

*This will be the first of an occasional article from me regarding the current political dynamics of our nation. For nearly 25 years, I wrote a monthly article or action paper on some of the issues of the day. My brain cannot seem to turn off this practice and I seem to be doing so in my head. Well, I have decided to go to the computer and put my thoughts in writing for a while. Readers should know that these are my views alone and do not, as they say, reflect the views of the NBPC Board or its web page.*  
Elenora Giddings Ivory

## “Ubuntu”

Over the years, I have given thought to the African phrase, “**I** am because **we** are”.

Perhaps we should look at the current economic downturn through that lens. ‘I am because we are’. Westerners are often accused of promoting to “I” over against and at the expense of the “we”. That rugged individualism you see portrayed in old American movies about the settlement of the western part of the country, with actors like John Wayne who conquered everything in sight. I always felt so sorry for the horse on which he rode off into the sunset, because it seemed so small for his big body. That is probably the image other parts of the world see when they think of the US in economic terms.

On the other hand, Southern hemisphere cultures are accused by westerners of promoting the “we” at the expense of the needs and rights of the ‘I’ –the individual. Some promote that all endeavors should be for the benefit of the whole community and that individual rights and desires should be secondary.

This tension between the **I** and the **We** is a constant balancing act. What is best for the **We** may not be best for the **I** and vice versa. This is the struggle in the upcoming presidential campaign. Who is looking out for our collective society?

As we look at government and the economy, or policies of human rights, interreligious cooperation, we may have to ascertain if we are promoting the benefits that may favor the ‘I’ or

those that favor the 'we'. What policy approach will we bring to bear as we speak—the 'I' or the 'we'?

As I understand it, the phrase "I am because we are" is African spirituality and is the English translation of the word "Ubuntu" (pronounced Ooh-BOON-too). It means we are all connected. We cannot be ourselves without community. Our health, well being and even our faith should connect us to one another. The well being of the 'I' is caught up into the well being of the 'we'—the community. Not all elected officials seem to understand this.

Of course, we find this concept in our Christian faith as well. The apostle Paul illustrates this truth by describing the church as the connective body of Christ:

Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the

body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it (1 Corinthians 12:14-26).

As we are dealing with the needs of people we often find ourselves also having to think about the rights of people in order to see a way for them to lift themselves out of poverty. Poverty and justice cannot each be approached in isolation of one another. Approaching poverty without justice can sometimes be only charity and charity alone may not bring the systemic change needed to bring about justice.

There are signs that people are struggling in almost every direction we may turn. On a recent morning news show, there was a cooking demonstration segment entitled 'Bizarre Foods' where they showed people how to cook BBQ raccoon, possum and other wild prey. I could not help but wonder if this would have been done in a thriving economy.

[http://bites.today.msnbc.msn.com/\\_news/2012/01/21/10205989-lester-holt-dishes-on-taste-testing-with-bizarre-foods-host-andrew-zimmern](http://bites.today.msnbc.msn.com/_news/2012/01/21/10205989-lester-holt-dishes-on-taste-testing-with-bizarre-foods-host-andrew-zimmern)

It is incomprehensible to me that the City of Pontiac, Michigan has to sell off its police station, library and city hall because it can no longer afford to maintain them, due to a low tax base.

[http://www.michiganpolicy.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=1163:policy-brief-pontiac-and-detroit&catid=59:urban-affairs-policy-briefs&Itemid=243](http://www.michiganpolicy.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1163:policy-brief-pontiac-and-detroit&catid=59:urban-affairs-policy-briefs&Itemid=243) I do not jump for joy when I have to pay taxes, but I know that if I do not pay as a participant of this community, my city too may be forced to adopt such measures also. Part of being the 'we', means that we work together with our resources to provide much needed municipal services. This is called

sharing. It is not class warfare as one of the candidates for president has said often. It is not class envy to want the best education for our children or to want health services for our families.

Catholics say that the bible has a predisposition for the poor. They were at the top of the line of defense in the 1980s when the religious community worked against the Reagan Administration's economic trickle-down theory in a campaign under the banner "The Poor Have Suffered Enough". It might be time for the churches to dust off that campaign slogan and use it again. The Poor have truly suffered enough".