

*When I talk about children at work, obviously I do not use their names. But this is a small town, so best practice is to not even repeat the story. Thank you*

## Just Find your people

When I heard the theme for this month, I was motivated to understand **inter**dependence. I have recently become more dependent on others and strive to be more *independent*. But **inter**dependence challenged my thinking. Jenna Jameson wrote, "Maturity comes in three stages: dependence, **in**dependence, and **inter**dependence." Obviously, we are all dependent early in our lives, and then we strive to be *independent* like a teenager who will do the exact opposite of what a parent asks. And then as a young adult or a married person we work at being independent to show that we are strong. It is good to be independent but taken too far it can be lonely and not at all productive. Which brings us back to **inter**dependence.

Amanda Chatel wrote "Every relationship is comprised of at least two people, and each party brings their *complete selves* to the table. Then, it's up to those people to create a healthy relationship in which each person can grow, and flourish in that growth. It's from maintaining *individuality* and being supported by a partner that **inter**dependence is born".

Recognizing the synergy between people or between people and things is important because if one-part falters the other will too. Obviously, bakers, grocers, and restaurants are dependent on farmers, and farmers need them to buy their produce so there is a connection. The baker and grocer are also dependent on people buying their product, so here is an example of the chain of **inter**dependence. However, farmers are dependent on weather, which is unpredictable. So, the farmer also does not have that security in the chain of events which affects the others. In other words, **inter**dependence is complicated.

An easier way to look at **inter**dependence could be in sports. When I think of a team, I think of people working together whether it's a family, teachers in a school, the high school football team or a WNBA basketball team. Even individual sports like swimming or track are still dependent on other members to *collectively* win as a team. Pete Newell said, "There is that **inter**dependence and that *strength* you get from a team; that *the group* is greater than any individual."

I grew up in a very athletic family and sporting events, whether playing or watching, were a big part of my childhood. Although as a teen I was the rebel who drifted toward long haired musicians, and played drinking games disguised as softball, I enjoyed watching sports because it was our family time. We built nests of blankets on the floor, played cards and listened to the game in the background. My dad taught us about sportsmanship. He taught us to be fair and *honest* in everything we did from card games to life events. In some ways that demand for a sense of fairness has been difficult for me as an adult, because a lot of things are not fair. But I inherited and *appreciate* his optimism, because it's just easier than the alternative.

When I think of my childhood and our family of ten, I imagine this swirl of dependence, independence, and even codependency that at times felt chaotic. Like a windstorm that blew in and then *settled*. But that swirl always landed on **inter**dependence. Whether it was the *individual child* or the *circumstances* it was an ebb and flow. It was fluid. Mom counted on my older sister to help with housework, and she counted on me to watch my younger siblings. My older brothers kept an eye on us out in the neighborhood. We all counted on Dad to provide for us, and mom to take care of us. We all took turns being independent, but

under certain circumstances we were dependent. In so many ways we were always connected. **Inter**dependence was the base, the healthiest interactions because ten *individuals* worked together.

The evolving roles in our families over time is challenging. We are dependent on our parents, then independent, then hopefully **inter**dependent. But then our parents became dependent on us, as we will become dependent on our kids who were once dependent on us. It's hard to see your parents lose themselves to disease or dementia and it's sometimes necessary to take on the role of caretaker as much as possible.

Through my family, my work, and people watching I have observed a lot of children playing. They are figuring out where they belong, and I have seen the need for that connection. There are the obvious "groups" that kids fit into, but even then, there is a sort of hierarchy. There are kids who are loners most of the time, at least during recess. Some kids find peers early on and are close all year, while others test out different groups to see where they fit in.

Probably the most profound evidence I've witnessed for that need to be connected has been this school year. I'm working with seven children who came to school without speaking or understanding any English. My fifth grader, a beautiful young girl, had been in Mexico "for the past five years" while her mom was here. She met her five year old brother for the first time when she arrived in Sheridan. I don't know anything about her experience there, but I know she was traumatized. The most valuable training I ever got from the school district was at the beginning of this school year. Josh Varner wrote the book, "Be Their Hero" and he gave an amazing presentation. What I learned that day was that when there has been trauma "in a

child's life", a child is not able to work on academics. My role was to help her in and outside the classroom to learn English, to help her with reading and writing. She cried every day for the first two months. I worked with her to learn the basics, but more than anything I tried to show her that I was there for her. I was an adult to be trusted. Sometimes we just sat together.

By that third month I felt a shift. The tears dried up and suddenly we were both learning. Now I see her smiling and laughing with peers, I get hugs in the hallway, and she is reading and speaking English pretty well. She has found a connection in our school. Varner also wrote that the child needs a hero. It can be their teacher, para, bus driver, cook, custodian etc. They need someone to trust, to make a connection. I reminded myself of this the other day. An older student with a serious attitude problem was giving me a hard time on the playground and I got dagger looks which can be slightly *intimidating*. The next day on the playground I found her and got the ugly face. In my least obvious tone, I was upbeat and asked her how her day was going and what she had planned for the weekend. It totally changed the dynamics and the interaction. We are extremely fortunate in this community to have great teachers, good schools, an understanding of trauma and a focus on kindness. In both examples with these two girls, I was given as much as I gave. I had to figure out a way to reach them and they had to be open up and trust me. We worked as individuals towards a common outcome and productive connection. They received a "leg up" and I was given the gift of fulfillment in my work.

Part of my **mis**understanding of the word **inter**dependence was that I was trying to identify *each* relationship to *just one definition* that fits. What I realize is that all relationships, whether with two individuals or a group, can be at times dependent and at times independent etc. Relationships are fluid.

Dependence, independence, codependence all have a place in our lives, a portion of our growth, or the reality of our circumstances. It is by the effort of each person or group involved that the connection is productive.

I'm not sure if this is philosophical or accurate but I think about this country being **inter**dependent and it feels like we are losing the synergy that protects us. We the people depend on the politicians to represent us, and they depend on us to vote for them. We depend on them telling the truth and representing the majority and we have lost that piece of the puzzle, that link in the chain. According to Helpful Professor, "**Inter**dependence is evident in political systems when *different political parties cooperate* to work for a communal goal while respecting each other's viewpoints and preferences." We have certainly lost that in the past seven or eight years. This synergy has been historically difficult to maintain but now it seems impossible. I am sure many of us have family and friends who we cannot talk to about current politics. I will never understand how voters think we can depend on a person who is a complete narcissist and doesn't have any intention of working together with others, or towards **inter**dependence in our country. He surrounds himself with people who think he can do no wrong. He cannot let go of his ego and work with others. He is the opposite of **inter**dependence. Honestly it completely blows my mind.

When circumstances, relationships, give and take and all moving parts are connected, we celebrate **inter**dependence. I guess the main thing I've learned is that **inter**dependence is the best way to work towards a common goal. I also feel that we need to make an effort, to **prioritize**, to look for and stay in relationships that meet that need. I feel so fortunate for my

family, friends, my work environment and for this UU community because I do feel *connected* in such a healthy way. As Drew Holcomb wrote in his song, "You've got to find your people, the ones that make you feel whole, that won't leave your side when you lose control. The ones that won't let you lose your soul. You've got to find your people, *then you'll find yourself.*"

Catherine Johnson

P.s. I use the bold and italic when I read to help me empathize words. I do not know why that one part is highlighted, I have tried, and it won't go away.