

I, Thou and We

A sermon by Seanan Holland, Intern Minister

In our reading we heard the commitments of Henry David Thoreau. He gives elegant words to what we might paraphrase in modern language as, “Bring it on!” It’s him against the world. And, to be sure, it is him *with* and *in* the world. But there aren’t a whole lot of other people out there on Walden Pond. This is for the most part an individual effort he’s describing.

However, Thoreau probably did have a little instigation from a fellow transcendentalist and Unitarian minister Ralph Waldo Emerson. In the Harvard Divinity School address of 1838, Emerson disappointed a lot of ministers by claiming that the spiritual experience did not need to be mediated by clergy or through church. Individuals could and should experience the divine independently.

There’s a story of how Emerson, Thoreau, and other transcendentalists evolved toward this idea that spirituality is largely an individual project. There’s a related story of how the United States became the place of rugged individualism – of frontiersmen and inventors. It begins with the Reformation and the Enlightenment that followed. It goes something like this:

Before the Reformation, the church was the final authority on life, death, and the nature of the universe. The church and the state, *such as they were at the time*, collaborated on preserving and promoting a certain understanding of the “truth.” Individual accomplishment and initiative were not widely championed – at least not if they didn’t support the established worldview. Then there was a great invention that changed things forever – the moveable type printing press. Literacy spread like luke-warm molasses. About a hundred years later, bibles were available and people started doing their own interpretation of scripture. The Enlightenment philosophers picked up where the theologians left off, and they submitted their theories on the nature of the human condition, the meaning of morality, and the essence of the physical world. With all of these books available, individuals started arriving at their own understandings of truth and meaning.

It wasn’t an easy piece of history. But we needed that story of individual enlightenment. Frankly, on a lot of points, the church and state were wrong – their view of the world didn’t match up with the world itself. It took some individual genius to challenge the establishment – people like Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, and Descartes.

There are many legacies of the Reformation and Enlightenment, but among the most significant, and perhaps the easiest to overlook, was simply that it gave us the legitimate authority to decide for ourselves, as individuals.

It’s a great story and it’s been taken up time and again in different settings and with different details. In my own reading, the culminating account of the now quintessential brand of American individualism is probably found in Ayn Rand’s famous novels: *Atlas Shrugged* and *The Fountainhead*.

We needed this story that focuses on the self; it’s an important response to the ancient practice of reserving dignity and worth for a few individuals at the expense of the many. We needed Descartes to tell us, in his famous dictum, how precious our own consciousness is: “I think, therefore I am.” We

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needed Immanuel Kant to provide a foundation for individual morality rather than reserving such authority for the church. We needed the Scottish philosophers to give us a theory of perception that starts with the individual.

We now understand that, as a world-view, the individual as the centerpiece of the universe is a bit short sighted. But it was important because the prevailing cultural flow at the time was that only a few should be privileged with the rights of the individual.

Whether we choose Ayn Rand's huge tome, or one that has perhaps more affinity with a Unitarian Universalist sense of egalitarianism, we need this story to know who we are as a people and to remind ourselves of what we can accomplish as individuals.

But there is a limit to the size of the myth you can make out of a rugged individual. Daniel Boone, Thomas Edison and even the mythic Paul Bunyan have limits. If nothing else, geography would finally be a limit. In 1896 at the Chicago World's Fair, historian Frederick Turner, in a now famous essay, stated that the frontier was closed.

Now,, it would be presumptuous of me to assume that I know all of what he meant in that statement. But it seems to me that he had to know that it could and would come to mean many different things to different people. One of which is that there is no longer any place for us to go where we can behave with impunity and not affect our neighbors. We are all neighbors now – since 1896 the population his tripled. In the roughly 50 years since *The Fountainhead* was published, the population has doubled.

Our neighbors are getting closer. Empathy has probably always been important to human civilization. But it is ever more important in our crowding world. Hopefully by now, we have all realized that we are indeed surrounded. And that rather simplifies the matter of what we humans should do in this crowding world. Make lemonade, bake a pie, greet a neighbor... imagine ourselves in someone else's shoes.

I have to believe that empathy was the touchstone, the foundation, of inspiring stories that reached, with compassion, beyond the towering icon of the individual, to acknowledge the sacred other – to acknowledge and honor, Thou.

We are inspired by the stories of

- Jane Adams who founded the Hull house – a ministry of sustenance, education and uplift,
- The story of Mother Theresa and her ministry for and with the poor,
- The story of Susan B. Anthony who championed women's rights to vote and own property.

All of these real people were working on behalf of others. They were honoring the sacred other through service. And their stories were woven together in our history and eventually came to stand alongside the mythic image of individualism.

