**[Ubuntu](http://thehurt.wordpress.com/2010/06/30/ubuntu/" \o "Ubuntu) by Kevin Hurt in his Blog Edumacation**

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I’ve been doing some research and thinking about Ubuntu. No, not the Linux operating system, but its namesake. I started looking into it a couple weeks ago. While watching the World Cup, I noticed a commercial that included this word and I wanted to know what it meant. As I read more about it, I became intrigued and had to wrap my head around it. This post is the result of that thinking.

Before sharing this, I’ll share my classroom application for this. I have struggled over the last couple years to find balance between enforcing the rules that I want enforced and giving students input into the class rules. I’ve set  my own rules, tried to create a class constitution, but haven’t found something really effective. This year, I’ll be trying something new – a class covenant. I’ll post more about this concept later, but the applicable part for now is that I will provide guiding principles and students will identify the outcomes of those principles in different contexts. After learning about Ubuntu, I have no doubt that this will be one of the guiding principles in my classroom this year.

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**What is Ubuntu?**

“Ubuntu” is what it means to be human. A Zulu maxim provides perhaps the simplest definition of Ubuntu: “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*,” which means “a person is a person through other persons.” It is a philosophical belief that being human means recognizing and respecting the humanity of others. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu said, “It is the essence of being human. It speaks of the fact that my humanity is caught up and is inextricably bound up in yours. I am human because I belong.” Tutu goes on to say, “Ubuntu speaks particularly about the fact that you can’t exist as a human being in isolation. It speaks about our interconnectedness. You can’t be human all by yourself.” It is, he says, the relationships between us that make us truly human.

It is not an uncommon philosophy. English poet John Donne, in “Meditation XVII,” opined that “No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main,” noting, as Tutu does, that being human means you are part of a greater whole. Immanuel Kant, in *Groundwork on the Metaphysic of Morals*, writes that all persons should “Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end.” By treating others not as objects, but as people, we not only respect them, but respect and affirm our own humanity and the ways in which we are bound to one another.

**What does Ubuntu look like?**

While Ubuntu is a worldview, there are certain outward characteristics that reflect the internal belief that we are all connected, most notably the traits of compassion and justice.

It speaks about wholeness, it speaks about compassion. A person with Ubuntu is welcoming, hospitable, warm and generous, willing to share. Such people are open and available to others, willing to be vulnerable, affirming of others, do not feel threatened that others are able and good, for they have a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that they belong in a greater whole. They know that they are diminished when others are humiliated, diminished when others are oppressed, diminished when others are treated as if they were less than who they are. The quality of Ubuntu gives people resilience, enabling them to survive and emerge still human despite all efforts to dehumanize them. (Archbishop Desmond Tutu, *God Has a Dream*)

Tutu points out that respecting the humanity of others and having empathy towards others leads us to be positive and welcoming to other people. When we truly believe in the concept of Ubuntu, we realize that when someone else is degraded, then we ourselves are degraded. This leads us to a point where we are enacting justice on behalf of others

In addition to seeking justice, Ubuntu impels us to be compassionate and hospitable. “A traveler through a country would stop at a village and he didn’t have to ask for food or for water. Once he stops, the people give him food, entertain him. That is one aspect of Ubuntu but it will have various aspects. Ubuntu does not mean that people should not enrich themselves. The question therefore is: Are you going to do so in order to enable the community around you to be able to improve?” (Nelson Mandela). Ubuntu, according to Mandela, puts our own personal gains in a larger context – the context of something greater than ourselves, some transcendent cause. Our own personal gains, whether mental gains (such as education) or physical gains (such as money), inevitably benefit the greater community and make it a better place for everyone. Thus, those with Ubuntu are more likely to share their gains of wisdom or wealth with their neighbors.

Of course, this is no different than the Christian ethic, which values respect and justice as the highest human good. In Leviticus 19:18, the scripture says, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” commanding us to recognize the inherent humanity in each other. Again in the Gospels, Jesus reminds his followers not only to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength,” but also that the next greatest commandment is that “you shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:30-31). In the scripture, loving God with everything we have leads to what Mandela and Tutu call “Ubuntu” – the respect and compassion that we have for each other within a community.  The end result, however, remains the same – people with Ubuntu are welcoming, compassionate, and affirming towards all people.

**How to apply Ubuntu**

With a basic understanding of the Ubuntu philosophy, the application of these beliefs should be somewhat obvious. Building meaningful relationships, treating people with respect, affirming people across cultural divides, and enacting justice on behalf of others should seem to be clear outcomes of Ubuntu.

Even so, there are some guiding principles that can help us become more adept at applying Ubuntu in a practical way. Stanlake J.W.T. Samkange emphasizes three maxims that give a sort of practicality to Ubuntu, much as Kant did in his *Metaphysic of Morals*. First, he said, “To be human is to affirm one’s humanity by recognizing the humanity of others and, on that basis, establish respectful human relations with them.” First and foremost, the application of Ubuntu requires us to appreciate not only with our words, but with our actions, the inherent humanity in each other. As a result of this appreciation, we are able to treat each other with dignity and respect.

Samkange’s second principle of Ubuntu is a practical application of the previous maxim: “If and when one is faced with a decisive choice between wealth and the preservation of the life of another human being, then one should opt for the preservation of life.” This particular statement emphasizes that respecting our humanity and the humanity of others should always be the primary motive for any action. Wealth, while useful for advancing the good of the community, should never be valued above preserving the humanity of another person. For example, even something as simple as an insult degrades the humanity of someone else, and given the opportunity to make money by insulting someone, we should always say no to the money, because that person’s dignity is more valuable to us.

Finally, Samkange provides a third principle: “The king owes his status, including all the powers associated with it, to the will of the people under him.” Those who are in power, he says, are only in power because the people have allowed them to be in power.  This democratic ideal, Samkange says, was a “principle deeply embedded in traditional African political philosophy.” Consequently, the practical application is one directed at those who are in leadership: lead courageously. Those in power must continue to recognize the humanity in the people they lead, and must continually affirm the dignity of others. It is particularly imperative for those in leadership roles to develop Ubuntu because they have an impact not only on the people they lead, but on other whole communities. Thus recognizing that they are “a person only through other persons” allows them to work for a transcendent cause, lead courageously, enact justice on behalf of others.

**Conclusion**

Ubuntu is not a religious belief. Truly, it is not even an all-encompassing worldview. At its most powerful, Ubuntu is scarcely a moral imperative. Rather, Ubuntu is an underlying belief – it provides the “why” for actions that we all know to be good and just. By recognizing that we are all persons only through other persons, that I am human only because of the humanity of others, and that humans are intrinsically interconnected, I have a *reason* to treat others with respect. I have a reason to be affirming of others. I have a reason to be kind and welcoming and generous. It is this concept of Ubuntu that gives us the motivation to become real human beings and to treat others as such. Ubuntu gives us validation in our mission to accept responsibility, lead courageously, have empathy, enact justice on behalf of others, and work for a transcendent cause. Ubuntu is knowing what it means to be truly human.