

# UBUNTU AROUND THE WORLD

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*Heaven, Earth and I are living together and all things and I form an inseparable unity.*

*ChuangTzu*

*We cannot live for ourselves alone. Our lives connected by a thousand invisible threads, and along these, sympathetic fibers, our actions run as causes and return to us as results.*

*Herbert Melvill*

*Ubuntu is the essence of being human. I am human through other humans. What I do to another I do to myself. The solitary individual is a contradiction in terms. We are corporate.*

*Archbishop Desmond Tutu*

My greatest lesson in alternative dispute resolution came to me during the Truth and Reconciliation hearings in South Africa where I helped coordinate the International Monitoring Project of the TRC. The statute creating the TRC said “There shall not be victims or perpetrators; there shall be ubuntu.” We are in essence all in the same soup together.

Ever since, whether from Archbishop Tutu or Chief Justice Yazzi of the Navajo Nation, I have sought out this wisdom with every step of my life. In the end, Ubuntu knows no borders. Many non-dominant cultures across the globe honor the principle that all living things are interdependent and inseparable parts of a larger whole. Such values contrast sharply with American and western

colonialism, in which the individual pioneers' quest for wealth and property isolated them from the rest of humanity. The present dominant world order, in which governments, corporations and other institutions operate mechanically, as if they were separate from nature, detached from fellow human beings and segregated from the rest of the world, is ultimately destructive to everyone, including the ones who practice it. To be a better mediator, peacemaker or human being, we can draw upon these examples to bring people together and find common ground.

Our search for a stronger connection in our lives and in our world requires a rediscovery, not a new invention. These paradigms of interdependence have always existed. By drawing upon the ancient, intuitive wisdom inherent in various non-dominant cultures, we can build a bridge across the ages and cultures, between *us* and *them*. The secret to a new way of living has existed throughout time. We need not mirror one culture or romanticize or idealize its traditional ways of life, but we can share in and honor their perspective-their ubuntu-and begin to relearn how to live in that special place.

These models we will examine arise from a natural expression. of what is already inside each of us. While they provide a glimpse of what's possible, and provide support for the journey we must take if we're to survive, the awakening of who we are ultimately comes from within. Knowing our true selves does not involve learning as much as unlearning. That is the heart of a spiritual journey.

### **Native Americans**

Black Elk, an Ogalala Sioux medicine man, did not speak Xhosa. Nor was he ever told about ubuntu. Yet he spoke its language. As a young boy he saw a great vision that he was "seeing in a sacred manner the shapes of all things in the spirit, and the shape of all shapes as they must

live together as one being." Recognizing the link between peoples of different cultures, he declared: "I saw that the sacred hoop of my people was one of many hoops that made one circle, wide as daylight and as starlight, and in the center grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father.

According to Native American traditions, our unity with the whole results in the notion that anywhere you are is the center of the world. This concept of *one circle* is ubuntu. During traditional ceremonies, tribes that speak Lakota and Sioux repeat, "*Mitakuye Oyasin*," literally interpreted as "all my relatives." It reflects an understanding that we are all related and interconnected. Relatives include not merely blood relatives but all humanity. In a native talking circle an eagle feather may be passed around to link all people together, with all their relations, near and far, past and present. Such circles and the Native American medicine wheel are ancient symbols of our interconnected world.

Similarly, the Lakota native pipe ceremony reflects this holistic belief. The tobacco in the ceremonial pipe represents the green things, the four-leggeds, the winged ones and all things in the water. All are asked to come into the pipe. The pipe is then offered to the four directions, as well as up to the mystery spirits of the universe and down to Mother Earth. Smoking the ceremonial pipe invites all living things to come into you, and for you to be one with all life.

Too often we have seen nature as something outside of ourselves. For too many people, a return to the wilderness means an outing to a national park in an automobile or camper, complete with cell phones and television. This separation from nature distances us from responsibility to the

natural world and hinders the cultivation of an understanding of our oneness with the universe. We don't realize that we breathe the world in and out with every breath.

Audrey Shenandoah, an Onondaga clan mother, says, "There is no word for 'nature' in my language. Nature, in English, seems to refer to that which is separate from human beings. It is a distinction we don't recognize." The belief that we are uninvolved spectators in nature's dance of life alienates us from our essence and keeps us from taking necessary steps to protect the environment from exploitation. It isolates us from other species and from others within our own species as well.

