

Principle Connections

Delivered by Joseph Bednarik to Olympic UU Fellowship on April 25, 2021

Connections are a particular focus of the principles of Unitarian Universalism, as stated in our concluding principle, number seven: Respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part.

Consider those phrases “interdependent web” and “all existence.” Which essentially means that you—your discrete individual self—can find a connecting path—however slender and tenuous—to anything else in the Universe. Sort of like a cosmic version of that parlor game “Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon,” which asserts that within six moves you connect *any* Hollywood actor who has ever lived—through their film work—to Kevin Bacon.

For those of you who may need a briefing, Kevin Bacon is a movie actor whose done lots of movies and became a heartthrob in the 1980s for his starring role in the “dancing vs. religion” teen rebellion flick *Footloose*.

So every actor who has ever worked in Hollywood has what’s called a “Bacon Number.” Kevin Bacon, of course, is Zero. Anyone who has worked directly with Bacon has a score of 1, and so on. And because miracles occur, there is an astounding website—no doubt conceived of and constructed by a passionate Humanist—called “The Oracle of Bacon.”

The Oracle of Bacon will determine any actor’s Bacon Number, as well as provide the connections in that particular web to getting there.

For example, consider the great comedian of silent films, Charlie Chaplin, who was in the movie:

- *Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?* with James Cagney who was in
- *Ragtime* with Elizabeth McGovern who was in
- *She’s Having a Baby* with... wait for it... Kevin Bacon!

So Charlie Chaplin, who was born in 1889—the same year that Grover Cleveland served as President—has a Bacon Number of 3.

The highest score, of course, is 6.

And let me tell you: I played around with the Oracle of Bacon for *much too long* and I never discovered a score higher than three.

Even that loyal dog Lassie has a Bacon Number of 3.

On first glance, this seems *astounding*, though in reality it is fundamentally math that proves how connected we really are. And to hammer this particular nail one more time: I have an Abraham Lincoln Number of five, because:

1. I have shaken the hand of a person who has
2. shaken the hand of a person who has
3. shaken the hand of a person who has
4. shaken the hand of a person who
5. shook the hand of Abraham Lincoln.

Because: Back in the 1950s, a man who dressed like Abe Lincoln, complete with overcoat and top hat and who served as the connecting node of “shaken the hand, shaken the hand, shaken the hand” visited a grammar school in Chicago and shook the hand of my friend George.

George and I have shaken hands many times.

And if *we* have ever shaken hands in the sanctuary at OUUF, I hope it comes as welcome news that *you* have a Lincoln Number no higher six.

In fact, let’s just do that virtually right now. Welcome aboard! And if ever you meet my friend George, shake his hand and you’ll drop down to five!

So yes, yes, yes... we get it, we get it... the interdependent web of all existence is an undeniable truth, as it is an undeniable fact that we—by our very existence—are a part of that web.

There is no escaping this existential fact. And to take it one step both further *and* farther: This interdependent web, per se, is not two dimensional and flat. It is, rather, multi-dimensional, shooting off in all directions and backwards and forwards in time.

So the next time you hear Crosby, Stills, and Nash perform that Joni Mitchell song “Woodstock” and they get to that rousing chorus, they sing scientific truth:

We are stardust
We are golden
Billion year old carbon

As scientist and writer David Hamilton states in his article “You Are Made of Stardust,” the “basic components of everything within you and around you were made in a star and you are deeply connected to all of it.”

He explains, in layperson’s terms, the lives and deaths of stars, the explosions, the vast scattering of elements, then that slow re-formation of material, and I quote: “Eventually gravity draws this stardust together to form planets like the Earth. Everything on Earth, from rocks, stones, water, crystals, to all living things like people, animals, insects, birds, fish, grass, trees and flowers, is made of this stardust.

Every atom of your DNA is stardust. Every atom in your skin, blood, and bones is stardust. Every atom of the oxygen you breathe is stardust.

