

Finn Tschudi. June 21, 2008

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UBUNTU notes

UBUNTU is an African concept which can be translated in a variety of ways. My favourite is: "I am because you are", which may be elaborated "you create me, and as you create me I create you", what may conveniently be called co-creation. Bishop Tutu has a more 'conventional' interpretation 'our humanities are inextricably interrelated'.

If you 'google' UBUNTU for further elaboration and enlightenment you may be in for a surprise. While there are several million hits, on the first page the first ten hits exclusively deal with technical computer issues. This, however, refers to a story which may be of great interest also in the present context. I first sketch this strand. I then turn to the African one, and tell about Mandela, Tutu, and the TRC (Truth and Reconciliation Commission). At the end we will then consider whether it is possible or necessary to weave the computer and the African strands together..

From internet we first learn that UBUNTU is the current dominant version of LINUX, which may leave many of you still puzzled. LINUX is an operating system for computers, the kernel, operating system. Previously one would say the 'brain' of the computer. It was written by the Finnish computer technician Linus Torvalds. If the name does not ring any familiar bell you may perhaps prick up your ears when you learn that he was literally giving away million of copies of his system. This points the way to a sharing community. What really strengthens this theme is what is called 'open source code'. This implies that there are no trade secrets involved here, no patents or copyright issues. Anyone who is interested /willing to acquire the necessary background (no lack of books to help on the way) can delve into the innards, so to speak disassemble and reassemble the workings of the system. Here we are at the core of this UBUNTU. Everyone are free to make their own contribution, and literally million of hours have been spent on improving the system.

This feature was a great inspiration for a prominent Norwegian Marxist – leninist, Tron Øgrim. I once listened to him while he talked about school applications of the Linux system and he strongly argued that here the old communist dream really came true: 'to each according to his/her ability and to each according to her/his needs'.

Not everything can be done without funds and it should be mentioned that UBUNTU has profited from generous gifts from a philanthropist, Mark Shuttleworth, who has spent millions of dollars to facilitate development of UBUNTU systems, especially in Africa.

It may be appropriate to dwell a minute on the relation between UBUNTU and Microsoft. The 'father', Linus Torvalds, is not a well known figure compared to Bill Gates (who started Microsoft). The number of google hits for Linus is a very small fraction of what you find for Bill Gates. But from a generalized dignity point of view this is as it should be. The point is not to have a hero to heap rewards, or adulation on – cf. Evelin Lindner's critique of 'honour society' - but to enjoy the fruits of a co-creating, yes, an UBUNTU type community.

One more comment is appropriate. Sometimes it is argued that patent rights are necessary for development of important high tech contributions, e.g. in the pharmaceutical industry. This ignores the importance of the joy of simply being a part of a greater whole and the concomitant joy of making a contribution ('small' or 'large' is not the main issue). In the contest of rebuilding societies after war Mary Kaldor speaks passionately about 'islands of civility'. In the present 'war' concerned with fighting large capitalist systems which tend to create greater inequality and concomitant suffering, we should pay attention to the UBUNTU community as an 'island of civility' and hopefully use it as a source of inspiration.

Let us now turn to Africa and Nelson Mandela. My friend Vegar Jordanger has carefully gone through the literature on Mandela's long imprisonment on Robben Island. There was a precarious balance between Mandela's insistence on keeping his own dignity, and the guards 'licence' to humiliate. Mandela would insist on

keeping his own pace. If, however, he slowed down far too much it might have been appropriate for the guards to seriously beat him. I see the relation as a carefully balanced dance where in a sense the steps of each partner somehow meshed with that of the other, a kind of UBUNTU co-creation. A beautiful way in which Mandela respected the dignity of his 'dancing partners', was to have two of them sitting next to him at his presidential inauguration.

The most well known application of UBUNTU, however, was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, TRC. Those who had violated others in the apartheid struggle could get amnesty in exchange for telling the truth about their transgressions. In a seminar at Bar Ilan University in Tel Aviv I was taken aback by professor Gerald Steinberg, then leader of a centre for the study of Negotiation and Conflict. He wrote a paper criticizing TRC for having only limited applicability. In his view it depended on a Christian 'turning the other cheek' approach which for instance was completely incompatible with the Jewish faith. I reacted strongly against this. While I could see Christian influence both for Mandela and Tutu, my feeling was that the primary background was UBUNTU. I asked an Australian friend of mine, John Braithwaite, who has extensive international experience in peace and conflict about this. His answer was 'I think you are right, Finn. My wife talked with Mandela about this, and he cited UBUNTU as a primary source of TRC.'

The point here is of course not to say anything in general about Jewish harshness (which needless to say would be entirely inappropriate at this occasion when we celebrate Wergeland¹). First of all I will draw attention to a point made by Johan Galtung; all major religions have so to speak two faces, a hard, unforgiving one, and a compassionate, forgiving one. (consider for instance the [contrast between e.g. Calvin and Francis in Christianity].)

My favourite Jews are the participants in a general peace demonstration in New York city in 2002. At that point in time several Palestinians had been slaughtered in Jenin by Israel soldiers: and a group of Jews marched under the banner:

We did not escape Auschwitz to die in Jenin.

I need not elaborate that Wergeland would have enjoyed participating together with Jews in favour of (probably) muslim brethren and sisters!

UBUNTU as a signal of compassionate community and forgiveness; is that a different world from UBUNTU as a computer community? This would imply some (in my mind) inadequate distinction between 'intellectual' and 'humanist' (or whatever) orientations.. We should cherish and contribute to any UBUNTU type community we come across which is congenial to our interests and abilities. Each of us can make one small step towards a larger UBUNTU, a global UBUNTU.

In a larger perspective my dream is that the wisdom of Chief Seattle as engraved in a museum in Memphis, Tennessee may guide us. Two excerpts from what he is reported to have said in his 1854 speech

The perfumed flowers are our sisters. The bear, the great eagle, these are our brothers. The rocky crests, the meadows, the ponies – all belong to the same family.

This we know: All things are connected like the blood that unites us. We did not weave the web of life. We are simply a strand in it. Whatever we do to the web we do to ourselves. We love this earth as a newborn loves its mother's heartbeat.

Thank you.

¹ Wergeland was born 200 years ago, and is *the* Norwegian poet laureate. In this connexion it is appropriate to underline that he fought for the right of Jews to enter Norway, and this helped to change the Norwegian constitution in this respect. Not only is there is a pronounced Christian influence in his many poems, he was also much impressed by islam A true Abrahamic child!