Chief Seattle appeared before the 1854 Treaty Commission in Washington and sounded a warning in his native Duwamish language so eloquent that it was jotted down at the time by Henry Smith:

We are part of the Earth and it is part of us.

The perfumed flowers are our sisters; The deer, the horse, the great eagle, These are our brothers.

The rocky crests, the juices of the meadows,

The body heat of the pony, and man

All belong to the same family.

Chief Seattle, attempting to dispel for the Treaty Commission any notion of the primacy of individualism, probably didn't know directly about Africa or ubuntu. Yet, he and people from many other cultures who lived close to the earth understood our responsibility to all living things, that we are but one part of a greater whole:

Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. This we know. The Earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the earth. This we know. All things are connected like the blood which unites one family. All things are connected; whatever befalls the Earth, befalls the sons of the Earth. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.

In the Navajo Nation, Native Americans have structured some of their governmental functions and conflict resolution processes around a traditional concept called *K'e*. Like ubuntu, *k'e* has no direct translation, but pertains to the importance of relationships. *K'e* has been loosely translated as "solidarity," "love" or "respect," but Chief Justice Robert Yazzie, of the Navajo Nation Supreme Court, insists that such words don't get to the deep connotations of the word. He describes *K'e* as "a deeply embedded feeling we have of our responsibilities to others and our duty to live in good relations with them." It is, he says, "a community view of life." *K'e* relates to the kinship of all. It holds that individual responsibilities must be balanced by concepts of duty and responsibility toward plants, animals, father Heaven and Mother Earth.

The Yup'ik or Yup'it western Alaskan people are bound together by *yuk*, the idea that everything has a personhood. This includes every plant, animal, stone, human thought or deed. This type of shared personhood must be taken into consideration when we act as human beings. It is, once again, ubuntu. To hunt successfully, one must be in harmony with the world; only then can a hunter connect to *inua-the* spirit of the animals. It requires patience, grace and the use of every sense "to fly with, swim with walrus and ride Polar Bear to the moon."

Despite differences in languages and cultures among the indigenous people of the Americas, these principles of ubuntu extend from one end of the Americas to the other, uniting

almost every tribe in an invisible elemental web. A shaman in the Acandon rainforest of southern Mexico says, "What the people of the city do not realize is that the roots of all living things are tied together."

The Huichol Indians of the Sierra Madre in Central Mexico believe that we are all one with each other, all part of a great "cosmic dream." A Shuar Indian shaman from the Andes explained the world's interdependence by saying, "Your country is like this pebble." Then he threw it into the river. "Everything you do," he said, "ripples across the Mother." Another shaman remarked, "We are all connected, all brothers and sisters in the deepest possible sense, because we are the same, hatched from a common egg. We humans and everything we see, everything we touch, smell, hear, taste and feel with our sixth sense. We have the same mother." The Quechua of the Andes, the Maya of Central America and countless other tribes echo the same belief of interdependence and connection. The Maya's Basic Truth is that all life rests on three pillars: mineral, plant and animal. Each pillar is equal and each has a spirit. As humans, we are simply part of the animal pillar.

This spirit of connection can dissolve conflict and lead to remarkable solutions. In the Brazilian rainforest, the Kaxinawa Indians have formed the Alliance of the People of the Forest, a unique combination of indigenous groups and their former enemies, the rubber barons to protect against large scale mining and logging. The Kaxiwana concept of *Txai* (pronounced "chi"), which translates as, "half of what's in you is also in me, and half of what's in me is also in you" binds the group together.

An Ecuadorian shaman named Manco describes a Quechuan term that also has no corresponding word in western languages: to *camay*. *Camay* relies on the connection between all living things and loosely means "to breathe unity into." "When one of our parts is out of balance," he says, we can help bring them back. That is when we *camay*." As if describing ubuntu, Manco says, "We are all one, everything you see around you and way beyond, we are all branches of the same tree. We humans are the ones who need to be *camayed* - the community must remold itself."

### **Eastern and Middle Eastern Spiritual Practices**

Buddhists have believed for centuries that individualism runs contrary to the nature of reality and corrupts our relations with the world around us. "Ignorance or misapprehension of the nature of reality is at the root of our suffering," says spiritual teacher Chandrakṛti Nagarjuna. As with ubuntu, only a recognition of the true nature of reality-our interconnection and our corporate, as opposed to our separate, selves--will allow people to live from the heal.

