

dailypress.com/features/family/dp-fea-relcol-0206-20110204,0,7886058.story

dailypress.com

We are all connected on the highway of life

10:07 PM EST, February 4, 2011

A few weeks ago, I was driving on I-64, traveling from Richmond back home to Newport News. At that time in the early evening, the traffic was fairly dense; cars were filling both lanes and moving fairly steadily at around the speed limit. One car, however, was repeatedly switching between the lanes, going from one side to the other and back again, in order to overtake other vehicles and move a little faster down the highway than everyone else.

I could speculate as to why that car was being driven that way, generating various reasons that could be degrees of mean or charitable feelings toward the driver. But whatever the actual reason, the effects on the rest of the traffic were clear: every time the car would change lanes, the vehicles that were now behind it would apply their brakes, and a wave of red taillights would move back along the road. Just as the traffic stabilized, the car would change lanes again, the vehicles in that lane would brake, and another line of red lights would appear.

Usually the ways in which our actions affect one another aren't quite so obvious. There's rarely a signal as clear as a ripple of red brake lights shining out from the evening's dark to show us how the consequences of our actions are spreading through the world. On some level, we know that what we do often affects other people — indeed, such an awareness is one of the characteristics of maturity as an adult. But in my experience, it's not unusual to limit our decision-making by considering the consequences of our actions for only ourselves and the small number of people that we intend to be directly impacted by our decisions.

That's generally a practical attitude for employing our individual free-will. If we could somehow plot out all the ways in which our actions might affect all other people — like a computer programmed to play chess — our lives would be spent in a perpetual state of "analysis paralysis." It expedites decision-making to have a mental process that, for example, recognizes that I'm going to get home much later than I'd promised and assumes that the rest of the traffic on I-64 will be able to accommodate my repeated lane-changing so that I'm not quite so late.

Unitarian Universalist minister Forrest Church noted that religion is, quite simply, "our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die." However, while each of us takes that final journey into the mystery of death alone, each of us spends our lives in relationship with other people and other life-forms on this planet in ways we can see and in ways we can't.

The sciences have shown us many of those connections, helping us to see, for instance, how the air we breathe and the water we drink are provided by planet-spanning, life-maintaining cycles of photosynthesis, respiration, transpiration, evaporation and condensation. Many religions have been telling us the same thing — in their own ways — for much longer, from the Hindu concept of maya — meaning, loosely, the illusion of our separateness from the rest of reality — to Paul's explanation to the Corinthians that "there are many members, yet one body." My own faith tradition, Unitarian Universalism, similarly embraces these truths by affirming and promoting "respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part."

We generally get through life assuming that our individuality also comes with complete independence. Most

of the time it's a reasonable, if self-serving, attitude to assume that highway traffic will accommodate us when we change lanes. Both science and religion, though, remind us that we are, in fact, interdependent, even if we don't always see the wave of red lights behind us. When you're the only driver on the road, independence is a perfectly reasonable assumption. But as the traffic gets heavier, such an assumption can prove deadly.

In a world with increasing numbers of people who are increasingly connected to one another by commerce and technology, with increasing needs for water and food and fuel, it's time for us to develop a more mature awareness of our interdependence with one another and with all life on Earth. Both science and religion tell us that we're all in this together, "caught in an inescapable network of mutuality," in Dr. King's words, "tied in a single garment of destiny."

It's time we acted accordingly.

Rev. Andrew Clive Millard is minister to the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Peninsula in Newport News. He can be reached at minister@uufp.org

Copyright © 2011, [Newport News, Va., Daily Press](#)