

**From Tethers of Captivity to Roots of Flourishing:
Collective Sin and Mutual Struggle in the Web that Connects Us**
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If Groups Can Sin, Can Groups Be Absolved?

No.

But 5511 words remain at my disposal, and not to use them would be... an error.

My task as I see it is to explore the nature of collective sin and the question of absolution, and to do so in a timely way for Unitarian Universalism as these questions meet and merge and twine together in the profound moral conundrum of our time: The system of domination rearing its monstrous heads particularly in the contemporary social sins of white supremacy and human made climate crisis undergirded by late-stage neoliberal capitalism...

I may need more words.

And another lifetime.

And yet, there is something clear, if not simple, to be said about the sin of domination that lives in each of our hearts and becomes a system more harmful and insidious than the sum of its parts in the ongoing struggle of our entangled human lives.

And there is something simple, if not quite clear, to be said about the ethic of love and ongoing mutual struggle as a means to our collective liberation (though not, I will argue, our absolution).

So in we dive.

First we will turn to the question of collective sin, examining the relationship between systems and individuals and the perpetual ontological struggle between the one and the many.

I will argue that this question of the universal and the particular is especially relevant to liberal theologies and the way that we conceptualize both fault when speaking of sin and agency when speaking of redemption.

Secondly, we will turn to the materiality of sin in liberal theology, and wonder whether, in moving toward a systemic conception of sin, we have moved into a realm of the ideal that un-tethers the experience of sin from the flesh.

I will argue that in grappling with the entanglement of the one and the many, we must grapple as well with the re-embodiment of sin, both individually and collectively, as an ethic of domination that tears flesh as well as breaking hearts, and desecrates earth as well as perpetuating sinful systems.

Thirdly, we will turn to the question of absolution as it relates to the individual and the collective, the material and the ideal. I will argue that absolution itself is a concept divorced from the material, especially when applied to groups, and therefore inadequate to face the sins of our society and our selves.

With the possibility of absolution off the table, we will close with a brief turn to the image of ongoing mutual struggle and to an ethic of embodied love as a way to live with integrity into the perpetual work of collective liberation, and as the only response to our systems and our sin.

Sin, Itself

“If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.”

Mother Theresa

As with most things in philosophy and in life, regarding sin I take a decidedly pragmatic approach. Sin is measured by its impact on the self or other, not by our intention. Sin exists at last in the material world - it breaks bodies and desecrates ground because it is enacted between embodied actors in a fleshy world.

In this way, sin is also dynamic and relational. The category of sin is not set or established for all time, but emerges in the dynamic of relationship.

Through this paper, then, a working definition of sin will begin to emerge, though never be settled at last. It may be helpful, in beginning, to hint at that definition:

Sin unfolds as human behaviors and collective systemic behaviors that deny or violate our connection with other humans, other creatures, or our planet. Sin is action that is not “in touch” (literally *and* metaphorically) with our mutual relationship to other beings and with the whole.

In the tradition of womanist theologians like Emily Townes and Dolores Williams, sin, here emerging, is the domination or exercise of control over another in a way that objectifies, denies, annihilates, or, in Williams’ words, “invisibilizes” others and our connection to them. This domination interrupts the co-evolution of the one and the many, often collapsing one into the other, and it therefore destroys difference – tearing the fabric of the web of life.

In this way, sin is not exactly separation itself, but is the result of our illusions of separateness. Our sin is every moment that we forget or violate the web of interconnection that binds together all creatures and our world.

Yet, the intricacies of that very web invariably render us ignorant of a number our violations, as the complexity of our entanglement with one another and the systems of the earth makes it more and more difficult to witness or understand the true results of our actions.

In this way we are each caught up in collective sins that we may never understand or even know.

This is the reality of life in the web.

The Peril of the Web: Entanglement & Collective Sin

“We celebrate the web of life/Its magnitude we sing/For we can see divinity/in every living thing.”

*“We Celebrate the Web of Life” Singing the Living Tradition, Hymn #175
Words by Alicia S. Carpenter*

In how many sermons and liturgies have we heard Unitarian Universalists waxing poetic about the web of all life of which we are a part? (How many times have I done so myself?)