In the 7th century, Fa-Tsang, founder of the Chinese Hua-Yan school of Buddhist thought, compared the universe to a network of jewels, each reflecting the other ad infinitum. The story goes that when the Empress Wu indicated that she did not understand this theory, Fa-Tsang suspended a candle in the middle of a room full of mirrors and explained that it represented the relationship of the One to the many.

Throughout Buddhist scripture, we see the importance of interconnectedness. Tantric Buddhism speaks of the cosmic web. The name of its scriptures, the Tantras, comes from a Sanskrit

root meaning "to weave". As a society, we have often looked outside ourselves for our leaders, and our gods. But because our connection to all living things makes us beings of unlimited potentiality, this outward search is the antithesis of our universality or ubuntu. Zen Masters teach that if you see the Buddha on the road, you should kill him as he is a false Buddha as the true Buddha lies within. Even Christians speak about the Kingdom of Heaven being within.

Acknowledgement of our universality does not strip us of our individual power; instead, it provides us with the internal strength and power of living things. When we see ourselves only as solitary individuals, we not only limit our potential but become disconnected from the pain, oppression or violence around us. We unplug. But when we view our world through the principles of ubuntu, of interconnectedness, we cannot ignore the sufferings of others or of the planet, for we are part of the whole that is suffering. Therefore, rather than feeling distant, through connecting to others' suffering, we cultivate our compassion. The Dalai Lama speaks of this potential:

If we were to apply this inter-connectedness to our perception of reality then we could gain a great insight from it. For instance, we would then be able to appreciate the interdependent nature of one's own and others' interests; how the interests and wellbeing of human beings is dependent upon the wellbeing of animals living on the same planet. Similarly, if we develop such an understanding of the nature of reality, we would also be able to appreciate the inter-connectedness between the well-being of human beings and the natural environment. We could also consider the present, the future and so forth. We would then be able to



cultivate an outlook on reality which is very holistic and has very significant implications.

Therefore, as with the Navajo's *k'e*, happiness depends upon taking care of everything, because everything relates to you.

Despite being separated from Native Americans by the Pacific Ocean, Buddhists possessed nearly identical views of nature and relationships. Thich Nhat Hahn, a Vietnamese Buddhist, echoed the sentiments of Black Elk and Chief Seattle when he wrote:

We classify other animals and living beings as nature, acting as if we ourselves are not part of it. We should deal with nature the way we should deal with ourselves; we should not harm nature. Harming nature is harming ourselves and vice versa. If we know how to deal with our self and with our fellow human beings, we would know how to deal with nature. Human beings are inseparable. Therefore, by not caring properly for any of these, we harm them all.

Buddhist philosophy also involves a concept of emptiness that is often misunderstood by westerners. Emptiness refers to the emptiness of our individuation, not to the entire non-existence of everything. It's as Archbishop Tutu told me "The individual is a contradiction in terms, we are corporate." His friend the Dalai Lama says that individuals are in reality "empty of inherent and independent status." He discusses the dramatic power of living from ubuntu, stating that "the nature of modern existence is such that the well-being, happiness and success of one's own community

are very connected with the well-being and interests of other communities, and other societies. In such a complex modern world there is no room for bigotry and racism."

Similar to *k'e* and ubuntu, ancient Buddhist philosophy recognizes that we are all woven together into an inseparable net. Even when we struggle to remain independent and separate from the rest of the world, we fail. Buddhists believe that our own internal world and the external world are two sides of the same coin. As Thich Nhat Hanh teaches, "When the second Buddha comes, (he/she) will not come as an individual, but as a community." Once again, ubuntu is the essence of being human.

Hinduism also resonates with ubuntu. According to the teachings of Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita, the many things around us are merely different manifestations of the same ultimate reality. This reality or oneness is called the Brahman, the essence of all things. When people are in touch with this point of unity, they recognize that despite superficial fragmentation, a universal wholeness exists. Even in a world filled with diversity, the world remains one.

One day a guru named Sankaracharya heard the footsteps of someone behind him and he called out, "Who is there?" They were the steps of one of his followers, who answered, "It is I." Sankaracharya said, "If this 'I' is so dear to you, then either expand it to infinity, as in knowing the universe as oneself, or renounce it altogether." To the Hindus, "egocentric thought"-what we might call excessive individualism-leads to chronic fragmentation, which can only produce human suffering. The disenfranchised individual can be reconnected to the whole through meditation and yoga.

