

## On Being Part of a Whole



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# On Being Part of a Whole

## 1. What Are You a Part Of?

Setting aside that scary, quasi-paranoid feeling of being part of something that is totally out of control and hell-bent for destruction, what are you a part of that you *want* to be a part of? Anything? Nothing?

1. Are you a part of a **family**? Americans are drawn to the idea of *family values*, but how many of us actually live in a family in which the whole and the parts regularly support one another, where they really live the Musketeers' creed, "All for one, and one for all"? How many live in families that are so dysfunctional that they can barely stand to be together, where the children "can't wait" to leave and get out on their own?
2. Are you a part of a **company** or **agency** through your **job**? Do you, like many Americans, define yourself through your job, your career? After years of education and more years of on-the-job experience that makes you an expert in your field, thinking of yourself as an expert is only natural. Or are you among the disillusioned millions whose career has become a job, a mere means of paying the bills? Or worse, are you among the many whose employers have repaid loyalty with pink slips? Are you among the fortunate few whose loyalty to your employer is reciprocated?
3. Are you a part of a **neighborhood** or **community**? How many people in your neighborhood do you know by name? How many are your friends? How many do you hang out with? Is your neighborhood or community a supportive, active place that you are happy to be a part of? Or is it merely a stretch of map around the building you happen to live in?
4. Are you a part of a **church**? **This church**? How often do you come? Sunday mornings? Occasionally? Plus a few other times for cool events? Are you an active part of planning and doing those activities?
5. Are you a part of a **cause**? What need does this world have that not only touches your heart and checkbook, but also your head, feet and hands, so that you are committing your time and energy to volunteer?
6. Are you a part of a **nation**? Americans typically think of themselves as Americans. In good times they live the good life; in bad times they complain, about the government, about those commie liberals or those redneck conservatives, or those damned (fill in the blank). In other words they're like everyone everywhere. But what do we do that makes us a **part** of this nation, rather than mere residents? We vote, some of us. But is that enough to fulfill our responsibilities as contributing parts of this great nation?
7. Are you a part of a this **earth**? There is every reason to believe that our earth is physically ill, nutritionally deprived, and spiritually dysfunctional. What are you doing to heal this world of ours? Is that not our responsibility as parts of the earth?

8. Are you a part of **God**? *Panentheism* is the belief that God is not a disembodied spirit, but the whole of the universe, including its physical, its mental, and its spiritual aspects. On this belief, toward which I am strongly inclined, we are all parts of God. Indeed, our individual choices affect the future, and hence co-create this whole called God. Are the choices you make co-creating a God worthy of worship?

Well, what are **you** a part of?

If you don't feel that you are really part of something, how do you feel about that?

- Self-contained and self-sufficient? *Really?*
- Alone and isolated?
- Like the pieces of your whole are floating all around you but just can't seem to quite come together?

I have spoken before of dysfunctionality as a debilitating part of the human condition, as a hell in this life that we have to struggle constantly to avoid. Some theologians describe hell as separation from God. I worry more about our separation from each other, but maybe those are two aspects of the same thing.

Scientists speak of *entropy* as the inevitable breakdown of all things. They formalize this principle as the *Second Law of Thermodynamics*, as though by rendering it in the language of mathematics, they can bring it under control. But their explanations of the principle do little more than echo the wisdom of Eastern philosophers in recognizing the ephemeral nature of all wholes. We live on the edge of a *nothing*, as was told in *The Never-Ending Story*, a nothing that ever threatens to consume us and all we hold dear.

Today I want to consider whether becoming part of a common whole is part of the answer to the challenge of dysfunctionality. Philosophers characterize the study of the relationships between parts and wholes as *mereology*, so our topic is one of social or spiritual mereology. What can be done to turn you and me into a we?

## 2. Why Be Part of Something?

We Americans are raised with a strong value on self-reliance. Henry David Thoreau, particularly in his *Walden*, and other Unitarian saints of the 19th Century, along with John Keating (played by Robin Williams in *The Dead Poet's Society*), and probably 99% of all the graduation speakers at every school in the country, have refined and extolled the virtues of self-reliance, of being one's own self. Why should we be concerned about being part of some whole?

The answer is that **Walden is a myth**. Thoreau and Keating and all the rest have honored *self-sufficiency* as though it were the only alternative to being *part of the herd*. But that is a false choice, a false dichotomy.

Humanity is a social species. As John Donne said, "No man is an island." Our evolutionary heritage is the tribe, the village, the community. Neither *Walden* nor *Robinson Crusoe* can work when the tools begin to break. Worse than that, what evidence

we can glean from studies of feral children is that loss of community yields permanent loss of humanity.

