

“Am I My Brother’s Keeper?”
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For the last couple of weeks and for a couple more we have talked about and will be talking about Interdependence. We are reflecting on the significance of our 7th UU principle through which we affirm our “respect of the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.”

This is often thought of as our “green” principle, our environmentally friendly principle, and indeed, when it was proposed in the mid-eighties as an addition to our other six, it was most certainly rooted in biology and ecosystems.

But as it turns out, what is true for one kind of system tends to be true of others as well. System is the key word. A system is, by one definition, “an assemblage or combination of things or parts forming a complex or unitary whole.”

Yes, it’s true, if we spill oil into the gulf and it affects the algae, it will also affect the next critter up in the food chain of that ecosystem. It is also true that if you take the innards of a clock, and damage one of the gears in the gear train, the whole mechanical system as a whole will be impacted. The clock will stop keeping time.

And the same is true of human systems, including family systems. We are all connected, and what we do affects others. If one of us stops functioning in some way or another, perhaps due to mental or physical illness, or stress, or addiction, the whole system feels the affects.

“Family systems theory” says that individuals are component parts of the whole – the family – and therefore, cannot be considered in isolation. Instead of identifying a single patient, family systems therapists consider the whole and how the constituent parts interact. They posit that if one person is able to change his or her behavior, the whole system will change.

One of the most prolific writers to come out of the family systems therapeutic field is Harriet Lerner who has spent a professional lifetime writing accessible and popular books for a mostly female audience about family systems...*The Dance of Anger, The Dance of Intimacy, The Dance of Fear, The Mother Dance*, and others.

In her 2001 book, *The Dance of Connection*, Lerner paints a portrait in words of the ideal family. As I read it, I invite you to think of your own family – either your family of origin or your immediate family...or both...and think about how it compares to this one. She writes,

The ideal family encourages the unfolding of each family member’s true, authentic voice, promoting a sense of unity and belonging (the “we”), while respecting the separateness and differences of individual members (the “I”). Parents calmly enforce rules that guide a

child's behavior, but they don't attempt to regulate the child's emotions or ideas. In this way, they create a safe space where kids can feel free to speak and be themselves.

Family members are comfortable sharing honest thoughts and feelings on even the most emotionally laden subjects without getting nervous about differences. Information flows freely, different points of view are respected, and difficult issues are discussed frankly. The emotional climate of family life is warm, spontaneous, and relaxed, so that children feel free to ask direct questions over time about whatever concerns them. Kids trust their parents to tell them the truth about important matters or, when appropriate, to say that some things are private and will not be shared. Children are seen objectively for who they really are, not through the distorted lens of what a parent wishes, fears, or needs them to be.

The parents are richly connected to each other and to their own families of origin, and together they model a vibrant, equal partnership in which conflict can be creatively addressed and resolved. Both parents can speak their minds and resolve their differences. Every now and then there's a good blowup (only dysfunctional parents never fight), but afterward the adults get their reactivity in check and offer a heartfelt apology when that's appropriate. No family member has to deny or silence an important aspect of the self in order to belong and be heard.¹

So...does that portrait describe your family? How is that like or unlike your own? If you're beginning to despair because the family she describes is almost unrecognizable to you, don't fret! She says that in all of her years of experience, she hasn't met the perfect family yet. And she goes on to say that a dysfunctional family is "any family with more than one person in it."²

The truth is, sometimes our families may encourage the unfolding of every member's unique authentic voice, and other times they don't. I suspect that most of us who are parents have – or will - at one time or another attempted to regulate our children's emotions or ideas...even if we hated it when our own parents did the same to us. And much of the time, many of us are exceedingly uncomfortable talking with our family members about topics on which we know there will be disagreement.

Families are like laboratories where we experiment a little and can learn a lot. We start out as children, utterly dependent on our parents, needing them...relying on them...for our very survival. Over time, starting when we're about two or three, and then again with a vengeance as teenagers, we begin to experiment with pulling away from our parents in small ways, with saying no, with having our own opinions, and with asserting ourselves. We begin to assert our growing sense of freedom...our independence.

And we begin to see how our parents will react. Will they let us be ourselves? Or will they insist on our being someone that they prefer instead? Is it safe to say what we think...what we feel? Will our feelings and thoughts be respected, even if our parents disagree with us?

¹ Lerner, Harriet, *The Dance of Connection*, (New York: Harper, 2001), p. 25-26.

² *Ibid.*, 28.

We learn some powerful lessons in our families of origin. Don't we? And as we grow we begin to develop the sense of self – stronger or weaker – that we will carry with us into our adult relationships.

Since most of us probably didn't grow up in the ideal family – no matter how loving and warm and positive our experiences may have been in many ways – many of us have probably struggled quite a bit as adults to develop and maintain a strong sense of authentic self in our relationships...be they intimate relationships or friendships or relationships with other family members. Some of us have probably found ourselves floundering at times in that regard...losing, at least temporarily, our sense of self.

Harriet Lerner writes that her father “chose to have relationships at the expense of having a self...”³ It was her mother who made all of the decisions, believing that her husband wasn't capable, even though he was a very intelligent man. And he went along with almost every decision she made because he so dreaded conflict...that is, difference.

The term “codependence” was first developed in the addictions field to describe some of those family members in relationships with alcohol and drug addicted person, but it doesn't apply only to families with addiction stories. Some have described codependence as “relying on others to provide what we are not able to provide for ourselves” emotionally. Or as “unhealthy psychological dependence.” Or as “the need to be needed.” Some signs of possible codependence include the following:

The tendency to place the needs and desires of others ahead of our own...even to the exclusion of our own...

