucius was especially interested in labelling relationships properly, making sure everyone knows the nature of the various relationships in their lives and the role they are expected to play, the duty they are expected to fulfill. Confucius was interested in the natures of the various relationships we hold and in helping people do their duty, and in so doing, thrive.

In the traditional Confucian system, there are five constant relationships that all must attend to at various stages of their lives. They are the relationships between ruler and subject, between father and son, between husband and wife, between elder brother and younger brother, and the relationship between friends.

Just hearing the list, you might already be noticing the ways that your life doesn't conform to this system described in China about 2,500 years ago. There isn't much room for women in this system. There is no mention of family patterns outside of traditional models. A lot of the teachings about relationship in Confucianism seem hopelessly hierarchical and irrelevant to our modern sensibilities, but there are ways that this model was transformative. Confucius taught that the people with more power in a relationship, the rulers, the fathers, the husbands, and the elder brothers needed to wield that power carefully and responsibly. They needed to prove themselves worthy of the respect that their subjects, sons, wives, and younger brothers should show them. In its time, this was a radical idea. In some contexts, it still is today.

Today, rather than focus on the parts of this teaching that I find outdated and irrelevant, I want to hold up what is of value. Confucius, in the teaching about the five constant relationships, names that our relationships with different people, in differing roles need to be different. In our various relationship, we need to know our duty and what we can fairly expect of the other person in the relationship with us. Most of us have some sense of this intuitively, if we are parenting children at any stage of their

¹ Confucius, quoted in Smith, Huston. *The World's Religions*. New York: HarperCollins, 1991. Pages 174-175.

development, we know that our relationships with them are fundamentally different than the relationships we have with our friends. We know that romantic partnerships and sibling relationships have a different set of obligations, joys and challenges... and yet there are ways in which many of us could use a rectification of names for the relationships in our lives.

Now, rectifying names, Confucius' aspiration, might seem like an ancient concern, something that might be relevant in his ancient China context, but not relevant here and now, thousands of miles and thousands of years from Confucius. We aspire to a much more democratic way of being... and yet, it is still relevant.

The word "friend" means a lot less than it used to. I blame Facebook. At one point, if you called someone a friend, it meant that you had a reciprocal relationship with some degree of affection and trust. Facebook has changed that, at least among in communities where lots of people use that social networking website. On Facebook, as many of you know, you connect with other people by sending them a friend request. You then friend one another – Facebook has made friend a verb. And friend is the only relationship allowed on the site. There are ways to sort friends and label some people acquaintances and designate who is family, but everyone is a friend... and every person we're connected to in our lives is decidedly not a friend. Through Facebook, I am connected to hundreds of people – and I would only call a small percentage of them friends – just the people who know me well and with whom my relationship is reciprocal. Perhaps this is your story too. My Facebook connections include family members, professional contacts, mentors, acquaintances and people I went to elementary school with that I haven't spoken to in decades. Outside of Facebook, I would never think of these people as friends. Some of them are very important to me, but our relationships are not friendships. They are family members or part of my professional networks, or my mentors, not my friends. These relationships have different expectations and obligations than friendships.

And, I'm friends on Facebook with many of you – and my relationships with you all are precious and rich and so valuable to me, but they are not friendships. Our relationships can be marked by affection—and many of them are— but they are, by design not reciprocal and that is part of the power of my relationship with People's people. In pastoral care, worship, and other areas of church life, I offer you the support and wisdom I can without expecting that in return. Sure, I hope what happens here inspires you to be of service to the church and the world – but my relationship with you all is not and shouldn't be a personally reciprocal relationship. This is the beauty of it. I struggled with this some on my way into the ministry and a mentor, not a friend, offered me this example of how a ministerial relationship is different from a friendship. She told me that members of a church can set up an appointment with their minister to complain about their job and seek support, if they you want, if that is what they need. If the minister was setting up appointments with congregants to complain about her job, that would be a really unhealthy ministry. To make my relationship with all of you work, I find the support I need to be your minister outside of this congregation – and I have friends, especially other religious leaders, who are a great help with this, who understand the particular challenges of my weird job.

None of this is to say that I don't have great personal affection for you all, collectively and individually. This affection is simply in a minister-congregant relationship, not a friendship.

We do our relationships a disservice when we do not see them with all their nuance and gradation, when we do not recognize various strengths of connection and levels of reciprocity, when we call everything a friendship. I am not suggesting that we adapt the hierarchical, patriarchal relationship

models of Confucianism instead, but I think being in conversation with this other way of being has much to teach us.

