

Seven of Nine (one of 7,000,000,000)

Rev. Lisa Doege

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Nora UU Church, Hanska, MN

“The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.”

These words are among the most well known of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, whose birthday we observe this weekend. Except they aren't his. Not originally. The core idea comes from Unitarian minister and activist Theodore Parker who wrote “I do not pretend to understand the moral universe. The arc is a long one. My eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by experience of sight. I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice.”

Theodore Parker was an outspoken advocate of abolition in the mid 19th century. Martin Luther King, Jr. was the most prominent leader of the civil rights movement of the mid 20th century. So it is not surprising that the one influenced the thought and even the speech of the other. This morning I'm interested in the beliefs each man held about the relationship between the individual and the larger community. We heard early Reverend King's statement about the inescapable network of mutuality. Reverend Parker, in a sermon about women, wrote thus of both men and women:

Every person, man or woman, is an integer, an individual, a whole person, and also a portion of the race, and so a fraction of humankind. Well, the rights of individualism are not to be possessed, developed, used and enjoyed by a life in solitude, but by joint action. Accordingly, to complete and perfect the individual man or woman, and give each an opportunity to possess, use, develop and enjoy these rights, there must be concerted and joint action: else individuality is only a possibility, not a reality. So the individual rights of woman carry with them the same domestic, social, ecclesiastical and political rights as those of man.

I like Parker's mathematical understanding of the relationship between the individual and the community - the idea that a person is at once an integer, whole unto himself/herself, and a fraction of humankind. We live in a country where a Bill of Rights of individuals comprise the first ten amendments to the Constitution. And we live in an age when talk of rights fill our public conversation - often those same rights guaranteed in the Bill of Rights. But there are some voices, often and especially in the wake of tragedies such as the shooting in Arizona last week, reminding us that rights come with responsibilities. Nations, and communities of all sizes, shapes and character, grant and

guarantee individual members certain rights, and demand of them certain responsibilities in return. In each community individual members are both integers, whole in and of themselves, and fractions of the greater whole. And from book clubs to country clubs, from local municipalities to states to nations, all communities are based upon and function as a result of particular understandings of the relationship between the fraction/integer individual and the whole. Those understandings, however, can and do vary greatly from community to community.

One of my best friends in high school was our class valedictorian. M was not only bright, but also funny and surprisingly naive in certain situations. M and I played together in marching band, competed together in quiz bowl, traveled to the Hague together for a Model United Nations, and took many of the same college prep classes. And both M and I are the second born in our families. That's where the similarities ended, however. I'm about as middle American as you be. M was born in South America to Asian parents. She lived in a single parent household, along with an older brother, and twin younger sisters. Her mom worked long hours in the extended family restaurant. To my eyes it appeared that M and her siblings were left to their own devices much of the time. And M often seemed a bit bewildered by my family's claims on my time and attention.

Weeknight family supper, Sunday mornings at church followed by Sunday dinner, family outings and trips and various together times were routine events in my life. My parents expected me to show up and participate and I expected it of myself. It almost never occurred to me to protest or absent myself from family life. But M was taken aback each time I had to turn down a suggested a social or cultural outing due to family obligations.

Our different experiences, M's and mine, truly were not a matter of right and wrong. Just different family systems, different expectations. The example of our two families comes to mind whenever I think about what it means to be a member of a community. Communities have different expectations of their respective members, but they all have expectations, rights and responsibilities that belong to their collective members. In the community of my family communal meals, church attendance and family camping trips as well as visits to grandparents and other relatives and family friends were expectations. M's family undoubtedly had different expectations. If I had to guess, I'd say those were probably functioning at a high level of autonomy, working in the family restaurant, and excelling academically.

As my family of origin grew older and no longer lived together in the same home, city or even state, our expectations and responsibilities toward the family community shifted. Regular communal meals and shared church attendance fell away. Regular

communication--through letters and phone calls and eventually electronic media--came to the forefront as a primary expectation.

I'm wearing my communicator button this morning. If you've watched *Star Trek the Next Generation* or *Deep Space Nine* or *Voyager* you might recognize it. While the Kirk and Spock and the rest of the crew from the original series used hand-held communicators that inspired contemporary flip-phones, on the newer series crew members communicated with one another by tapping the insignia on their uniforms to activate it and then simply spoke normally. At the height of popularity of the newer Star Trek wave you could buy shiny, realistic-looking communicator pins from novelty catalogs, but this one is home-made. Several years back my sister and I made one for every member of our family. We'd each wear one whenever a member of the family had something big going on--job interview or travel or medical procedure--claiming that we could offer better support by staying in constant, instant communication. It was a game of sorts, but also a reminder of two central expectations and responsibilities in our family--staying in touch with one another and offering support to one another.