For our present purposes we need not focus on the extremes or the ideals. It is quite sufficient to recognize some very practical benefits of being part of something:

1. ***Rational Self-Interest.*** We do better for ourselves as part of community. If you don't believe at least this much, why are you still here, instead of carving out your life on some distant frontier?
2. ***Not Being Alone.*** In becoming part of a whole, we trade our loneliness for community, for the loving relationships we gain with other members of the community. Of course, learning to love well, rather than selfishly, is challenge all its own.
3. ***Finding Purpose.*** In becoming part of a whole, we find purpose for ourselves in the goals of the community and our role in achieving those goals.
4. ***Finding Identity.*** In becoming part of a whole, we not only find our own purpose in our role in the community, we come to identify ourselves with that role.

Now for me to be honest, I need to acknowledge that those *potential* practical benefits have to be weighed against some real risks:

1. ***Impermanence.*** Whatever whole we choose to belong to bears the seeds of its own dissolution; it is subject to entropy. We face the prospect not only of grieving the death of that whole, but also of being set adrift.
2. ***Subservience.*** Most of the wholes of which we might be a part are human organizations all inclined toward hierarchical structures in which a few impose decisions on the many.
3. ***Failure.*** Human institutions often fail to achieve their goals, the very goals that may have inclined us towards belonging.
4. ***Vulnerability.*** To the extent that we identify ourselves with our roles in that community, we risk loss of that identity when the community fails, or when we lose that role. Such a fate has befallen those many who have lost their jobs through downsizing or bankruptcy.

As always, of course, real risks have to be weighed against real opportunities. That is the nature of the choices you, as a divine co-creator, have to make.

### 3. What Is It to Be Part of Something?

I suggest that if we are to benefit from being part of something, our relationship to that thing, that whole, has to be much stronger than merely being co-located. We might be *part of the crowd* in the mall the day after Thanksgiving, but we are not ***part*** of that crowd. We don't take our identity from it. Our relationship to a whole needs to be something more. What more? I'm not sure there's a single answer, but there are a number of examples of part-whole relationships that we can consider.

### **3.1. Some Unsatisfactory Wholes**

First let's look at some wholes that I suspect we would not want to be part of.

#### **3.1.1. The Herd**

If you watch a flock of birds rising from a field at sunset or a stampeding herd of cattle or a mob of angry people, you will see what I've heard called *flocking behavior*. No one individual leads the flock. Each one in a sense is making its own decisions – return to the field or head to the trees, turn toward the plain or to the gully, fight or flee. But each is intensely aware of what its neighbor is doing. If one bird turns toward the field, the others around it will do the same, until they see others heading towards the trees. Back and forth they will go until a critical number “chooses” one direction or another and the whole flock is committed. This is precisely the behavior decried by Thoreau and others. To be part of a herd or flock or mob is to be so sensitive to the shallow surface of our neighbors' behavior – their fads, their casual or angry remarks, their responses to polls – that we don't think carefully about our own choices.

#### **3.1.2. The Hive**

A few years ago one of the themes in the series *Star Trek – The Next Generation* was how to deal with the *Borg*, an aggressive alien race with a so-called *hive mind*, in which every individual was so interlocked that they all thought alike. Every Borg was so intimately part of the whole that their every thought and action was directed toward achieving the objectives of the whole. Hive minds, a frequent theme in science fiction, might be seen as an extreme example of herd mentality. They are almost always depicted as a horrible way to live, while at the same time terrifyingly successful and difficult to defeat, very similar to the way Americans thought of Communism during the cold war.

#### **3.1.3. The Dictatorship**

To be a part of some communities, you must subject yourself to the authority of others, or in large organizations a chain of command. Soldiers obey orders from higher ranks and issue orders to lower ranks within their commands. This same model is used in governmental, ecclesiastical and corporate organizations. In all cases failure to obey orders is subject to penalty, ranging from death to ejection to fines to being labeled “not a team player”. Moreover, since people might be citizens of a country, members of a church and employees of a corporation all at the same time, they might be subject to conflicting commands coming down through the various hierarchies. Throughout history people have found their identities and purposes through their sense of belonging to these institutions, and have suffered serious anxiety when having to choose between conflicting commands. In the West there seems to have been a widespread rejection of the authoritarian model, perhaps due to a perceived chronic abuse of the command structure. People often dismiss their associations with their governments (“I just live here”), their jobs (“I just work here”), or their churches (“I just come here on Sundays.”) They no longer identify with these institutions, and to a large extent they no longer see themselves as being parts of them, or of anything else, in any meaningful way.

