

Interdependence: Interrogated and Affirmed?
Remarks by Rev. Steven Epperson
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UCV

In preparation for the 1992 UN Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, the David Suzuki Foundation issued a “Declaration of Interdependence” whose final section, “This we resolve,” ends with these statements: *All this that we know and believe must now become the foundation of the way we live. At this turning point in our relationship with the Earth, we work for evolution: from dominance to partnership; from fragmentation to connection; from insecurity to interdependence.*” Since that time, the word interdependence has become such a commonplace in our world that it is at risk of becoming a cliché devoid of heft, consequence and bite. In the sciences and economics, in politics, journalism, religion and elsewhere, we just have become accustomed to the assertion that “we live in an interdependent world.”

Reviewing documents from the mid 90s, I’m struck by what people perceived then, and in the coming decades, of the promise and perils of a world made smaller by global commerce, communication, military security, natural resources use, and what some writers called social stewardship—that is long-range efforts to improve public health, fostering democracy, human rights and a more equitable distribution of resources and wealth.

Some of the impacts of interdependence have been of tangible benefit: rates of dire poverty have significantly decreased. For example, strengthened international ties with developing nations has meant that millions of farmers who have transitioned from subsistence and self-provision to production for export have seen their markets, profits and wealth grow. Ideas move far more freely and instantaneously around the world, with outcomes that include making what were local norms of human rights and environmental protection global in scope; and forcing heretofore hidden practices of oppression and corruption out into the open and

subject to international scrutiny and censure. If not for the internet, for example, and the intervention of Unitarian Universalists all over the world, the Burundian Unitarian minister who will be visiting with us next week would still be languishing in prison in his home country. Today, he is free, safe and serving as an intern minister in Saskatoon and has been reunited with his family.

But I think we know that there is a flip side to interdependence. Those same farmers lifted from poverty through global commerce are now vulnerable to the vagaries of the market. Canadian kids kick around inexpensive soccer balls stitched together by their peers in Pakistani sweatshops. We wear clothes sewn in unsafe Mauritian and Bangladeshi factories where workers' rights are a cruel dream. And we've seen how the impacts of job insecurity, stagnant and lower wages in the so-called developed world have become acute and politically significant—and not in good ways. As well, in an interdependent world, too many governments farm out the responsibilities for formulating draconian domestic economic policy to unaccountable international organizations hoping to avoid the blame for the resulting social and economic pain at home.

And do I need to add that insults to the environment, organized crime, disinformation and terrorism know nothing of national and continental borders?

Finally, people who study systems and organizations have noted that interdependence gives rise to all kinds of complex uncertainties which organizations seek to reduce through mergers, centralization, government regulation, and warfare—economic and by force of arms.

We live in an interdependent world—and there are consequences for both good and woe. And I find myself responding accordingly. At times, there is something distressing and overwhelming about it all, and I feel this urge to plant and tend my own garden and “sit under

my own vine and fig tree.” (As it says in *Candide* and Micah 4:4) Other times, I resonate with deep satisfaction to the cross-pollination of cultures and to the tangible gains made to improve public health, the rule of law, and the ways so many have been lifted out of extreme poverty.

And there is something aesthetically and emotionally pleasing to contemplate something like the interconnected hidden life of trees and fungi, the intergalactic cosmic web, and the uncanny, creative and transforming energies of Nature pouring out into all the orders of the world great and small—all of which speak of cooperative engagement and beneficial enmeshment in the interconnected web of all existence of which we are a part.

Over two thousand years ago, the Roman playwright Terence wrote: “*I am human, and therefore nothing human is alien to me.*” Today, given what we know, it’s as though we can and perhaps ought to say that: “*I am human; therefore **nothing** is alien to me.*” This is what living in an interdependent world can give us—a vision intimate, capacious and consequential.

Which brings me to my final remarks. Exactly a year ago, at our Annual Meeting, delegates from across Canada approved a new Vision Statement for the Canadian Unitarian Council which reads: *As Canadian Unitarians and Universalists, We envision a world in which our interdependence calls us to love and justice.*

And I want to say this—in this statement we move from the fact of interdependence to spiritual and ethical duty—that is, to love and justice. That move happens and is justified because of one word: *our*—“our interdependence.” I take this plural possessive to be profoundly inclusive like when an elder begins an invocation by saying “*all our relations*”—and I’ve come to learn what that means: relationship extends across and between all living and non-living beings and things. And where there is relationship, our faith tradition, among others, speaks prophetically of a call to us to respond with love and justice.

More than ever, we need the transformative knowledge of *our interdependence*—what MLK Jr. called that “single garment of destiny...that inescapable network of mutuality.”

May we glory in this vision as we act with love and justice toward and with “all our relations.”

See: Declaration of Interdependence, <http://www.davidsuzuki.org/about/declaration/>
Laurie Mazur and Susan Sechler, “Global Interdependence and the Need for Social Stewardship,” http://www.rbf.org/sites/default/files/attachments/global_interdependence_social_stewardship.pdf
Randall W. Stone, “Institutions, Power and Interdependence,” https://www.princeton.edu/~hmliner/Conference_files/KEOHANE/stone.pdf
Donald Chisholm, *Coordination without Hierarchy: Informal Structures in Multiorganizational Systems*, <http://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=ft4d5nb38m>