Despite my communicator pin, my Spock ears, and my complete set of original series Pez dispensers, I don't really count myself among those--and there are many--who see deep and universal meaning in the Star Trek universe, drawing from it all sorts of philosophical insight and spiritual sustenance. I'm simply a fan. However, Star Trek often does come to mind when I think about community, and the relationship between the individual and the whole. In fact, other Trekkies out there may have recognized that the first part of this morning's sermon title, *Seven of Nine*, comes from *Star Trek*.

In *The Next Generation* and the other newer series there exists a new alien race even more feared than the Romulans. The Borg is a race of partially bionic life forms whose catch phrase is "resistance is futile. You will be assimilated." Upon encountering new races the Borg assimilate all useful knowledge and technology into their own culture and destroy whatever is left over, wiping out whole races whenever and wherever they encounter them. But assimilation and destruction are perhaps only the second most terrifying characteristic of the Borg.

The most terrifying characteristic of the Borg is their collective nature. There is no individual Borg. One might encounter what looks like a single Borg or a group of individual Borg, but those individual looking bodies all share the same consciousness. There is no "I" in the Borg vocabulary and there are no names either; simply designations. Seven of Nine, for example, being the seventh fraction of a whole comprised of nine fractions. But fractions only, not also integers. These creatures have no individual thoughts, no individual feelings or personality. In order to accomplish the

many tasks necessary for survival and conquering other races, the entire Borg collective is broken down into smaller units of nine or five or twenty or other number of members. And the fractions of those units are capable moving and acting with a limited degree of independence from one another, but always toward the same end, always with the thoughts or voices of the rest of the unit sounding in their heads, always and only as a fraction of the whole.

Various episodes of the different series and even one of the newer motion pictures play with the consequences of such a collective existence, examining what might happen if a single Borg is separated from the collective, for example, or begins to develop an individual consciousness. The inevitable moral, since these shows are written by human beings, is that the will of the individual, given even the slightest chance, will always triumph. Seven of Nine will become simply a woman called Seven, if removed from the collective and loved and valued as an individual. Third of Five becomes a teenage boy called Hugh, when befriended by the Enterprise crew.

In our society we live and move in and among communities, but not collectives. I'm Lisa, not Second of Three or Fourth of Five. Living in community is vastly different than living in isolation and vastly different than living in a collective. (By the way, I'm speaking here of living in community in the most general sense. Not of living in an intentional community such as a commune or monastery or convent). Living in community--whether the community is a country, a village, a Scout troop, or the global community of humanity--means that neither the rights of the individual nor the benefit of the whole take precedent at all times and in all situations. When we choose to be part of a greater whole we agree to execute a delicate and fluid dance. Individual and whole. Whole and individual. Sometimes, again in the words of Star Trek, *the needs of the one outweigh the needs of the many*. And sometimes the needs of the many outweigh the privileges or preferences of the one--though very, very rarely if at all do the needs of the many outweigh the rights of the one.

Individuals serve communities. Dr. King makes that point in his *Letter from the Birmingham Jail*. He went to Birmingham as an individual member of the larger community of the Christian South, to help call that city back to its better self.

And communities serve individuals. Mitch Albom is reminded of such by both the Rabbi and the office staff at the temple. The community watches over and guides individual members in danger of straying. And the community keeps track of individual members, remembering who they are and where they came from and knowing where they've

gone. Not as a spy agency keeping a dossier, but as a loving sanctuary, intent on preserving a tie, so that the individual, no matter how far he may stray or how long she might be gone, is always known and remembered and welcome when he returns, she returns.

Nora Church is but one of many communities of which each of us is a part. And Nora Church is in turn an individual member of several larger communities--the Prairie Star District, the Unitarian Universalist Association, Brown County, rural Hanska. We are all of us, all of the time, juggling our individual existence and our belonging. It is a complex way of life, at times confusing and frustrating, as when M and I would bump up against each other's understanding of family and responsibility. But there is beauty here, too, and grace in the dance and in the juggling. Together, if we choose, we call ourselves to our greater nature. Together, if we choose, we remember the forgotten and elevate the downtrodden. Together, if we choose, we set the individual aglow with possibility and the community alight with hope.

This weekend we commemorate one of the great teachers. A man who died reshaping communities because he dreamed of individuals, a society of individuals judged by the content of their characters, not by their collective ethnic background. If his dream is our dream today, then let us choose. Amen.