Difficulty identifying what we're feeling...or sharing our opinions...or making decisions...

A fear of being rejected or abandoned...and therefore the tendency to compromise our own values and preferences to avoid being rejected...

The need to be needed by others...

The tendency to worry excessively about how others feel about us or think about us...

The tendency to have our self-esteem depend on the approval of others...

Which, perhaps strangely, makes me think of Cain, Adam and Eve's first-born child about whom we heard this morning in our reading.

You'll recall that Cain was the crop farmer and his younger brother Abel was a shepherd...a keeper of sheep. Cain makes an offering to God. God's not that impressed. Abel makes an offering to God. God loves Abel's offering. Cain gets mad. He doesn't get the approval from his divine father figure that he clearly desires.

³ Ibid., 23.

God says, “If you do well, you’ll be accepted,” which, in the context of the sermon today, sounds awful. It sounds a lot like God is not seeing his child objectively for who he really is, but through the lens of what God wishes he were. Cain is not accepted for who he is and what he has to offer.

But God goes on to say, “If you don’t do well, sin – your own jealousy and anger – will be lurking at the door. You must master that,” says God. In other words, “if you aren’t the recipient of another’s approval, you let it affect you too much! You let your emotion get away from you. You let it guide you rather than allowing yourself to be guided by your reason and your principles. It’s almost like God’s predicting what will become of Cain.

And Cain doesn’t listen. Instead of controlling his anger and jealousy, he lets them take control of him. He takes his brother Abel to a field and murders him.

And then the famous line... When confronted by God, Cain says, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Totally sarcastic. One version of the bible translates it, “Am I his babysitter?” Keeper, after all, is the same word used earlier when we learn that Abel was a “keeper of sheep.” One “keeps” livestock. One “keeps” babies. One looks after them. One “keeps” something – or someone – that is utterly dependent and in need of being kept. To “keep” is to be responsible for something. One does not “keep” one’s brother.

“What? Am I his babysitter?” says Cain defiantly.

To which God replies, “Oh, Cain! What have you done?”

“Am I my brother’s keeper?” These words have come to stand for the unwillingness of many of us humans to accept responsibility for the welfare of others.

But I’ve begun to wonder if the story is there in the Bible, partly to show our very human and very common ambivalence. The predominant message of the Bible for Jews and Christians is that we are supposed to love our neighbors as ourselves and treat others the way we want to be treated and stop along the road to help the foreigner who’s been mugged. But here’s the alternative voice, the one that says, “Wait! Are we really responsible for each other?”

And no wonder we’re ambivalent about it sometimes. Isn’t that the very question to which someone in a co-dependent relationship with an alcohol-addicted mate might answer, “yes?” Yes, I am responsible for his drinking. Yes, I am responsible for making him stop drinking. Yes, I am responsible for his unhappiness. And a part of us – the healthy part – hears such a response and screams, from the bottom of our lungs, “NO!”

I’ve been working with Katelynn a lot on prepositions this summer. She’s a very good ball thrower, having started early throwing balls for the dogs. She has good strength and good aim. So now I’m talking with her about the difference between throwing a ball for the dog...and throwing a ball to a person...and throwing a ball at someone or at the dog. These are important little words that carry a good deal of meaning!

And so, in response to Cain's retort, I can almost hear God, the frustrated parent of a mouthy, rebellious teenager saying, "No, Mr. Sarcastic! You're not his babysitter. He's a grown up. You're not responsible FOR him. But you are still responsible TO him. For you're both part of this family, this interconnected, mutually-dependent system of people.

For that is precisely what interdependence is...that state of being mutually dependent upon and mutually responsible to one another...whether we're talking ecosystems or family systems.

In families, interdependence then requires that individual selves can maintain their sense of self, while also being fully part of the whole. Some theorists call this "self-defining" and "staying in touch." And it can be hard to do both at the same time.

If we only self define, but don't stay in active, engaged relationship with the others in the system, we are merely expressing our independence. And, of course, if we lose our healthy sense of self, we are in danger of engaging in codependent relationships. True interdependence requires both. As Harriet Lerner puts it,

"The challenge in all intimate relationships is to preserve both the "I" and the "we" without losing either when the going gets tough."⁴ Interdependence has everything to do with learning to balance ones own needs with the needs of others in relationship.

As another writer puts it,

A person with a well-differentiated "self" recognizes his realistic dependence on others, but he can stay calm and clear headed enough in the face of conflict, criticism, and rejection to distinguish thinking rooted in a careful assessment of the facts from thinking clouded by emotionality. Thoughtfully acquired principles help guide decision-making about important family and social issues, making him less at the mercy of the feelings of the moment.⁵

As we prepare to move on from this sermon into the reflective time of our anthem, I invite you to spend a few quiet moments thinking about your own relationships. Think about those people on whom you depend and who also depend on you...

I will leave you with some questions for now...and we'll continue our reflection with the prayer and silence that follows...For now...

Think of a relationship, past or present, in which you've had trouble expressing yourself or being yourself or even finding yourself...

Has that been a challenge for you? Finding your own authentic voice in relationship and speaking up?

⁴ Ibid., 105.

⁵ www.thebowencenter.org/pages/conceptds.html

Why do you think that is? What lessons did you learn early on to dissuade you? And from whom?

What has it cost you to not be able to be fully yourself? And are you in some ways still paying that price?

And now, think, too, of an example of a relationship, past or present, in which you have had trouble staying in touch...a relationship in which you've used distance...either emotional or physical...to protect your sense of self?

And what have been the costs to you...and to your family...of maintaining that distance?

Because there are always costs to others. That is the nature of systems. Other people's behavior affects us, and ours affects them.