It is a beautiful web, sparkling with dewdrops in the morning sun... It is an embracing web, which upholds us and catches us when we fall... It is Indra's net, sparkling with jewels at every joining... It is the awesomeness of our interconnection and the promise of our shared fate, which we declare to be Love.

But if the web of life guarantees our shared fate, it also threatens it. Or rather threatens us with it. A shared fate is a heavy thing. And we do well to remember that a spider's web is a trap, a predator's instrument of death, and certainly a more difficult and truthful theological metaphor than our preaching may regularly reveal.

Process Theologian Catherine Keller, in her book *The Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement*, writes of the theological implications of the emerging quantum physics that show our universe to be entangled and web-like from the quantum level up.

This emerging physics of quantum entanglement supports the worldview held by process philosophers – of the universe as dynamic and relational at every level, what Keller calls a ‘participatory universe.’ In this participatory universe, our actions, decisions, and even our subjective experiences are so deeply woven together that the act of any one individual has a profound impact on all others and the whole unfolding universe itself, just as the unfolding of the whole universe finds its expression in each of us.

Indeed, our entanglement stretches every which way. As individuals, we are caught up in larger systems and in the universe itself, but so are those systems and the universe deeply impacted by the actions and decisions of each individual.

This fact, points out Keller, can operate in our lives for good or for ill, our entwined, shared fate both a promise and a threat.

Entanglement can manifest as the entanglement of the powerless in the decisions of the powerful – even the many powerless can be at the mercy of the one exercising dominating power.

Entanglement can also show itself as the ontological struggle between the one and the many – which co-exist in wary relation to each other, as the many stand in danger of

being swallowed up by the one and the one in danger of dissolution by the actions of the many.

The web is beautiful *and* terrible as it serves to either trap or creatively engage the many subjects that make it up. The web is both strong and fragile, as the many subjects in its threads have the capacity to tear its fabric with careless action or reweave it with resilience.

When we treat our entanglement with respect and our entangled fellow-subjects with empathy, the one and the many thrive in a harmony that balances the power of each and holds both in an unfolding and creative tension without collapsing them together.

But, as Process Theologian Jay McDaniel writes in response to Keller's work, when we *forget* our entanglement and the empathy that it demands, "we come to think of power as *power over* other things (unilateral or dominating) rather than *creative cooperation with* other things."

"Accordingly," he continues, "we fall into sin." (McDaniel)

This is one emerging definition of sin in an entangled world: the individual and collective will to dominate the one and the many – the desire to manage the vulnerability we encounter in our interconnection by taking control of the web and by perpetuating systems that help us feel it is unfolding predictably, under our dominion.

Our closeness to one another, our out-sized impact on one another, can call us to tenderness and compassion, but it can just as easily call us to fear and domination. As James Luther Adams points out in exploring the reputation of human nature: "History is a theatre of conflicts in which the tensions between the will to mutuality and the will to power appear in their most subtle and perverse form." (Adams 15)

In this way, the web of life can be the source and the substance of our sin when dominated by the will to power-over. Or that very same web can also be the source and substance of our salvation when encountered with the will to mutuality. Most likely it will always be both, as the dance of mutuality and power unfolds in our psyches and in our communities.

The web of all life of which we are a part tempts us with control, even as it calls us to love, and the danger of our collective sin is that the very web itself can be used to manipulate its constitutive parts.

Keller uses the example of late capitalism to remind us that our entanglement can be engaged for good or for ill: "The global dimension of capitalism increasingly entangles everyone with everything," remarks Keller. It even "captures something of the ontological process of entanglement, of its instantaneous exchange and its productive risks" (Keller 225). But it does so in a way that collapses the one and the many into each other in a commodification and objectification of both. It urges the will to control, or, specifically, to possess:

Capitalism does not advertise the all-in-all and each-in-each of our nonseparability. To the contrary, it features the ego-by-ego of corporate individualism. That billboard ideal projects the smoothest uniformity *as* the new and the different: a new ruse of separability that stays “connected.” Our mutual immanence, our embodied interdependence is systemically ignored while our external links are commodified – indeed electrified. (Keller 225)

This is the peril of the web that connects us – the confusion of the one and the many with each other at the expense of the depth of both. A shallow engagement with the web will always lead to its violation or abuse through the desire to control or possess. Keller reminds us: “It is not that relation itself is good or responsible. It is *mindfulness* of relation that plies the ethical” (Keller 255).