This image, this story is one that we all hope for – that each person, each sacred other, would have the opportunity for...

- Education,
- rewarding work,
- the rights of free speech,

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- and the hope of living in relative peace.

If we modern people were careless with this image, if we were not attentive to the details of empathy and compassion, we could rework this narrative into a rather mechanical, and perhaps even sterile society. One in which each person was endowed with certain unalienable rights, and only a meager sense of responsibility to the good of the whole.

There is something proud and inspiring in the achievements of a single, heroic figure.

And

There is something noble in being of service to others; there is something hopeful in a society that dignifies the sacred other.

But is this really the limit of our options. Should we believe that the contest between self and other are really what we have to choose from? If one were to watch televised news for a few hours, I think it would be hard to believe otherwise.

If we choose a narrative with the self at the center of the universe, I think it is easy for us to see that this is not yet a complete story from which we can make meaning and that will be our ethical guide. We rely on the others in the communities of which we are a part.

If we choose a narrative with the sacred other at the center of the universe, or the center of our concern, it is much more difficult to find fault. The meaning we make of this story is sublime, noble, and worthy of emulation.

We need this story ... to keep us decent.

But the frontier is closed. The population is thick, and the resources of the world, though they may be enough, are finally limited. We have taken enormous steps in recognizing the worth of others and the dignity of Thou. But we have to go one step further than granting the rights of the privileged few to the many hungry – to stop short would guarantee the disappearance of our limited natural resources.

And this is where I struggle. When I hear the pundits and politicians, it too often seems that they are selecting a part of one narrative and pitting it against the other. In our polarized politics, the sacred self and the sacred other are framed in opposition.

The other day I saw a bumper sticker that said global warming was a financial scheme by which a few would get rich quick. I have no doubt that there is someone out there who is trying to make money off of global warming. But why implicate an individual at the expense of the many.

Debates about taxes are framed this way: Why should one person pay taxes to support another person. Whether it is the environment, taxes, crime, or the economy, we seem to be stuck in this oppositional paradigm that pits the mythology of the individual against the mythology of the other.

All the while, we fail to see that we are all in this together, and desperately in need of a new mythology.

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A few months ago, Rev. Strauss invoked an image by the Spanish artist Jose de Goya. It bears repeating here. In the painting, two men, knee deep in quicksand, are fighting each other with clubs. It's hard for me not to want to reach in to that painting and point out the obvious – that they are both in the quicksand together.

What would a narrative of interdependence look like? We UUs are sometimes a little bit iffy about scripture and narratives – too often they have been used to usurp reality. We do like our facts. But life involves some mystery, and facts need a story of meaning. Even the Big Bang has some mystery in it – what was there before the Big Bang? Regardless of how accurate the theory is, or how much room it makes for mystery, the Big Bang isn't very satisfying as a moral compass. We could try Evolution, but that one comes with a lot of inherited baggage. Survival of the fittest isn't very redemptive. Anthropology would be a good start, but we'd still have to include some Biology before we could get to the anthropology.

The stories we might make out of particular scientific disciplines leave us with the difficulty of incompleteness – a single branch of science doesn't strive to make a complete world-view. But researchers are beginning to synthesize various disciplines in ways that reveal our interconnectedness. Historians of science are piecing together bits of cosmology and anthropology, bits of geo-physics and evolutionary biology to reveal our origins. Paleontologists, archeologists and geneticists are tracing our migrations and describing the history of culture. It is still not clear where the trajectories of economics and national security are pointed.

We can ask ourselves, what narrative would be compelling enough, that when the political stick fighting began, we could reach into the news anchor who was hosting the debate, and remind him that we are all in this together, and the old narratives don't play anymore – at least not without the new one. When the talk turned to economics and national security, we would be ready with the story of our interconnectedness.

Alongside a few pictures of this marvelous Earth, taken by the Apollo 8 crew, we have an opportunity to blend together scientific reality and the mysteries that exist beyond our finite lives. We have an opportunity to shape a new narrative that is rich enough to describe the fragile world we live in, to be a moral compass for our perfectly imperfect human condition, and that reflects the truth of our interconnectedness.

The fragility of our mutual dependence has been revealed many times in just the last decade. In the winter of 2007, a nation-wide collapse of bee colonies threatened almost a third of our food production capability. The verdict is still out on whether or not we could have predicted last year's financial collapse, but let us think of all the things we value, and realize how much of the web of life is balanced precariously on the dollar.

Perhaps it is naïve to think we might intervene in our current political and economic situation with something as simple as a story. But I have to believe that it was our human capacity to reside in our stories that brought us to this moment. And it is the same capacity that might restore and sustain the web of life.

Amen

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