

SAVED ALONE OR FREED TOGETHER**May 31st, 2026****Ottawa 1st Unitarian Congregation****By Rev. Mwibutsa**

I was recently privileged to join other Unitarian African leaders in Cape Town, South Africa. While there, I heard repeatedly, a word connected to an important philosophy that carries the wisdom of generations: **Ubuntu**.

A simple phrase **“I am because you are.”**

Today, I would like to talk about the tension between individual well-being and collective well-being, how our Unitarian Universalist faith helps us navigate that tension, and the growth that can be ours if we navigate it fully.

The philosophy of Ubuntu came up as we discussed how Unitarianism exists side by side with a growing and active evangelical movement on the African continent. For many evangelicals, the emphasis is on personal salvation and personal reward for being good and faithful.

Ubuntu offers a different perspective. It moves from **me** to **we**, and back again. The more one sits with it, the more revolutionary it becomes.

Ubuntu is a way of understanding what it means to be human in relation to others. It reminds us that a person cannot fully exist alone. My humanity is tied to yours. Your dignity affects mine.

If one member of the community is wounded, the whole community carries the wound. If one child goes hungry, the village itself is diminished. Even if we enjoy personal comfort, something fundamental is missing.

Ever since that conversation, I have been wrestling with a question that I believe is both spiritual and deeply personal:

What does it mean to be saved or okay alone? What does it take to achieve collective liberation?

Modern life pushes us relentlessly toward individualism.

We celebrate achievement, independence, and self-reliance. There is much that is good in this. But Ubuntu whispers a complementary truth: we, as human beings, are deeply connected.

Like many immigrants, I left Burundi seeking safety, stability, and a future that felt more secure. Canada gave me many gifts. It gave me safety. It gave me a UU community such as this one. It gave me experiences that shaped my mind and expanded my world. For all of that, I remain deeply grateful.

And every day, I ask myself difficult questions.

What if I am safe, but my fellow Unitarians back home are not?

What if I have what I need, but my fellow countrymen do not?

Some days I feel not guilt, but responsibility.

There is a real tension between the individual and the community that shaped that individual.

One way I manage this tension is through the work I do with Flaming Chalice International. The work allows me to remain connected to people and their realities.

When I spend time and energy supporting projects that help teen mothers regain independence and dignity,

when a student gets a chance to go to school,

when refugees are given an opportunity to rebuild their lives through sponsorship,

I communicate something important: my life and theirs are connected. Their hope is mine, and their despair affects me.

Here we need to be careful not to fall into extremes. A good life is a life of balance. A good narrative is a narrative of nuance.

Some traditional societies rooted in communal life place a heavy emphasis on the community. In the process, the individual—their rights, their space to grow, and their own identity—may be constrained.

That is why we need to keep this tension alive. It is, in many ways, life-giving. Both the individual and the community matter, and both need space.

Can Unitarian Universalism Help Us Ease That Tension?

We are gathered here as a community of faith. Can Unitarian Universalism help us ease that tension?

In my experience, this is a faith that, at its best, skillfully navigates the space between the individual and the community.

It creates spaces that encourage, respect, and support the individual's search for growth and meaning,

while also fostering a covenant to work together on endeavors that advance both the immediate community and the wider world.

This is the gamble that Unitarian communities have taken upon themselves.

We believe in the need for individuals to search, to grow, and not simply to receive.

Armed with a strong sense of self, self-worth, and responsibility, we can then go out and work for the benefit of the community.

The call is not to trade our lives for someone else's, but to recognize that our well-being does not depend on us alone. It is connected to the well-being of others.

Unitarian Universalism, to me, has been a saving grace. It expanded my understanding and granted me permission to take my well-being seriously.

It is a faith that reassures me that it is okay to care for myself and to search for meaning. This is the foundation for making room for the other, through whom I grow, build, and with whom I share the journey.

The UU faith beautifully complements the philosophy of Ubuntu.

Ubuntu also asks us to rethink what it means to live a meaningful life.

Ubuntu invites us to make the values we inherit from others our own—to remove some elements, add others, and place them in a different perspective. The goal is to make those values a living reality.

The result is the ability to look ourselves in the mirror, when no one else is watching, and say:

“This is me, and I am proud of who I am and who I am becoming.”

This spiritual grounding and growth are only the first part.

The world is waiting for us to show up without fear or apology. To recognize that we are made from building materials received as gifts from others.

With that in mind, we can choose to become the gift that keeps giving.

With growth, We See Ourselves in the Other

Seeing ourselves in the other is an act of humility. It begins when the boundary between “me” and “you” becomes less solid.

Joy is recognized more easily. But it is often in pain that recognition deepens.

During my last visit to Burundi, I met Mariya, a 15-year-old teen mother. After becoming pregnant, she lost the support of her family and had to leave school. She was trying to support herself and her baby through day labour.

Her story interrupted my comfort.

It was clear to me that, as a community, we were failing her.

Local women organized support around her. When I returned to Canada, I shared her story. Today, Mariya is part of a program supporting 15 teen mothers. She will return to school in September, and her baby will be cared for.

When we see ourselves in the other, we begin to loosen the habit of separation. We become less indifferent.

We start to notice that dignity is a condition of being human together.

To see ourselves in the other is to accept that responsibility is a form of belonging.

Our Growth Grounds Our Lives

The meaning of life can be difficult to determine, but any attempt to shape it must include our place in the world, our relationship to ourselves, and our relationship to others.

Who is freer because my choices did not serve only myself?

Who breathes a little more deeply because I chose a life of integrity ?

Flaming Chalice International relies on donations from individuals and congregations like this one.

Across Canada and within this very community, there are people who make it possible for refugees in East Africa to be supported, for youth to attend school in Burundi, and for teen mothers to have a future.

They breathe a little more deeply because you are.

Their future looks brighter because you are.

They are freer because of the choices you make.

Thank you for making this work possible and allowing these lives to be changed.

In this sense, a life is not measured by how high it rises alone, but by how many other people find stable ground because of its presence.

This is not a call to dissolve into endless obligation.

It is, rather, a grounding: a recognition that care for self is not opposed to care for others but is the foundation that makes it possible.

To live with Ubuntu is to respect others not because they are identical to us, but because they are connected to us in ways both visible and unseen.

It is to wish others well, even in thought. It is to resist the inner habits that dismiss them.

A life lived well leaves behind not only personal gain but widened space for others, for dignity and possibility. A life well lived is the life that can say in the end:

“I lived because other people lived.”

Amen and blessed be.