### **3.1.4. The Democracy**

Whoa, you ask, why is democracy in this list of unsatisfactory wholes? We're Americans. We pride ourselves on our democracy. But are we really **part of** our democracy? As UUs we tend to be liberal, religiously and politically. We tend to affiliate with the Democratic Party, and if that's not true of you, please forgive me. But are we democrats (small 'd') or are we Democrats (big 'D')? Do we think of ourselves as part of the whole American system that includes Democrats (big 'D') and Republicans and Independents and Libertarians and everyone else? Do we view the political process as the way that all Americans come together, whatever their political stripes, to make joint decisions? Or is politics a fight that **we** have to win? As soon as we think of ourselves as a **we** that has to **win**, we thereby separate ourselves from our opponents. They are no longer a part of **us**. We are diminished from a whole America to a faction. Rather than negotiate compromises in which no one loses all, we appeal to the base and struggle to get out the vote, so that we get that small edge at the ballot box that makes us the winners, the winners who take all. We become an adversarial democracy, whose only advantage over a dictatorship is that those in authority change every few years.

## **3.2. Some More Satisfactory Wholes**

Next let's look at some wholes that may be more worthy of consideration.

### **3.2.1. The Organism**

Living organisms exemplify a radical form of part-whole relationships, in which the organism is made up of organs, which are themselves made up of tissues, which themselves comprise in descending order of complexity cells, organic molecules, inorganic molecules, atoms, particles, quarks and so on. The life of the organism depends entirely on each of its parts at every level *doing what comes naturally* and *playing well with others* at that level. Evolution dealt harshly with organisms whose parts failed in those regards.

Note that unlike the hive mind discussed above, the various parts of an organism don't all think alike. To the extent that they can be said to "think" at all, their "thoughts" are focused solely on acquiring and processing the resources they need to do the tasks they are built to do, whether those tasks are to turn food into chemicals usable elsewhere in the body, or to send signals down the neural pathways, or to exert force on bones by contracting. Not only do these components not think alike, they are frequently in competition for resources and dominance. For example, the signals sent by one set of neurons may conflict with the signals sent by another, with other neurons resolving the conflict. At a higher level, we often find ourselves conflicted, having multiple competing alternatives from which we as wholes have to choose.

I've often speculated on whether and what it would take for human society to integrate into some kind of *super-organism*, the way organic molecules once evolved into cellular organisms, or the way that single-celled organisms once evolved into multi-celled organism, but our current level of dysfunction seems to make that a moot question. Nonetheless, the organic model at least establishes a kind of baseline ideal for successful part-whole relationships.

### 3.2.2. *The Team*

A team is a group of people who work together for a common set of goals and objectives. Sometimes, as on the football field or in a stage play, a team has to develop and practice intricate interactions among themselves in order to achieve their goals. Sometimes, as on the basketball court or the battlefield, the roles of each teammate are both less precise and more flexible. The overwhelming evidence is that such team activities are extremely rewarding in terms of the camaraderie, *esprit de corps*, the bonding that takes place among the teammates. Not only do people accomplish things in teams that they could never achieve individually, they take deep pride both in their team accomplishments and in their individual contributions to the team. Teams are also short-lived. Once the game or the play or the battle is over, after a cool-down period of self-congratulation, the team dissolves into individuals, with no more common purpose than any other group of acquaintances. Why is it that team play is simultaneously so fulfilling and so fragile?

### 3.2.3. *The Consensus*

Consensus democracy is a process by which decisions are made so that everyone in the community participates and no one feels that their voice or fundamental values have been ignored. Consensus democracies, unlike adversarial democracies, don't have an extensive history of practice. One of the persistent mantras of politicians everywhere is that they want to build consensus, that their goals are non-political, that they want to cross party lines, that they want everyone involved. In practice, the factions in an adversarial democracy can never engage in deep negotiation for fear that they will lose their market edge, that difference that keeps their base loyal.

Consensus democracy is much more like team play than adversarial democracy. It requires each member of the community to respect the rights and values of every other member, no matter how great the differences. It requires taking the time to negotiate agreements in which no one has to accept an unfair loss. Even when a majority could push through a solution quickly over the strong objections of a minority, consensus democracy takes the time to find a compromise that the minority can accept.

In a consensus democracy, everyone is a valued part of the whole; no one's opinion is unworthy of incorporation.

## 4. **What Is the Price of Being Part of a Whole?**

I believe that to truly be a contributing part of something worthwhile is an ideal we all share. Either to be excluded, to be on the outside of a functioning whole, or to be irrelevant to the successful functioning of that whole, or to see ourselves as trapped in a failing or dysfunctional whole, is the spiritual equivalent of Hell. Cynicism is the attitude that we are all trapped in that Hell, and there's nothing we can do about it. I on the other hand am a guarded optimist. I choose to act as though there is something I can do to become part of a worthwhile whole. But I must pay a price, three of them:

1. **Respect.** I have to sincerely say "namaste" to you and everyone else. I have to respect your contributions, your values, your choices. I have to ac-

cept you as co-creator of the future of my whole, and thus of my own future. And I have to accept you as co-beneficiary of the rewards of our common success. If I exclude you, if I exclude anyone, I thereby dissolve the whole and exclude myself.