The web of life will be the source of subjugation or the site of mutual flourishing depending on our capacity to recognize it, to hold the one and the many in a creative tension, and to live gracefully and compassionately into our entanglement without exercising the will to control or possess.

We Didn't Start the Fire: Agency & Responsibility in the Collective

“We didn't start the fire/It was always burning/Since the world's been turning”

Billy Joel

Sin may be the one area of theological questioning where the contemporary religious liberal turns away from individualism, tending to see sin overwhelmingly as social.

Perhaps this trend goes to our Unitarian forebears' belief in the moral perfectibility of humankind, which over time evolved into a moral perfectionism that no longer allowed the admission of personal transgressions.

Perhaps this turn can be traced to an adoption of the principles of the Social Gospel movement, represented in the theological canon by Walter Rauschenbusch. His work associating economic inequality and social ills with a robust theology of collective and institutionalized sin accompanied real and important work by people of faith in justice-making efforts well into the 20th century. It turned our attention to the systemic.

Perhaps this turn represents a repudiation of the individualistic, full-fault shaming of contemporary religious conservatism – the sin-as-crime model that Barbara Brown Taylor describes in her book *Speaking of Sin* in comparison to the no-fault, sin-as-sickness approach that she identifies in contemporary religious liberalism.

For these reasons, and probably others, it is far easier for Unitarian Universalist ministers, when speaking of sin at all, to name the “sins of various –isms” from the pulpit rather than the “sins of the people,” “our sins,” or, Heaven-forbid, “your sins.” The collective is comfortable, the individual – not so much.

Exhausting though the ruse of moral perfection may be, Unitarian Universalists do not take kindly to being called sinners. Sin, if it exists at all among us, is something that lives

nebulously at the systemic level, affecting and even implicating each of us, but for which none of us is quite responsible.

On one level, this rings true to the theological framework here emerging. Because we are entangled, the extent of our responsibility *is* unclear. The reality of inter-subjectivity *can be* the diffusion of agency. The reality of collective sin *is* that we live amid systems we did not personally create and we can hardly perceive how to resist.

On the other hand, if we take the web of life seriously, *untangling* our individual role in social sin becomes just as difficult. Effectively, the depth of our inter-subjectivity – our entanglement down to the very atomic level and up to the level of global systems – guarantees that *all sin is both individual and collective*.

The collective sin of the many forms and shapes each individual within it, and the sin of the individual is always contributing to a larger whole.

A theology of sin that resists the collapse of the many and the one must acknowledge that the will to control and the seeds of domination live in our systems *and* in our individual psyches in ways that reinforce each other.

As leaders in our tradition, it may be our role to distinguish for our people the difference between a sophisticated systemic analysis – which holds in tension the responsibility and agency of the one and the many – and a simpler “blame the system” outlook – which denies personal responsibility *and* drains away our agency.

This tendency to blame the system and to disengage may reflect the developmental stage of some in our congregations, but perhaps it also has something deeper to do with our theology.

In his essay on the changing reputation of human nature, James Luther Adams reminds us that the idealism of liberal rationalism posits the existence of a rational unity and harmony that exists *a priori*, outside the context of human struggle. This idealism gives rise to the image of unified systems that somehow precede us and are so universal and determined as to operate largely outside our influence.

This idealism becomes a barrier to recognizing our own agency and responsibility for collective sin whenever we engage in what Alfred North Whitehead called “the fallacy of misplaced concreteness.”

When we accept the existence of *a priori* forces preceding the processes and struggles of our material world, we assume their concreteness or un-changeableness. We also often assume, unquestioned, the ultimacy of the *wrong* forces, such as the supremacy of the free market, the primacy of whiteness, or the inevitability of climate change.

Once we elevate the wrong thing to the idealized status of *a priori* force, it becomes so universal and remote as to be untouchable by human hands and human behaviors. Upon this loss of agency, what can we do but abdicate responsibility?

We see this especially in the human response to the climate crisis: in the dynamics of explicit climate change deniers *and* in the more common psychological denial that allows the rest of us to move through our days without panic.