The Hindus take ubuntu to the level of recognizing that the unity of all things, people, living creatures and the world around us are whole and one. In *The World of Swami Rama* a drop wept and said, "We are all so different from the sea." But the sea laughed at the drop and said: "We are all water."

In the Middle East, many people have turned to spiritual paths that downplay the individual and emphasize the fusion of the self with the collective or, in religious terms, with God. Sufism, for example, is not simply a religion, but a state of being, a spiritual state -"something to become, not something to merely read about."

Sufism focuses on the movement toward merging with God by moving away from the individual self. The proper manner of this movement involves letting go of attention to the self and other forms of self-worship. It is the antithesis of the dominant elements of our narcissistic culture. The greatest discipline of the Sufi is to live harmoniously among people; therefore, it is not a path of inner meditation, but one of actively living in balance with the outer world and with society. For Sufis, the *macrocosm is the microcosm*:

If the Whole is likened to the Ocean, and the part to a drop, the Sufi says that witnessing the ocean with the eye of a drop is impossible. However, when the drop becomes one with the Ocean, it sees the Ocean with the eye of the Ocean.

### **Pacific Native Cultures**

The Aboriginal culture in Australia has been around for over ten thousand years. Aborigines regard themselves as being formed of the same flesh. First and foremost, they are all members of

the same tribe. They also see themselves as interrelated with all aspects of nature, in an all-inclusive universe. Rain, fire, yams or honey ants merit the same respect as other kinsmen. All living things share a common life-stream. The Aborigine believes that animals' existence "is an echo of his own." The Creation came from a dream, and one's dreaming, the earth and everything on it are all linked together in consciousness. No room for separation in such a culture.

Anthropologist Robert Tonkinson describes the Mardu Aborigines' interdependent nature and moral universe as one populated solely with relatives. When strangers come into contact with the Mardu, they need only to establish a connection with one member of *the* group in order for the entire group to characterize the person as kin. This is *k'e* in action- some 5,000 miles from the Navajo Nation.

Aborigine culture is characterized by obligations and responsibilities for relatives. The willingness to give is the most significant indicator of self-worth. "Strong feelings of security and well-being stem from being enveloped in a cocoon of kin," says Topkinson, and "people talk with satisfaction about the good feelings that come from being surrounded by so many others who are 'one family,' 'one country' and 'one people.'" No words exist for feud or warfare. The Mardu have developed unique conflict resolution processes to defuse conflict and strong negative emotions, in order to bring about a "good feeling in the stomachs" of the principals. Before a child can walk or talk, the child must share food with others. A strong sense of compassion, known as *nyarru*, impels people to be generous and look after others. With no concept of suicide, no evidence of warfare, the Mardu live in the spirit of ubuntu.

Over a thousand years ago, the Polynesian ancestors of the Hawaiians brought to the islands fundamental value called *aloha aina* (*aina* meaning something that feeds us, or homeland). This guiding principle infuses the people with a deep love and respect for the land, the sea, and all life sustained by them. In the 1970's it became a rallying cry of Native seeking the restoration of their land and attempting to roll back the tide of materialism sweeping over the islands with the arrival of statehood.

Native Hawaiians see the world as alive and conscious. Humans are merely one of many species in nature, and all beings have rights and responsibilities toward one another. *Mana*, the basic spiritual essence, is present in everyone and everything, including the land. Extended families formed together in *ohanas* (literally, *off-shoots*) that operated cooperatively, making decisions in the best interests of the *ohana* as a whole. Everything relating to the individual lies within the matrix of *ohana*; the concept of the individual alone is unthinkable. *Ohanas* still serve as a cohesive force in some rural districts, surviving as mutual benefit associations, although American society continues to encroach upon these values.

According to traditional Hawaiian philosophy, separation is only an illusion. People are connected with others whom they meet through their invisible bodies, which are connected by a substance called *aka*. Thus, because of *aka*, there can be no real separation between one person and another, and because of *mana*, there can be no separation between each person and the world, or between each person and the universal energy or God. As one Hawaiian expression goes: Ho'omoe wai kahi ke kao'o. (Let's all travel together like water flowing in one direction).

