

Week 17: The One Illusion We Cannot Afford to Believe In

I'm on the fifth floor of a hotel in Pennsylvania, waiting for an elevator to the lobby. It's July 4th—Independence Day in America. Early morning, and I'm leaving the hotel to find a cheaper breakfast. As I wait, I become aware of piped-in music overhead. I hear lyrics that remind me of my wife: "Fortune teller said I'd be free, and that's the day you came to me." I instantly reach for my phone, Google the lyrics, and the song title is the top result. I click out of Google, tap my Spotify app, search for the song, and the song playing above my head is now coming out of my phone.

I enjoy the dopamine rush of immediate gratification and I marvel at the convenience of technology. But mostly, I revel in my apparent self-sufficiency. Twenty years ago, I would have required the help of a number of people to identify the song, find a music store, and purchase the CD. Now, I interact with no one.

Now, I can completely ignore how interdependent all of us are.

The truth is, even though I felt like I found my song independently, I was dependent upon thousands of people—perhaps even millions—to make it possible: the device itself was created by people we'd all prefer to not think about—people working for low wages in horrible conditions half a world away. I charged the device in the hotel room, drawing on a power grid created and maintained by thousands of other people. If all those people decide to quit and go home, the power goes out and suddenly I don't feel so independent. Another team of people is responsible for the data service I used to stream the song. The apps I used were created by a team of people and are maintained by another team of people. But I don't see any of them and I don't hear them and I don't touch them. I don't look them in the eye. I don't talk to them. I don't shake their hand. I don't have a chance to say thank you. So I feel like I've done it all on my own. I *feel* independent.

What I feel is an illusion.

I listen to my new song in the elevator on the way down. I step into the lobby and look up. I see families surrounded by luggage, waiting on one thing or another before loading up the car and departing. I count thirty-four people—mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters and elderly couples and young businessmen and women—and twenty-seven of them are staring downward at a device. *Twenty-seven* out of thirty-four. A lobby full of people *with* each other, and yet, pretending to be independent. Entertaining themselves. Solving their own problems. A lobby full of people on devices that make us feel like a world unto ourselves—self-sufficient, autonomous, and free of each other. The illusion of independence on Independence Day.

Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh writes, “We are here to awaken from our illusion of separateness.”

The lobby full of device-gazing people is deeply interconnected, whether they recognize it or not. They’re connected at an atomic level: the atoms one person breathes out are breathed in by someone else, and a shock of static electricity will transfer electrons from one person to another. They’re connected at an emotional level: when one person is cruel to another, the cruelty is taken in and eventually passed on to another human being. And they’re connected at a spiritual level: their imagined independence is adding slowly to a collective sense of loneliness and disconnection that is, I think, reaching a tipping point.

“Fortune teller said I’d be free and that’s the day you came to me.”

Mysteriously, when someone comes to us and joins us in relationship and we lose some of our independence, we gain freedom. Freedom, paradoxically, always happens in connection to another. Because freedom isn’t about being independent. Freedom is about learning to dance the dance of both our independence *and* our interdependence, at the same time. Freedom is about finding the balance between the small *me* and a bigger *we*.

In relationship to each other, we learn to embrace the reality and the sacredness of our interdependence, while also respecting each other as independent, unique souls. We learn this in romance and friendship and marriage and family. In fact, *any* place where two or more are gathered can become a space in which we touch our independence and our interdependence at the same time.

Any place. Including a hotel lobby.

I leave the hotel, find cheap smoothies for my family, and then return. The lobby is emptier, but all heads are still bowed. The illusion believed. Interdependence ignored. I get on the elevator and, just before the doors close, a young boy gets in. I’m tempted to look straight ahead. To pretend we’re both independent.

Instead, I look down, and I ask him where he’s from and where he’s going.

His mouth and his eyes both smile, as if he’s been dying for someone to look at him. And he tells me. And then he does this surprising thing: this little kid asks me the same question. And I tell him. And suddenly we feel less like strangers—less like an adult and kid separated by decades—and more like two human beings acknowledging the reality of our interdependence.

Two human beings doing the human dance.