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SJSU Urban Leadership Program Application

An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity.

-Martin Luther King Jr.

I do not think the concepts of personal uniqueness and the need to affiliate with others actually need to be intentionally balanced. In fact, I do not think that these concepts are really that significant in and of themselves. In this individualistic society of ours, we see these concepts as significant only because we see the individual as separate from the whole. We ask ourselves, "How can *I* be an individual, and at the same time, how can *I* affiliate with others?" We are constantly looking out for ourselves and none other. This makes it critical for us to satisfy our perception of ourselves and at the same time our perceptions of what others think of us. This makes it impossible for us to find a response that honors our humanity, because to do so would require looking after the community outside of our individual selves. That is why we find it so easy to cheer the whistle-blowers and yet stand idly by as they lose their jobs; we value the individualism they demonstrate but not enough to give up our group affiliations. We do not see how the whistle-blowers fit into the greater context of humanity. We do not see that there is a greater moral message in being a whistle-blower; they are trying to protect the collective mass at a great personal sacrifice. If people fail to realize this, if they continue to try and reconcile this paradox, it could become detrimental to the survival of the human race.

Unfortunately our current state continually perpetuates this idea through the popular opinion that morality is determined by perspective. What is right depends on individuals, cultures and other factors that are constantly changing. This constant state of flux makes it impossible to truly have a definition of what is right and what is wrong. Without a consistent definition, changing perspective that we place on ourselves will always separate and divide us. Individuals want to have their own notion of what is right and what is wrong, which makes it nearly impossible to completely find affiliation. It is not possible to get around the fact that when we are separated by perspective, it naturally brings about a separation of priorities. In order to make those priorities a reality, it is necessary to install a system of morals and values that support the advancement of those priorities. Essentially, each system of perspectives is always going to have different ideas of what is right and what is wrong. The disagreement between those ideas is what separates us from each other and creates this need to balance uniqueness with affiliation. We want to have our own unique perspectives and cultures but also affiliate with each other too. We can delude ourselves into believing that this is possible, but if humanity is to survive, it cannot be.

In order to completely face this paradox, we must think beyond the paradox altogether and seek only to find a response that honors our humanity. We have to find a way to step outside these perspectives that separate the individual from affiliation; the selfish desire to be an individual that is affiliated with something. Humanity is the only organism that can exist outside of simple concepts like uniqueness and affiliation because it is by definition all human beings collectively. We are all individually human and we are all affiliated by the fact that we are all human. It follows then that we all share the same fundamental desires and characteristics of human beings. Once we understand that,

the need to affiliate is no longer necessary because it becomes clear that we are affiliated with each other just by existing. But collective affiliation also leads to collective responsibility. We have a responsibility to the survival of each other. That is why we must realize that the collective survival of the group depends on the collective work of individuals. If our survival depends on each individual, it is essential that each individual do what is best for the whole. It is almost a paradox, but not quite. Each individual can act uniquely on behalf of humanity. As long as each individual is acting uniquely towards the betterment of humanity as a whole, they have maintained their ability to be an individual and have affiliation at the same time.

It is here where Dr. King's idea of an individual rising "above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity" becomes critical. The fallacy of trying to balance individual uniqueness and affiliation is that they are selfish pursuits. They only benefit the individual. In order to truly balance the two concepts it is necessary to transcend the individual needs to focus on the needs of humanity. If a person is able to make that paradigm shift, then the perfect balance between individual uniqueness and affiliation will ironically fall into place. A complete *human* will be born.

It is critical that this shift occurs because it will eliminate the blurry line between blindly following authority and doing what is right. If we universally accept the idea that we are all human, then we must universally accept the idea that there are certain undeniable rights that are linked to the very humanity in which we all share. If something is right for one human, then it should be right for all. If some authority or system oppresses those rights, it should be stopped at all costs for the sake of humanity. In that case, following authority is fine until it infringes on those undeniable rights. Being a whistle-blower is something to be cheered because it is in defense, not just of what is right, but also of humanity. Self-reliance is important, but only in that we rely on ourselves to always do what is best for the greater humanity. To truly reconcile this paradox, there must be a universal definition, independent of individual perspectives, of what it means to be human.

As we start to see ourselves as individuals that function as a small part of a larger humanity we realize that it is precisely this affiliation that makes us more complete individuals. Then, if we base our lives on the principles of what it means to be human, we do not have to worry about balancing individuality with acceptance. It is our shared sense of humanity that seeks to bring us together and unite us. It becomes how we are accepted. When united, shared priorities and a shared sense of what is right and wrong follows. That allows us to always act with a clear moral conscience. We can act as individuals affiliated by the simple desire to do what is best for all humanity.