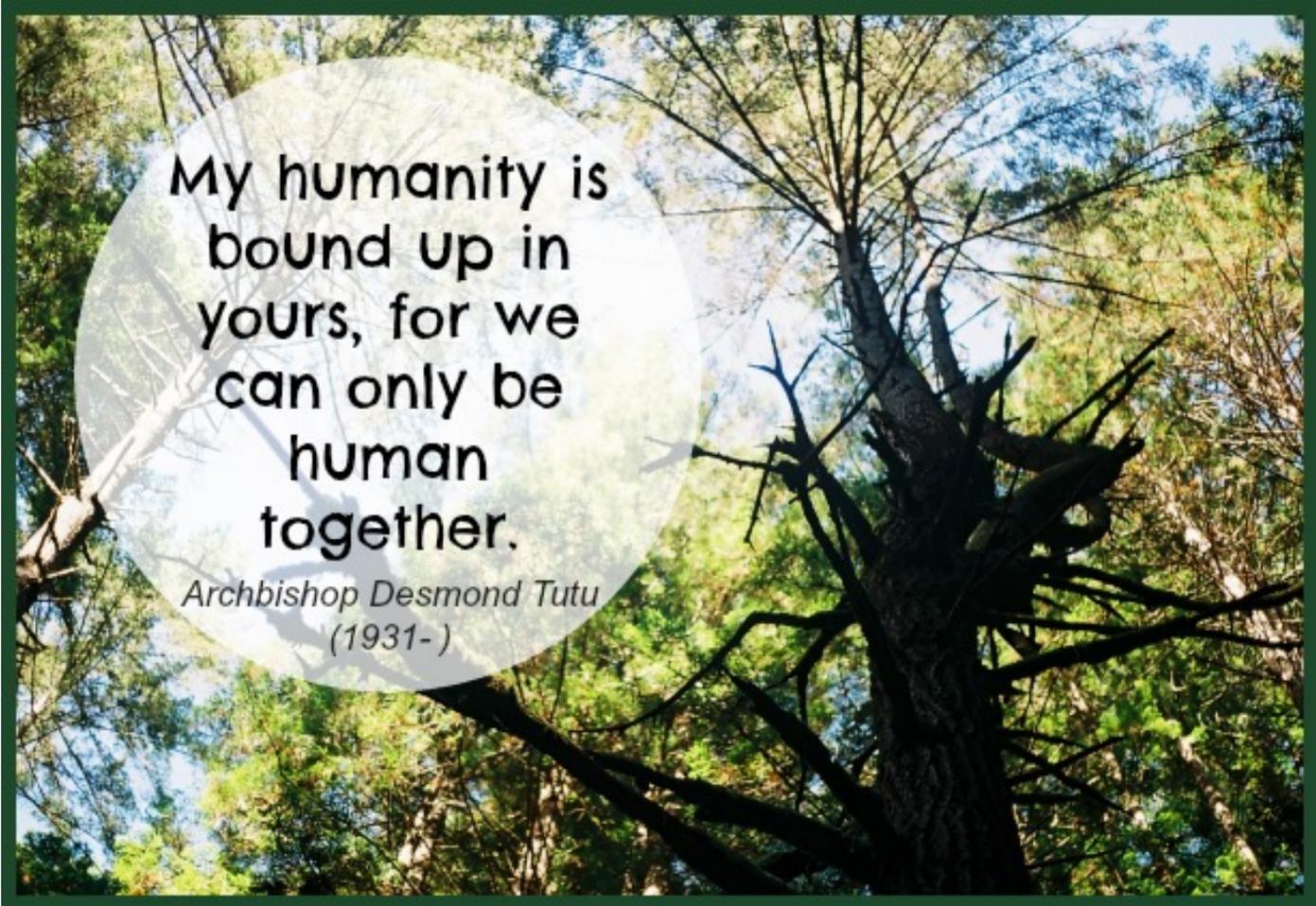


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My humanity is
bound up in
yours, for we
can only be
human
together.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu
(1931-)

INDIVIDUALISM: A BLESSING OR A CURSE?

The earth is awakening. As I open the door to let my cat in, I see the plum trees in full bloom and I can hear the bees busy with their work. I can almost taste the fruit that will come. If I look carefully I can see new growth breaking out on every side of me. Surely that is what I should be writing about — maybe not. Can dark shadows overcome the promise of Spring?