You are an intimate part of the whole universe. You are made of stars. The universe gave birth to you and you contain its essence within yourself. You might say that *you* are a form that the universe is currently taking.” Close quote.

So not only can you trace back to Abraham Lincoln, you can also trace back to an exploding star and make a scientifically sound claim that *you* are the form that the universe is currently taking.

To circle back to the chorus of that Joni Mitchell song, let’s add the final two lines, which take on a religious and spiritual tone. Here is the entire chorus:

We are stardust
We are golden
Billion year old carbon
Caught in the devil’s bargain
And we’ve got to get ourselves back to the garden

Reeling all the Bacon Numbers and Lincoln Numbers back in, let's consider the You Numbers—as in Y-O-U—the You who are the center-point, the foundational Zero Number of *your* life, of the Universe as expressed through you—with all your myriad Ones connected to and passing through you: family and friends and neighbors and cashiers and plumbers and bakers and tax attorneys and chiropractors and garbage collectors.

Everyone who plays a direct person-to-person role in your life... You realize, I trust, that this is the “of which you are a part” portion of our seventh principle, that you are a vital *connector* in the interdependent web of all existence.

You are a node of connections and radiating out from you are scores and hundreds and thousands of fellow creatures made of stardust.

How healthy are your connections—your *relations*—with all these creatures who are living within the first and primary radiance of *your* portion of the interdependent web of all existence?

Yes, you heard that phrase correctly: “Primary radiance.”

Everyone in this multi-dimensional and interdependent web practices “primary radiance.”

And I think this is where “Respect” as in the “*Respect* for the interdependent web of all existence” comes into play most intensely: within the direct influence of your primary radiance.

Sort of like that bumper sticker that reads “Think globally, act locally.”

Because for me, at least, the “interdependent web of all existence” is a vast and flossy concept, sort of like being encouraged to respect the Milky Way. Whereas if I am guided to respect the primary radiance between me and my childhood friend who apparently has become a virulent anti-vaxxer and pandemic denier—and likes to remind everyone of that fact on Facebook with quote-unquote “scientific” posts—well that's a different matter entirely.

A difficult matter.

With apologies to those among us here this morning, who may be pandemic deniers, one thing our global pandemic has shown us—beyond a shadow of a doubt—is the interconnected web of our existence on Earth.

Within months of its first appearance, the virus spread and mutated and brought the world to its knees. Nearly 150 million people have been infected, with over three million deaths worldwide and over 500,000 dead in this country alone. Math and “Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon” tells us that we are not too far removed from someone who has died from Covid.

Armed with this fact, with a virus circulating, with the fragility of this planet in high relief, I hope that we are being inspired to care for our particular portion of the interdependent web—care for it physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually—and by maintaining healthy relations with those plants and animals and people in our direct contact.

In essence, making certain that our primary radiance is bright and beaming.

And believe me, I get it: This can be a difficult slog.

I, for one, dearly miss meeting in the sanctuary in Sequim. Worshipping with you on Sunday mornings via computer is preferable than not worshipping at all, but I am so very eager to get back into the sanctuary and actually wear shoes and pants again during worship services.

No, no, just kidding! I am actually wearing pants! The shoes? Not so much...

And there are some relationships that I’ve had to take special care of.

Relationships that have become strained from the many pressures put on over the last year, from racial justice issues and the pandemic to the election and climate change.

- Who knew that I had right-wing racists in my close-in family?
- Who knew that I had left-wing anti-vaxxers in my close-in family?
- Who knew that I had elders in my family who think the presidential election was tainted with quote-unquote “shenanigans”?

Who Knew?

Math and “Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon” suggests that everyone in this congregation—you and you and you and you—is confronting similar issues: People who you love and respect and admire holding different views and behaving in ways counter to your deeply held values.

And Math and “Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon” tells us that this is also happening right here in this congregation. This conflict can fray nerves and lead to some very strained relations.

I know firsthand.