As I write this, the West coast of the United States burns with record wildfires after years of drought. But... we didn't start the fire. Climate change was created by the collective sins of consumer avarice, oil gluttony, free market lust – forces that are simply assumed as ultimate in our economy, and as such in our universe. How can we possibly be responsible for such a universal and irresistible power? In this narrative, our idealism is the source of our abdication.

Perhaps it is exactly a re-materializing, re-particularizing of our sins, both individually and collectively, that will restore our sense of response-ability and agency to do the work of resistance – to engage in the mutual and collective struggle that will transform us each, and so doing, transform us all.

The Body that Sins, The Body that Breaks

“Perhaps there has been, at some point in history, some great power whose elevation was exempt from the violent exploitation of other human bodies. If there has been, I have yet to discover it.”

*Ta-Nehisi Coates
Between the World and Me*

Systemic sin may be elevated in liberal theology to the universal and ideal, but it always plays out in reality upon the particular and the material. The reality of collective sin is the widespread plunder of bodies – bodies that starve, bodies that face mass incarceration and mass extinction, bodies that burn and break.

Early Christian conceptions of sin were always fleshy. Contemporary conservative theology en-fleshes sin as well, obsessed as it is with sexual purity. Both conceive of sin as largely or entirely an individual endeavor.

In contrast, the universalizing turn of a contemporary liberal approach, in framing sin as systemic, has simultaneously distanced us from the particular and from the body (which is always particular).

I would argue that we are better served by an understanding of collective sin that does not so divorce us from the material and particular consequences of our actions and our systems. A robust theology of collective sin must hold in tension the fleshy and the ideal, the individual and systemic.

Such a theology could grapple with the fact, for instance, that my body is clothed today in affordable garments produced by Indonesian bodies who are being paid starvation wages – A system in which my body is implicated in the exploitation of bodies across the world in the collective sin of an unjustly entangled global economy. This system may be beyond my control, but in its fleshy or fabric-y particularity, it is not outside my response-ability – my capacity to respond.

Acknowledging the embodiment of the particular *and* systemic at play together in this unjust entanglement frees me to attempt what Catherine Keller calls “reweaving” – a transformation of an unjust entanglement into a more just one, with real material results.

For example, I could explore various ways to re-entangle myself with Indonesian garment workers in a more just and ethical material relationship through fair trade practices, global labor advocacy, and more.

Further, grappling with the fact that particular bodies are violated by systemic sin opens me to grapple with the fact that particular bodies, while not inherently sinful *as* flesh, are entangled in and accountable for the fleshy sin that is always both collective and individual.

Just as particular bodies and collective communities are violated by sin, so too does the particular and material body both perpetrate sin and find itself formed by collective sin.

For instance, neuroscience teaches us that our brains are hard-wired to respond with fight or flight behaviors toward those it perceives as “other.” But it also teaches us that those wires and tangled neural pathways are *formed* in part by the categories of otherness that we learn and embody from the collectively sinful systems in which we are raised.

Thus we can see that collective sins like white supremacy and other tendencies to domination are materially present in the individual flesh of each of our brains as a result of nature *and* the nature of sinful systems. Our very neurons are tangled at the meeting place of individual and systemic sin.

My individual body sins *and* is formed or shaped by collective sin in a literal and material way. For collective sin to be transformed, my own individual, affective, and *embodied* conversion or re-weaving is required, including the re-weaving of my own neural pathways through practices of relationship and empathy.

Recognizing that even collective sin is a fleshy and particular thing does not imply that flesh itself is sinful. A theology of sin that revisits the role of the material and the particular must not over-correct toward controlling the body as a way to regulate sinfulness.

Quite the opposite: our capacity and courage to maintain an embodied sense of vulnerability in the face of our entanglement may be exactly what moves us to respond to our role in collective sin with the relationships of mutuality and material solidarity that can rewire our brains and reweave our communities.

Black Lives Matter – Mattering Black Lives

“The next time one of the Christians said she loved me, I asked her why.

She made a surprised face, like I should already know.

“Because God loves you!” she said, throwing both hands in the air. “I love you because God loves everybody!”

This may sound small, but I decided that was not enough for me. I did not want to be loved in general. I wanted to be loved in particular, as I was convinced God loved. Plus, I am not sure it is possible to see the face of God in other people if you cannot see the faces they already have.”

