Ubuntu: A secular response to spiritual questions

Highland Views
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Guest columnist

I first encountered Ubuntu as a font, one among the hundreds of designs for letters. Artists create lines and loops for letters so we can be expressive with the words and sentences we form, when our "words become flesh" – or ink. A particular font may enhance our ability to communicate something more than a mere word on a page; it potentially adds a flair or flourish to what it is we want to communicate. We might also say that a word in Ubuntu font can draw the eye to something behind the letter, beneath the word, even beyond the original intent of the writer.

In the world's scriptures, font matters, that is, the presentation makes a difference. Arabic passages from the Qur'an are creatively drawn, artwork in themselves. When English speakers see Hebrew or Sanskrit, Pali or Greek, there is a curiosity to interpret not only the words but the person behind the words, the writer-artist who crafted the text. This may be more interesting than the "holy words" themselves.

Consider the meaning of the word "Ubuntu" itself. The human person behind the word Ubuntu can show us how it can be packed to the font with meaning. Viewing a short video on BBC REEL, "The Philosophy that can change how you look at life," I was struck by an African professor's explanation of the concept of "Ubuntu," an indigenous philosophy that translates: "I am because you are" (or, "I am because of who we all are"). As professor James Ogude of the University of Pretoria, South Africa, explains, it's about "interde-

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pendence, we rely on each other." It's not political or religious but, "a social awareness, a consciousness of the fact we all have a responsibility to ourselves as human beings, especially the vulnerable among us ... and a responsibility to the world around us." He uses the example of bees that pollinate so much of our food crops. Caring for them is intimately connected to caring for ourselves. We are reminded of "co-agency" – working together with all life to nurture Life.

Professor Ogude makes a distinction between "individuality" and "individualism." Individuality offers a sense of independence and freedom. Individualism is about "me, me, me, all the time ... the ego." Living in community reminds us we are inter-responsible as our individuality is dependent on the community.

Not wanting to sound like an Ubuntu missionary, he wants to direct our attention to the great value of indigenous knowledge around the world. He believes that if we want to imagine a healthy society in the future, concepts from the past, like Ubuntu, can guide our thinking and our working. The sense of mutuality

is critical. Here he points to Archbishop Desmond Tutu who led his country in challenging apartheid, drawing from past values to forever change South Africa.

One of professor Ogude's most practical examples is greeting another, really acknowledging their presence and value. Even ordering a meal or drink, "recognition is fundamental." Speaking a person's name, showing respect for their identity, their unique individuality.

He concludes with a story a friend told him about fishermen in the Amazon. When they catch a lot of fish, they throw some back, honoring the fact the river sustains them, it feeds them, "it's a source of life." To summarize the concept of Ubuntu, professor Ogude, with little hesitation, responds: "interdependence."

Ubuntu seems a more humanistic as well as naturalistic response to traditional spiritual questions. In the African Journal of Social Work (August 2013) this preliminary definition appears: "Ubuntu echoes the African thought of acceptable ideas and deeds. Ubuntu can best be described as humanism from the African perspective." In Africa, Ubuntu has been applied in theology, politics, management and computer science. The essence of the practice is: "To affirm one's humanity by recognizing the humanity of others."

We might think of it in these ways:

● What is the meaning or purpose of life? Ubuntu responds: to learn how we are interdependent; meaning comes through the way we treat others.

● Is there a God? Ubuntu responds: There may be. But this doesn't change the first response.

● When we look for guidance and values from the past, shouldn't we look to scriptures before anything else? Ubuntu responds: Wherever we find the wisdom that guides us to practice respectful compassion toward others and toward the earth, it is good.

● What about rituals of prayer and worship? Ubuntu responds: Again, if these actions encourage a mutuality and responsibility toward others, it is good.

● What happens to religious belief and faith? Ubuntu responds: Beliefs are fine, as long as the essential belief is that "I am because you are."

With an awareness of cultural appropriation, Ubuntu seems to be a "font of wisdom" for all cultures.

Chris Highland served as a minister and chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His latest books are "Friendly Freethinker," "Broken Bridges" and "A Freethinker's Gospel." Learn more at chighland.com.