I have been deeply moved by the biographies of the 17 people whose

lives were cut short by a person with an AR-15 assault rifle at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. A father who lost his daughter told a president, who I felt was only vaguely interested, that he drove her to school but now when he wants to talk to her he has to go to the cemetery. Any parent could be in that man's shoes!

The internet hackers, now called “trolls”, both Russian and domestic knew right away what it was that would divide the country and weaken our sense of community, as it looked for a fleeting blessed moment like we would try to find a solution to school shootings. The trolls and their associates raised fear about losing our individualism, succumbing to socialism, etc. I was almost physically revolted reading the remarks of the spokesman for the NRA.



We've got problems. Lots of problems. Here are three which were recently driven home to me by other writers. But I have to remember those blooming plum trees, with the promise of new life are also just outside my door!



As Jim Wallis (1948–), editor of *Sojourners* put it, “*If Our Leaders Won't Lead, Our Children Will!*”

From Bellingham, Washington to the tip of Florida, young people, led by the surviving high school students in Parkland, are doing just that



as they climb on buses to confront legislators in the national and state capitals, as they lay down in front of the White House, as they challenge politicians who receive money from the NRA, as they walk out of schools in protest. They speak a truth that comes out of the depths of their very souls.

One man my age in Florida loves his gun collection. But after listening to a student, he took his AR-15 into his backyard and tearfully went through the laborious task of sawing it into pieces. Each of us in our own way should follow his example with some kind of personal action.

These are rough times. I thought of a student of an ancient Tibetan Buddhist sage who complained that a path was too rough and that it should be paved with leather. The sage suggested that the student pave his feet with leather sandals instead.

These young people, and others, are putting sandals on their feet. What am I doing? What are you doing?



The comedian and author, Michael Ian Black (1971–) recently wrote, *“American boys are broken. And it's killing us.”* He doesn't say this lightly. All the school shooters have been boys. Also, Michael is the loving father of a 16-year-old boy himself who is pretty much like other 16-year-old boys across the country.



Things have been different with the girls. *“The past 50 years have redefined what it means to be female in America.”* We had a problem and we worked on it together. Now girls are equal or outperforming boys in school in almost every way. This is the result of generations of concern and action. Nothing like this has focused on what it means to become a man.

If, as Michael suggests, manhood means nothing more than having power over others, we are in a sad state. It is also an unhappy state for many boys who feel lost and either move to the margins or become enraged. Despite that, Michael affirms that most men will grow up to be kindly. They will hopefully have found a way to navigate these rough waters. The problem is the boys, and society's confused sense of masculinity.

There will be no quick fix but at least we can make a start by simply recognizing that there is a problem.



Paul Krugman (1963–), the economist and author, suggests that this is not just an issue of gun control or school safety but is an attack upon, *“The very concept of community, societies that use the institutions of government to offer certain basic protections to all its members.”*

Since the beginning of our nation, the idea of individualism has continually made it difficult for us to develop any real sense



of community except in counterculture or spiritual experiments. Paul writes, *“For whatever reason, there is a faction in our country that sees public action for the public good, no matter how justified, as part of a conspiracy to destroy our freedom.”*

Paul quotes from the English political philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), that people who, *“live without other security than what their own strength and their own invention can furnish them ... live in a society which is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.”*

Is that where we are headed? Is that where we are?



Well, back to the plum trees. In these hard times, it seems very

important to open ourselves to the healing power of nature and the seasons.

Long ago I learned an important lesson from Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964.) He was imprisoned a number of times in India's struggle for independence against the might and oppression of the British Empire. One of the first things he would tell his fellow prisoners was to plant a garden in order to keep their sanity!



Spring can be both the doctor and the medicine we need in troubling times.

Here at Starcross, young people from places all over the globe can be seen carrying out flats of tiny plants from the greenhouses and into the gardens. The same thing is happening in so many places, very likely in your own backyard or kitchen window.

I find myself playing with some seeds my five-year-old grandson left on my desk. If we are careful in planting them they will grow into something nourishing. But they are also symbols of hope, especially at this time of tears. And each one of these little seeds also carries a spiritual message — that there is ALWAYS hope. What is going on right now with me is very likely



being duplicated around the world. And when five-year-olds from all over meet each other 20 years from now they will live in a better world. I will not be here to see it but when I look out at the plum trees I can feel it!



After the bees knock off work and the sun has gone down, these Spring nights are sweet and special. It's easy to feel that each of us is at one with the earth. And complicated problems sometimes seem to drift away. As the eminent theologian Hans Kung (1928–) put it,

“Tonight, I am going to stop trying to make sense of the world and just sit under the stars!”

Brother Toby

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