*Barbara Brown Taylor
An Altar in the World*

As white Unitarian Universalists grapple with the systemic and collective sin of white supremacy and answer the call to solidarity with the contemporary civil rights struggle embodied in the Black Lives Matter movement, an apt case study emerges for the dynamics of collective/individual sin and embodiment and the impact of both on our sense of responsibility and agency.

In our various engagements with the movement for black lives, white Unitarian Universalists have seen our perpetual sin of collapsing the particular into the universal and the material into the ideal play itself out in many ways.

The most obvious of these ways is when white liberals claim that “All Lives Matter” or engage in waffling and prevarication on the clear and particular claim that “Black Lives Matter.” Could there be a more straightforward example of the sinfulness of collapsing the particular into the universal, or a less response-able encounter with our entanglement?

The proper engagement with the collective in this instance is not a universal claim but rather the hard work of resisting the collapse of the one and the many. A sophisticated systemic analysis is called for, *and* that systemic analysis must pay rigorous attention to the particular, embodied lives most affected by that system.

We will never see the faces of God in people until we see the faces they already have.

The second way we fail in our engagement with the movement is our insistence upon policy demands and measurable goals at the expense of relationship-building and personal transformation. I see this at play in my congregation: a rush to move past the discomfort of individual, embodied relationships – which we *know* and *feel* to be entangled unjustly – into the systems-level work of policy change. The systemic work feels easier because it is a way to control our entanglement, rather than encountering unjust entanglement with the vulnerability it will take to re-weave.

For example, our people are eager to legislate an end to bias in policing – less eager to police the bias in their own psyches. This is at its heart a conflict between conceiving of sin at the abstract-systemic or material-individual level – does it live in us or in the systems beyond us? Is it beyond our response-ability or alive in our very own flesh?

As with every entanglement, the proper answer is that we must address it as *both*, and carefully, so that neither is collapsed into the other.

Lastly is our failure to put our bodies in relationship and on the line with bodies that are already on the line. Even when we get the language down, nail up our “Black Lives

Matter” signs and wear our buttons, the fact is that many white liberals still encounter “black lives” as an abstract concept rather than particular, actual human beings with whom we are in relationship.

Too often white liberals declare that black lives matter without doing the work of drawing close enough to learn and love the matter and the particularity of black lives in a way that can re-materialize the abstraction that supports dominion narratives embedded in the grey-matter of our brains.

Speaking near the middle of the 20th century with words that echo for today, James Luther Adams wrote: “In the end, “the attitude of distance” won the day, and Liberalism achieved poise by living at the low temperature of “detached, middle-class common sense”” (Adams 10).

How many of us have received detached, middle-class common sense in response to our call to solidarity with challenging, embodied movements? How many of us have engaged with such common-sense detachment, ourselves?

But distance and detachment are the realm of the ideal, not the material. And when black bodies are being gunned down in the streets, and choked on their block, and incarcerated at rates higher than South Africa during apartheid, the poise, the distance, and the universalizing abstraction of white liberalism *is* our sin.

In his book *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates reminds us that:

All our phrases – race relations, racial chasm, racial justice, racial profiling, white privilege, even white supremacy—serve to obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth. You must never look away from this. You must always remember that the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body. (Coates 10)

The collective sin of white supremacy is a material sin, and we cannot redeem it at a distance or in the abstract.

The unjust entanglements of our system affect particular human bodies, and the work of re-weaving ourselves into entanglements of justice and mutuality is the work of the body as well... through relationships that reweave our material lives from our neural pathways, to our interactions with others, all the way up to our engagement with the material systems of our economy, our earth, and beyond.

This material re-weaving occurs through affective conversion – through physio-emotional engagement that can convert our hearts, re-wire our brains, and re-weave our relations. This work is not poised – it is passionate; it is painful. It is vulnerable to the web of connection that we cannot control or possess, and it promises and threatens our transformation.

Absolution and the Permanency of Scars

“Out damned spot – Out I say! [...] What, will these hands ne'er be clean?”

Lady Macbeth
Macbeth by William Shakespeare

In the Catholic tradition, absolution refers to formal forgiveness both earned and granted through the sacrament of penance. More broadly it has come to mean a formal release from guilt, punishment, and obligation.