And our relationships matter... Confucians tell us that there is no such thing as a solitary person. We are because of our relationships. In *The Analects*, the collected teachings of Confucius, it is written, 'The Master said, "Virtue is never solitary; it always has neighbors."' Last week, I spoke about how a key part of the Confucian project is developing virtues, learning to be a good person. This learning happens in relationship. Some of the commentary on the statement that virtue always has neighbors is that you need to have good neighbors in order to be a good person. Goodness, however you might define it is not a solitary project. We all need all of us to make it – and, if we are to become virtuous, flourishing people, that will only happen if we have people around us committed to a similar project.²

A contemporary Confucian updates this idea. Tu Weiming that 'self-transformation is a communal act.'³ It is in the context of our relationships that we grow and change and become the best versions of ourselves. We need to be together to become fully human. We do this here – and I hope we all have relationships outside of the church that help us grow and change and self-transform.

When we delve into Taoism in February, we will explore a tradition that has grown alongside—and in opposition—to Confucianism in China that presents a very different, also very compelling vision of people becoming their best selves by walking away from the trappings of society and the bindings of relationship. For now, let's linger with this Confucian idea, that we become our best selves alongside one another when we attend to the important relationships in our lives.

This idea that we are as individuals only because we are collectively and our liberation is closely linked with others' liberation is not exclusively Confucian idea. Last Sunday, in his video talking about our Burundian Unitarian Universalist siblings' experience as refugees, Rev. Fulgence spoke of Ubuntu. Ubuntu is a concept common among speakers of Bantu languages in South, Central, and East Africa. It is translated as 'I am because we are' or 'a person is a person through other people.' To be human, we need one another. We need community. We need connect. There is no such thing as a solitary person. When Ubuntu is lived, it informs practices like South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which promoted truth-telling and healing at the end of the white supremacist apartheid government in that country.

Another approach to this concept is biological metaphors. I read a poem about ants earlier that spoke of how the collective thrives when each individual plays their role. Poet and physician Lewis Thomas uses another insect to make a similar observation. He writes, "'There is nothing at all wonderful about a single, solitary termite, indeed there is really no such creature, functionally speaking, as a lone termite, any more than we can imagine a genuinely solitary human being; no such thing. Two or three termites gathered together on a dish are not much better; they may move about and touch each other nervously, but nothing happens. But keep adding more termites until they reach a critical mass, and then the miracle begins. As though they had suddenly received a piece of extraordinary news, they organize in platoons and begin stacking up pellets to precisely the right height, then turning the arches to connect

² Confucius. *Analects: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*. Edward Slingerland, translator. Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing Company, 2003. page 37.

³ Tu Wei-Ming. *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985. Page 15.

the columns, colony constructing the cathedral and its chambers in which they will live out its life for the decades ahead, air-conditioned and humidity controlled, following the chemical blueprint coded in their genes, flawlessly, stone-blind. They are not the dense mass of individual insects they appear to be; they are an organism, a thoughtful, meditative brain on a million legs.”⁴

I'm not going to go so far as to claim that we humans are like the termites that sometimes operate as one brain with a million legs, but there are times when that feels close to true. There are times when we gather to offer comfort or celebrate or accomplish a great task that we could not accomplish alone where we feel like one organism, moments when the lofty ideal of the interdependent web of all existence feels real and tangible and present. There were moments of that yesterday at the bazaar. There were moments of that all week as people asked how they might comfort the Bullmer family – and then, when so many people I contacted to coordinate memorial service logistics said, “yes, I can do that.”

Earlier today, we sang, ‘there is a love holding us. There is a love holding all that we love. There is a love holding all. We rest in this love.’ My heart and my experiences tell me of the existence of a love greater than all of us. Some have asked if this lyric is about God or about community. My answer is yes. For me, it is about both... but the power of the song is we can each bring our own understanding. My heart and my experiences tell me of a love that is made real through the actions of kind, generous, loving people. When we are at our best, our relationships, our families, our friendships, our congregations, our workplaces, can be an opportunity for love to flow into the world and all of us to know we are held, we are beloved, and we can rest for a time, if that is what we need.

Joy and woe are woven fine – and we are connected in a garment of mutuality, of relationship, of love. We are love's hands and love's feet. Love's voice and love's vision. May it be so. May we continue to make it so. Amen.

⁴ Thomas, Lewis. *Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony*. New York: Penguin Books, 1995. Page 60.