

# Ubuntu From Chaos

## - Lessons from an African Tradition

By David Ambrose

Everything is connected, and everything interacts with everything else around it.

The oft-quoted maxim used to describe chaos theory: “A butterfly fluttering its wings over a flower in China can set in motion a series of events which result in a storm over the Caribbean,” illustrates this truth which we may expect would be more easily grasped by a spiritual person than a scientist. This scientific adoption of the concept of sensitive dependence, however, brings this connection between all things into the mainstream.

So if we accept that this interdependence exists, it seems odd that interpersonal relationships are tending to be more self-focused than ever before: the I-me-mine syndrome. How noticeable this shift in focus is to each individual, is directly related to age. Those born in the forties or fifties, for example, would judge the degree of change to be greater than someone born in the seventies or eighties.

This is because social barriers have systematically and progressively been eroded since the end of the Second World War. Historically, societies that flourished, all contained strict social structures to regulate behaviour and provide a balance between the good of the individual and the good of all.

Looking back in time to the dawn of humanity, nature, anticipating the need for survival and protection, endowed all creatures with instincts that took over to provide the balance necessary to protect their survival, thereby perpetuating the species.

As human civilization developed, the primeval dangers receded, and the role of instinct in survival slowly diminished. Superstition, religious teaching, regimented etiquette, and chivalry combined to form a new balanced foundation for our forebears.

Today, superstition has all but disappeared, and the influence that religious groups once exerted has waned. Further, the social rules of conduct have all but disappeared, as succeeding generations’ first test, then stretch whatever boundaries exist.

There are now few remaining structures in place to provide us with the structure and balance that once existed. The loss of a balanced foundation for society to rely on, results in both excess and deficiency in the realms of spiritual, physical, and emotional existence.

Finding signs of either this deficiency or excess in our world today is not difficult—in fact, both have always existed. Even the Dalai Lama, in 1989 acknowledged that the Tibetan nation had paid too much attention to spiritual development at the expense of material development. In most countries, the emphasis is the other way round. Whether on a national or personal level, excess in one area always reflects a contrasting deficiency in another.

Now into the picture comes a new concept, which is not really new at all. Thanks in large part to Nobel Laureate, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the African concept of ubuntu (pronounced “oo-boon-too”) is beginning to gain popularity in North America and elsewhere, although it has been around for millennia. In other guises it has been the foundation of many civilizations around the world. The simplest definition of the word would be: A person is a person through other persons.

This philosophy holds that my future is inextricably bound up in yours, and what hurts you will ultimately hurt me; what feeds you, feeds me. It is all about compassion, generosity, warmth, and the

interdependence we all share.

In these modern times, the wisdom of adopting the ubuntu ideology as a guiding principle for our lives seems particularly appropriate. The void left by earlier paternalistic, restrictive rules of society are replaced by a practical understanding of the need to balance our own needs and desires against those of our neighbours, our community, and all of humanity. ■

*David Ambrose is the author of Your Life Manual: Practical Steps to Genuine Happiness.*