In the Latin from which the word comes, it means “to loosen away” or “to separate from.” Absolve comes from the same root as dissolve and solvent, bringing to mind the image of sin melting away like errant paint stains met with turpentine or of sin sloughing off like dead skin under the influence of a good scrubbing.

But amid the material reality of our entanglement, the illusion of separation is a characteristic of sin, not of absolution, and amid our embodiment, the material result of sin is more scar than stain – a physical impact that cannot be scrubbed away or voided.

Collective sin scars all of us, individually and materially. Collective sins like racism, free-market idolatry, and environmental degradation create entangled, collective, material results – segregated neighborhoods, poverty wages, warming climate.

These unjust entanglements perpetuate themselves, by our ignorance, silence, or consent into profound collective and individual sins – bodies destroyed and starved, earth burned and parched. Scars and losses that cannot be reversed.

And these same collective sins engrave themselves into our psyches and neural structures, scarring sinner and sinned against alike in a bridging of the collective and the individual.

The bias that exists in my brain – written there by the abstract collective sin of white supremacy – is nonetheless specific and material as it lives in me. It is not something I would have chosen for myself, but the entanglement of collective and individual sin means that it is mine, individually, to be converted and transformed and re-woven, though never absolved.

To say that groups or individuals could be absolved of collective sin does not take seriously the depth of our entanglement *or* the materiality of our lives.

The reality of collective sin – its existence in individuals from our neurons on up and its pervasive and universal impact on earthly bodies – means that none of our hands will ever be clean, none of our psyches unscarred.

But if our hands can never be scrubbed free of our entangled individual/collective sin, they certainly can be put to work in embodied solidarity with one another as we collectively and individually resist both internal dynamics and external cultures of domination and as we reweave both neural tangles of bias and collective entanglements of injustice.

This is our hope – not for absolution – but for the courage, vulnerability, and grace to engage, whole-bodied, in the struggle of re-weaving.

The Hope of Our Struggle

Perhaps struggle is all we have because the god of history is an atheist, and othering about his world is meant to be. So you must wake up every morning knowing that no promise is unbreakable, least of all the promise of waking up at all. This is not despair. These are the preferences of the universe itself: verbs over nouns, actions over state, struggle over hope.

*Ta-Nehisi Coates
Between the World and Me*

Verbs over nouns, actions over state. These do, indeed, seem to be the preferences of an entangled universe. In this worldview, absolution, reconciliation, and salvation all communicate a finality in response to sin that does not bear out our experience.

But perhaps hope itself is not lost entirely. Perhaps hope is found within the process and the embodiment of mutuality. It is found, not in the melting away of sin, but in the work of reweaving the web of life – the work of transforming the ties that bind us together from tethers of captivity to roots of flourishing.

Our hope in the face of collective sin, then, is not a final resolution, which often forces the ideal upon the particular, but rather an ongoing process of struggle, solidarity, and liberation – liberation not from the web of life itself, but from the systems and acts of domination that threaten to tear apart the fabric of that web and all of us with it.

We glimpse this liberation when we practice love in the particular, even as we seek to universalize love's reach.

We rehearse this liberation when we find small ways to opt out of the systems at hand through embodied relationship, in which our lives truly matter, materially, to one another.

We are freed from within when, through this mattering, we are able to take on the individual struggle of weaving new alternatives of neural and relational connection from the pathways of bias, fear, and will to control wired into our brain matter by collective sin.

Our hope, then, is in the spiritual practice of courage and openness as the response to our entanglement. Hope emerges as we struggle to convert our affects, our bodies, our intellects toward empathy and compassion rather than fear and control – a conversion mediated by intentional, material relationship.

In our powerlessness before the beautiful and terrible web of life, we are united. Our hope unfolds as we lean into that vulnerability, living into collective strength and mutual struggle as we constantly and tenderly recognize the fragility and connectedness of our lives.

Finally, our hope lies in an ethic of love that is ideal and universal enough to transform, and that is material and particular enough to transform *us*, one-by-one and all-in-all. This same love re-wires neural pathways in our brains and, through our continual and mutual struggle, re-weaves our relationships and the web of life itself in an ever-expanding network of mutuality, compassion, and grace.

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