

One World
How We are Becoming a Global Community and How Some are Resisting It
By
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During his commencement speech at Oberlin College in 1965, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. memorably said, “we are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.”¹ It was something he wanted the graduates he was addressing to know and remember as they went about their work in the world. And it has since remained in our conscience because it seems as obvious as truth as it is “inescapable,” but also inexplicable and mysterious. How can it be true, that all people and all of life can be interconnected? “For some strange reason,” King continued, “I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be—this is the interrelated structure of reality.”²

Inescapable a truth as it is, it is still one we need grasp and remember today, although it may seem less inexplicable today than it was in 1965. If COVID-19 has taught us anything, it is the same message as Dr. King’s, “we are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny,” and we cannot be what we ought to be until others are also what they ought to be because we are all in this together.

Just as the pandemic does not recognize nations or their borders, or distinguish between their citizens and their leaders, the same must be true of its cure. It is not enough for the wealthiest nations, like ours, to vaccinate its citizens if the pandemic is allowed to continue spreading elsewhere around the world. Otherwise, its variants will keep evolving and spreading among us all. The pandemic has also taught us how fragile our global supply chain is. Everything from toilet paper to peanut butter and from computer chips to automobiles have skyrocketed in price and become difficult to obtain. And when a few people get laid off from work, then choose not to return to those same jobs, it becomes difficult to get timely and adequate service anywhere. And when one nation goes to war with another, as Putin’s war against Ukraine has reminded us, it can quickly lead to price inflation and hunger in other places around the globe.

Dr. King understood this in 1965, which is why, two years after his speech at Oberlin, he repeated them during his Christmas Eve Sermon at his own Ebenezer Baptist Church, going on to say, “Yes, as nations and individuals, we are interdependent:”

Did you ever stop to think that you can’t leave for your job in the morning without being dependent on most of the world? You get up in the morning and go to the bathroom and reach over for the sponge, and that’s handed to you by a Pacific islander. You reach for a bar of soap, and that’s given to you at the hands of a Frenchman. And then you go into the kitchen to drink your coffee for the morning, and that’s poured into your cup by a South American. And maybe you want tea: that’s poured into your cup by a Chinese. Or maybe you’re desirous of having cocoa for breakfast, and that’s poured into your cup by a West African. And then you reach over for your toast, and that’s given to you at the hands of an English-speaking farmer, not to

mention the baker. And before you finish eating breakfast in the morning, you've depended on more than half of the world. This is the way our universe is structured; this is its interrelated quality. We aren't going to have peace on earth until we recognize this basic fact of the interrelated structure of all reality.³

As obvious as all this seems, transcending our national identities in order to grasp our human identities as a global species is no easier for us now that it was in 1965. In some ways, extreme nationalism is making an unsettling comeback. Nationalism is, after all, the opposite of globalism and can be expected to increase in reaction against it. Nationalism refers to identifying mostly with the country one is from, as an American, or Russian, or Japanese, and so on. As a species that is instinctively and innately fearful of the unknown, it only seems likely many of us will react to the sudden changes happening because of globalization by seeking safety in old patterns of thinking.

The emergence of populist leaders like Donald Trump is a good example. Trump's message about making America great again struck a chord in the psyche of millions of Americans worried about how quickly the world is changing around them. His promise to build a border wall, his ban on Muslims, his separation of immigrant children from their parents, his break from the Paris Climate Agreement, the rise of White Nationalism during his Administration, are all examples of a desire by some to retreat from the rest of the world.

The United Kingdom's 2016 vote to leave the European Union, which it has been part of since 1973, represents another example of recoiling into nationalism. Brexit, as the decision made by barely half the nation is called, finally occurred in 2020, although this is more in name only. For it is not possible for a nation like the UK to truly withdraw from the many countries its economy, including businesses, employees, and families have become entwined with and dependent upon for decades. Exiting from our dependence upon the global community is not possible in today's world.