Just this week I was engaged in one of those email exchanges about police violence in America—with someone who I love dearly and would donate a kidney for—and during this exchange, articles and links and opinions were volleyed back and forth like some vicious Wimbledon tennis match, with each playing for and maneuvering to slam a righteous spike to end the discussion. *There!*

My blood was *boiling*.

And after one exchange I thought to myself: Do I enjoy boiling my blood? Is this helpful? Is this healthy? Is this exchange changing hearts and minds, or are we simply sharpening our bayonets for some sort of protracted trench warfare?

I did not feel like I was tending to my primary radiance very well.

Again, I think we are all dealing with this on some level.

And because we are called by our religion to have *respect* for the interdependent web of all existence, I believe that respect means keeping our portion of the vast web in good working order.

In good *radiating* order.

I want to radiate, to be a positive force in the Universe. I want this religion to help me—and I want this religion to help you and you and you and you—radiate as well as we possibly can. And that radiating is brightest when we are in right relations with those Number Ones within our interconnected sphere.

And if everyone in this congregation is in right relations with everyone in their sphere, then this congregation becomes a bright spot in the Universe.

And so on, and so on, and so on...

And so to close, I want to share with you something called the “Right Relations Covenant” that is being practiced in my home congregation in Port Townsend.

It takes the original covenant statement of the congregation and puts it into action.

First, here’s the covenant statement: We are travelers. We meet for a moment in this sacred place to love, to share, to serve. Let us use compassion, curiosity, reverence and respect while seeking our truths. In this way, we will support a just and joyful community and this moment shall endure.

The Right Relations Covenant reads as follows:

We, the members of Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship covenant to:

Compassion

- Be kind.
- Speak from the heart.
- Communicate directly with the person(s) involved, using honesty and care.
- Consider what is the most loving thing we can do or say right now.
- Forgive ourselves and others when we don’t live up to this Covenant.
- Begin again in love.

Curiosity

- Be curious about the other person’s point of view.
- Assume that others have good intentions.
- Be willing to admit that we are not always right.
- Be willing to let go of being in control of the situation.
- Reflect upon how our own projections, past issues, wounds and tendencies color our stance.
- Be open to receiving feedback from others when the time is right.

Reverence

- Honor our Seven Principles.
- Appreciate and lift up the actions of others.
- Balance personal needs with the good of the whole.
- Honor the sacred space we have created as a community of fellow travelers.

Respect

- Listen deeply so that others feel heard.
- Avoid judging, blaming, shaming, or trying to fix others.
- Discern the difference between gossip and healthy communication.
- Respect confidentiality and personal boundaries.
- Trust that conflicts can be worked through rather than avoided.
- Respect each individual's unique
 - learning style, social ability, life experience,
 - gender identity, socio-economic status, mental condition,
 - race, age, personality,
 - sexual orientation, theology, and politics.

I *love* the fact that a Unitarian Universalist congregation on the Olympic Peninsula is working to put this into practice.

And it is not easy. Like most UU congregations, there are factions and fissures, flowerchildren and flamethrowers.

But the point is, we all have to get along and respect our web of connections—so that our values can spread as far and as fast as any virus you may have heard of.

And just remember: *You* have an Abraham Lincoln number of at least six. Abraham Lincoln, who said: “When I do good, I feel good. When I do bad, I feel bad. That’s my religion.”

Let’s all go forth, do good, and radiate with brightness and beauty!

Amen

SOURCES

Kevin Bacon, “The Six Degrees,” TEDxMidwest:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n9u-TITxwoM>

The Oracle of Bacon:

<https://www.oracleofbacon.org/> (Beware! This site can be a very deep rabbit hole!)

“You Are Made of Stardust,” David R. Hamilton,

<https://drdavidhamilton.com/you-are-made-of-stardust/>

Title: Principle Connections

Description: During this intense period of multiple crises, numerous pressures have been testing the integrity of our social and spiritual connections. This sermon considers our many connections, to see what needs mending, what needs abandoning, and what has bloomed like a lotus from the muck.