

Eco-Ubuntu

Author: Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu
(**Article Type:** **Sustainable Development**)

Have you practiced Ubuntu today? Perhaps you listened to, and empathized with the health problems of a colleague. Maybe you gave a generous tip and exchanged friendly banter with a car guard. Or did you give a piece of fruit to the child begging at the traffic lights?

How wide, and how deep is your Ubuntu circle? Does it extend to people who look different to you, practice other religions, speak other languages, and come from other countries? Or does it extend only to those of your culture, your community, those who think like you, or your family and friends, and friends of friends?

How deep is your Ubuntu? Is it giving someone R5 if they need it more than you? How about really listening, and feeling with someone reaching out for help? Would it go as deep as adopting an orphan child, not related to you?

Most people who have experienced the diversity of South-Africa's people will have noticed that the Ubuntu spirit is strongest in stable, settled, communities in the rural areas and townships of South Africa. Communities in which most do not have much money, but where it is not unusual to share your food with a neighbour who is hungry, or join together to bury someone without means, or give your neighbour R20 to take their child to the hospital.

Ubuntu emerged from the African experience of long habitation of this place, this land. The African environment is uniquely challenging to human survival, having a variable climate, with regular droughts. Africa has more deadly diseases and parasites afflicting humans than any other continent (perhaps due to the longer human presence in Africa), and more intact mega fauna (including animals that can easily kill an unwary or unprotected human) than any other continent.

So it is to be expected that Ubuntu spirit, the practice of mutual care is strongest in the cultural heirs of this lengthy sojourn in Africa. Ubuntu ethics have been taken up by people of other

cultures, who also call Africa home. Some might call this cultural appropriation; others may see the potential to create values that unite a nation still partitioned by economic status and privilege decades after the end of Apartheid and colonialism. These Ubuntu principles include service to the community, the sharing of resources, and being caring, respectful, honest, and trustworthy in one's relations to others. These principles emerge from the understanding that our existence as human beings only becomes meaningful through our relationships with others, including the larger community.

Taking an ecological view of Ubuntu, considering flows of matter and energy, and relations between organisms, Ubuntu as practiced in African villages and kingdoms for millennia is inherently pragmatic, self-serving even. Before colonization, most Africans lived in societies that were almost closed systems. Any material goods, energy, love that you gave 'away', never really went 'away', they just built up the community that protected you, comforted you, counselled you, corrected you, mourned and celebrated with you. Perhaps some wealth was held as cattle, but most of the wealth was stored in social capital, in networks of exchange and support between people.

People living in that time were acutely aware that physical survival and a human identity were not possible as individuals. Humans don't survive or thrive as individuals. We survive or thrive as communities. A human, or human couple had as much chance of survival in the African wilderness as a bee away from the hive, or an ant away from the nest. When hard times came, as they surely do in Africa, when drought gripped the land, and fire consumed the plains, it was groups of people that searched together for food, for water, for grazing. It was a few families, a clan, and a tribe that survived together, or perished. It was groups of people that endured in that place, or walked away, together. Ubuntu merely acknowledges what we are, biologically. We are not individual beings, we have evolved as social organisms. This is the literal meaning of the expression which defines Ubuntu Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu - "A person is a person through people".

Of course, it is easier to see yourself in others, as others, if they look similar to you! It is easier to feel connected to people that you can talk to, laugh with; to people who share food with you, who are physically present in your space.

Some spiritual traditions practice universal compassion, and generate love that widens the circle of Ubuntu, to all people, beyond 'your' people.

As the circle of Ubuntu widens to include all people, and Ubuntu is taken up as a guiding ethic by people of all cultures, one might ask "How wide does the circle go, and how deep"? Does it include animals? Does it include plants, earthworms, soil? These are also living, sentient beings. As we grow in awareness we see how we are linked to all living beings by flows of matter and energy, how we breathe the same air, drink the same water.

So shouldn't we extend Ubuntu beyond people to all other living beings? Ubuntu arose as relatively small groups of people cooperated to survive in a challenging environment, in an ecology that was often dry, hard, thorny and hot, periodically scorched by fire, permeated by diseases, parasites and venomous creatures, not to mention larger creatures with teeth, claws, hooves and horns.

In this time, when technology and growing human numbers have changed the face of the Earth, humans no longer have to fight nature. Nature has been defeated, and succumbed.

We are in the midst of the sixth great extinction event, caused by humans, with other species disappearing 100 000 times faster than the natural background extinction rate. We also face planetary crises of climate change, water availability and pollution

This suggests a need for a change in our relation to the web of life, for a new gentleness and appreciation. If all the wild creatures and wild spaces were gone, would we still be human? Would we still remember who we were? After all, those wild places and creatures evolved us, sharpened our abilities, and fed the flowering of our consciousness and the ripening of Ubuntu. We are human because a lion is, because a snake is, because a mountain is, because rain and drought are.

We are totally dependant on the ecosystems which support us, so to see those ecosystems as 'us', as a system that we are embedded in, as an extension of our being is pragmatic, and accurate. As is the traditional practice of Ubuntu.

If Ubuntu encourages us to cultivate and care for ourselves, for our families and our brethren, so too should we care for our larger, extended body –the veld, bush, soil, air, water, and the wetlands.

We need to widen the circle of our Ubuntu as we become aware of the totality of what we are. Our bodies extend into the soil, into the air, into the rivers and oceans. Our families include our dogs, cats, horses, cattle. Our species is a cell in a larger organism, a planetary body that functions to maintain life on earth. This organism, that some call Gaia, has transformed the atmosphere of the planet, locking away vast quantities of carbon in the bodies of living organisms that have become coal, oil and natural gas. Gaia moderates the water cycle with living wetlands and watersheds, modifies the climate with cooling forests, and creates the very rock of the seafloor with the skeletons of marine organisms.

A cell that has forgotten its role in the organism becomes a cancer in the body. It multiplies and takes in nutrients without reference to the organs and systems around it, eventually overwhelming them. A man with no regard for Ubuntu is a cancer in his community. Let us not be a cancer on the Earth. What would it mean to practice planetary Ubuntu?

We have created a global communications and transport web. As a minimum we could apply this to reversing the damage we have caused, and maintain ecosystems at their present levels of diversity. We could halt the sixth great extinction event that is presently unfolding. We could practice our Ubuntu as custodians of our planet.

Can we remember what it means to be human, to live in a wild space, to be aware of sounds other than our own chatter and traffic, of horizons beyond the clutter of our cities, of fragrances other than smells of our own waste and car exhausts, of points of light in the night sky other than the haze of our streetlights?

Let us remember that everything we know emerged out of silence, out of darkness.

How often do we know the silence of no traffic, the darkness of a night sky beyond the lights of human habitation? Or the emptiness of the moon shining on the open ocean? Everything emerged from darkness, silence, emptiness. If we do not know these things we cannot know ourselves. When we reconnect with these, when we experience and are touched by them then we can practice Ubuntu to its fullest extent. Then we will remember who we are, and can appreciate what life and love have wrought on this planet.

Our planet was not always this place of blue skies and sparkling waters, of green horizons. Life made that, over millions of years. We emerged carrying the love which allows life to flourish in a dry and rocky place, in acid darkness at an ocean vent, in snow and perpetual ice.

Let us practice planetary Ubuntu, widen and deepen the circle, act with love to all that we are, to our entire community, to our extended planetary being.

I am because you are

We are because the planet is