Putin's war in Ukraine can also be viewed as his wish to return to the Cold War world this former KGB agent once knew and still pines for. Putin imagines he can reenter his comfort zone by slowly recreating the Eastern Block and erecting a new Iron Curtain to keep him and his country shielded from the rest of the world. Such a world is no longer possible, as he is finding out.

We have also seen the rise of nationalist leaders in Japan, Turkey, India, the Philippines, France, Italy, China, and South Africa, among other nations, in reaction to the new global existence we are already in but still have no framework for understanding or talking about. We still identify ourselves mostly according to which nation we are from, rather than as the related, connected, and interdependent planetary species we have recently become and have been becoming nearly since our first appearance on Earth. As Historian Yuval Harari points out in his book *Sapiens*, when viewing history from the "vantage point" of millennia, not centuries, "it becomes crystal clear that history is moving relentlessly towards unity."⁴ He goes on to explain that "Over the millennia, small simple cultures gradually coalesce into bigger and more complex civilizations, so that the world contains fewer and fewer megacultures, each of which is bigger and more complex."⁵

This has resulted in less than just two-hundred nations in the world today, a world that in just the past few years has become more whole through the advent of communications technology than even our small neighborhoods were in the past. But the Age of Nationalism, or what we might also call the Age of the Nation State, is an invention of the Enlightenment and its emphasis on a governing State, as opposed to being ruled by the Church or Monarchs. As Hans Kohn explains in classic 1944 book, *The Idea of Nationalism*, “Nationalism as we understand it is not older than the second half of the eighteenth century⁶ ... Only a few centuries ago, man’s loyalty was due to his church or religions; a heretic put himself beyond the pale of society as a ‘traitor’ to his nation does today. [This] fixation of man’s supreme loyalty upon his nationality marks the beginning of the age of nationalism.”⁷

He also says this “identification with the life and aspirations of millions whom we shall never know, with a territory we shall never visit in its entirety,”⁸ is based on “two fictitious concepts:” 1) that race or blood is the basis of nationality, and 2) that there is a unified national character that creates the nation. In reality, both race and the national character are fictions. In reality, any community is a conglomeration of different people with different ways. Although both the state and its citizenry do much to try to force conformity and to give advantages to majorities, there remain many differences.

As such, nationalism prevents us, as a species, from recognizing the truth about ourselves—that all human beings share the same narrow lineage and are part of one community no matter where we are from or where we live, and that, to paraphrase Dr. King, none of us can ever achieve our full potential until all of us are free to do so. Yet today, almost sixty years later, nationalism remains the most entrenched line dividing the human family, albeit but a fiction of our imaginations. The borders we overlay on the maps falsifying the Earth’s undivided terrain, and the names we give the territories we draw line around, demarcate, and most identify ourselves with, have no independent existence, which is more evident at this moment in history than any time during the past two-hundred years.

Some of you may remember the United Auto Worker’s campaign in the 1980’s calling for an end to Japanese imports, sometimes violently. An American of Chinese ancestry was murdered in 1982 by two autoworkers who blamed him for losing their jobs. Many companies at the time prohibited foreign cars from parking in their lots, and it was common for some people to vandalize them with sledgehammers and by other means. At the time, it was especially risky to be caught driving a Japanese import—a “rice burner” as they were derogatively called.

Today, this is hardly the case. Toyota, Honda, Hyundai, Mazda, Subaru, Acura, Kia, and Suzuki, are among the most popular car companies in the U.S., representing dozens of manufacturing plants that provide millions of U.S. jobs. Today, the buy American movement is all but dead in the U.S. Instead, it now has a variety of foreign companies that have become important employers, a significant part of the economy, and a benefit to consumers. This is but one example of how quickly things have changed, and of how much more Dr. King is right now than he was in 1965 about our global dependence upon one another. Only now, instead of having depended upon half the world before completing breakfast, we are more likely to

have depended upon the entire world. Today, we may still psychologically identify as Americans, or Russians, or Australians, or Chinese, or Ugandans, or Turks, or Saudi Arabians, and so forth, but we are all worldlings—Earthlings—part of a single global community and human family, a reality that is becoming increasingly difficult to deny and that is already impossible to escape.