## **18th and 19th Century Poets and Sages**

In the 19th century, a remarkable resurgence of the spirit of ubuntu arose in the western world, perhaps best recognized as Transcendentalism. Poet Walt Whitman, on the surface the epitome of the rugged individualist who was born free and boldly walked his own path, actually sang out the spirit of ubuntu. We are all *leaves of grass*, joined by a common root system: "I celebrate my self and what I assume you shall assume/For every atom belonging to me/as good belongs to you." Each of us, he declared are "a hub for the wheel'd universe."

Like Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, known for his famous essay, 'Self-Reliance,' always reconnected his thoughts to the universality of all things, calling attention to the "aboriginal self on which a universal reliance may be grounded." Similar to the Indigenous peoples of the world, Emerson saw how the universe is connected: "The swallow over my window should interweave that thread or straw he carries in his bill into my web also." Between humans, he exalted, "All men have my blood and I have all men's."

Henry David Thoreau, often held up as an example of stubborn Yankee individualism, also believed strongly in our connection to nature and believed that if we could only feel this again, our relationships to each other would be more harmonious. "The earth I tread on," he wrote in 1859, "is not a dead, inert mass; it is a body, has a spirit, is organic and fluid to the influence of its spirit." If humans could learn to reconnect to the "oversoul," the force that permeated everything in nature, he said, we could transcend the physical plane and perceive "the currents of the Universal Being" which bind the universe together. As in ubuntu, we, and the world around us, are corporate.

It's almost tautological to state it, but the Transcendentalists, of course, did not come out of a vacuum. Intimations and bold assertions of humanity's interconnectedness with each other and with the natural world, echoed across Europe. 18th century philosophers such as Hegel, reacting to the fragmentation of Europe, insisted that the self-realized individual required the activity of

others. He might well have been describing ubuntu when he wrote, "There is a formed system of complete interdependence wherein the livelihood, happiness and legal status of one man is interwoven with the happiness of all." Goethe wrote that "All that is outside, also is inside," and warned that, "All that a man undertakes, whether it be by deed or word, must spring from the totality of his unified powers. Everything isolated is harmful."

Across the Channel, Lord Tennyson described the only true self as being found in those rare instances. when individuality "seemed to dissolve and melt away into boundless being." Yeats asked, "Have not all races had their first unity from a polytheism that marries them to rock and hill?" William Blake called for a change in our clouded perceptions, saying that if the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is-infinite."

The Age of Separation is a relatively recent perception of our world in need of cleansing. Occasionally, today people still feel the call. They stop to appreciate the scent of a flower, take a slow walk through a park or the woods, look so transfixed at a majestic snow melt waterfall that they forget to take a picture, or stare at the magenta vista of a sunset and forget who they think they are. During these occasions, one can understand those moments.

Emerson described as times when man "awakens from his slumber and wonders at himself and his house [nature] and muses strangely at the resemblance betwixt him and it." This sense of unity with the living Earth, this ubuntu, brings a sense of peace and harmony to our disconnected senses. As John Muir described it, isn't it, "wonderful how completely everything in wild nature fits into us, as if truly part and parent of us? The sun shines not on us but in us."

But transcendentalism and non-dominant cultures are too often taught as historical and quaint artifacts instead of expressions of still living spirit and truth. How did it happen that we have traveled so far from this wide-spread understanding of ubuntu, to where people are so detached that they fail to understand our connection with nature and with each other and fail to take responsibility for their fellow inhabitants of our planet?

Western society has ignored for too long the ancient wisdom that can help us move out of this Age of Separation and into a new era of sharing, respect and responsibility - the Ubuntu Era. We can sometimes feel lost, isolated and hopeless in such a world. Yet we can stop and remember that all across the country and around the world, there are growing examples of creative and cooperative models re-energizing our schools, workplaces, laboratories, hospitals, communities and courtrooms. Each of us can draw strength from the power of these changes and can begin to find space for ubuntu in our artificially, needlessly busy lives and in our impersonal institutions. This is the path chosen by The Ubuntuworks Project – [www.ubuntuworks.org](http://www.ubuntuworks.org) – where we collaborate with organizations and individuals on research and strategies to move us locally and globally toward an era of ubuntu.

Those of us practicing alternative dispute resolution are operating in the spirit of ubuntu and are part of this historical continuum of breaking down *us vs them* and finding common ground. We no longer have to accept things as they have become. We have the collective strength within each of us to continue to make a difference. It is time to *camay* - to blow a sense of unity - into the institutions of the world with the power of ubuntu.