2. **Commitment.** I have to commit my own energies and invest my own resources to bringing about that co-created future. Even when the whole, the team, is taking a direction that is not quite what I would have chosen, I have to commit myself to participate fully in its chosen activity, while continuing to advocate for my preferred course.
3. **Responsibility.** I have to accept my own personal responsibility for the whole of which I am a part. It is my job to do the best I can to make sure that my whole succeeds. If it fails, I am responsible. If it errs, I am responsible. If it succeeds, **we** are responsible.

Now to be honest, I'm inclined to think that this demand for mutual respect, commitment and responsibility, is a high price in personal energy. Otherwise, team cohesion would not dissipate so rapidly when the game or the play or the battle is over. Of the forms of part-whole structures we have examined, I think only consensus democracy offers a hope for sustaining the voluntary integrity of the whole despite the pressure of social entropy. But am I really able to commit myself to our mutual **win-win** solutions over my individual **I-win** solution? Are you?

## 5. Turning You and Me into a *We*.

How would such an approach apply in the various wholes of which you might want to become a part? What is it that renders your family, your work group, your community, your church, your cause, your nation, your world a many rather than a one, that keeps it from being a whole? Are decisions of the whole truly made by consensus? Or are they imposed from above? Or are they merely the unpredictable consequences of everyone going their own way and fighting it out when push comes to shove? Does everyone feel that their hopes and aspirations are equally valued?

My own conclusion is that the whole that demands my highest priority is the earth itself, including all its peoples, with all smaller wholes being subordinate. I am an American, but only to the extent that I see America's potential contributions to the health of the whole world. ('Health', by the way, like the German 'gesund', as in 'gesundheit', means **wholeness**.) To the extent that I choose America, or my church, or my family, or anything else, over the whole of this world, I thereby sub-optimize the physical and economic and spiritual ecosystem that sustains the world. And I thereby exclude the non-American, or non-whatever, as unworthy of my regard.

Once I have chosen the world as my whole, the god of which I wish to be a contributing part, I must say "namaste" to everyone, to all the inhabitants of the earth (and to extra-terrestrials if they be discovered); I must acknowledge their goals, their hopes, their aspirations as worth consideration, even when I disagree with them. This is the essence of what Jesus meant when he told us that the greatest commandment is to

love God and the second is to love our neighbor.<sup>1</sup> And then I have to commit my energy and resources to bringing about a system in which each person sees himself as a full responsible, participant in a consensus democracy.

Can I do this unilaterally? No, of course not. I don't think that Jesus believed that an individual's love, by itself, would conquer all. But he realized that love and respect are infectious. If I can bring you into my circle of love and respect, you too might bring another into that circle. And person by person, a fulfilling whole might emerge to which we all contribute.

***This I believe. This I choose.***

***Namaste!***

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 12:30-31

## Appendix. Related Sermons by Jim Fulton

1. *Universalism*,  
[http://www.asuuc.org/Home\\_files/Sermons/2009/0315-Universalism/Universalism.pdf](http://www.asuuc.org/Home_files/Sermons/2009/0315-Universalism/Universalism.pdf)
2. *I Am ....*,  
[http://www.asuuc.org/Home\\_files/Sermons/2009/0920-IAm/I%20Am%20....pdf](http://www.asuuc.org/Home_files/Sermons/2009/0920-IAm/I%20Am%20....pdf)
3. *I Believe - A Universalist Catechism*,  
[http://www.asuuc.org/Home\\_files/Sermons/2009/0927-IBelieve/UniversalistCatechism.pdf](http://www.asuuc.org/Home_files/Sermons/2009/0927-IBelieve/UniversalistCatechism.pdf)
4. *Phoenix Communion*,  
[http://www.asuuc.org/Home\\_files/Sermons/2009/1004-PhoenixCommunion/PhoenixCommunion-0910.pdf](http://www.asuuc.org/Home_files/Sermons/2009/1004-PhoenixCommunion/PhoenixCommunion-0910.pdf)
5. *Sin and the Universalist*,  
[http://www.asuuc.org/Home\\_files/Sermons/2009/0524-Sin&Universalist/Sin&Universalist.pdf](http://www.asuuc.org/Home_files/Sermons/2009/0524-Sin&Universalist/Sin&Universalist.pdf)