As we have learned most recently, we share global pandemics and a global supply chain. It has also become apparent, due to global warming, that we share one global environment; one planet. We have a global economy, global banks, global businesses, global employment, global investors and property owners, global debt, global education, global entertainment, global laws and treaties and trade, global science and medicine and a global space program, along with a global worldwide web and global communications.

In light of all these things and more, it no longer makes sense to understand us as anything less than a global community. We ignore this reality at our peril: the peril of appointing despots to lead us so we can desperately cling to our comforting national identities; the peril of depending on impotent national governments that don't quite know how to govern in the new global reality; the peril of failing to do what we must to face this reality by developing what systems are necessary for maintaining a prosperous and peaceful global society; and the peril of failing to become all that we can be as individuals by recognizing that our brothers and sisters everywhere must have this same opportunity.

We might begin by strengthening the United Nations and global democracy, including giving people from around the world a voice and vote in the matters that impact us all. Just as we have local, state, and national elections, we should have international elections that include the voices of our international neighbors. We can also start by adopting, even improving, the United Nations 1945 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These rights ensure that every man, woman, and child anywhere on the planet are born free and equal without discrimination and have the right to life and safety. They promise a world without slavery, or torture, or unlawful detention; a world where these rights are protected by global law, where everyone has equal protection under the law and a right to a fair trial no matter where they are from or where they travel. As Chief Joseph understood long ago, "The Earth is the Mother of all people, and all people should have equal rights upon it."⁹ Finally, the time has come for more of us to begin speaking in what we might call cosmopolitan terms, framing ourselves and all of humanity, as part of a global community in order to foster a greater sense of worldwide camaraderie, compassion, connection, and responsibility.

Our species has been expanding our sense of identity throughout our time here on Earth. First, we identified with only the handful of individuals in our small family-sized troops. Then we identified with the larger cluster of families we were part of, our tribes. Then we identified as the people ruled by one king in a small kingdom. Then we expanded our view by identifying with an entire province or state ruled by the governor appointed by a Monarch we might never see. Then, around two hundred years ago, we came to identify with the entire nation we are part of, even if it is too large for us to fully traverse and its people too numerous to know. The next expansion of awareness, which the reality we are now in requires of us, is to realize we are part of one world and are intricately connected to everyone on the planet,

even if it is impossible to go everywhere or to know everyone. We are all neighbors now, part of one human society, one human family.

I believe many of the major problems we are experiencing in the world today, some of them existential threats, are happening because we are transitioning to a global identity, resulting in the disruption of almost everything, including how we have long understood ourselves and the world. Such disruption feels like chaos, which makes us want to hold on tightly to the small world we have known, to our national identities and to even smaller identity groups. But this world is slipping away, no matter how tightly we cling. We must now loosen our grip in order to widen our arms and embrace the bigger truth before us, that “we are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny” and “For some strange reason I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be—this is the interrelated structure of reality.”¹⁰

¹ Excerpt from Dr. King’s Commencement Address at Oberlin College, Oberlin, OH, June 1965.

² Ibid.

³ Dr. King first delivered this sermon at Ebenezer Baptist Church, where he served as co-pastor. On Christmas Eve, 1967, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation aired this sermon as part of the seventh annual Massey Lectures.

⁴ Harari, Yuval Noah, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, NY, 2015, (Kindle version), loc. 2562.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Kohn, Hans, *The Idea of Nationalism*, Collier Books, New York, NY 1944, p. 3.

⁷ Ibid., p. 18.

⁸ Ibid., p. 9.

⁹ Freedman, Russell, *Indian Chiefs*, Scholastic Inc., New York, NY, 1987, p. 111.

¹⁰ Ibid.