

REN – an important virtue for Mankind

By

Oludare Banwo

Baruch College, City University of New York

September 30, 2013

REN – an important virtue for Mankind

Virtues are general beneficial characteristics that a human being needs to have for his own sake and that of his fellows. They are beneficial and human beings do not get on well without them¹. It is on this premises that I have decided to expound the virtue I have and I consider important to me as a human being. I consider my relationship to my fellow human beings to be very important- how to act, what to say, and how to react in different situations [either good or bad]. As a result, one virtue that I have embraced is the concept of ‘Ren’ as expounded by Confucius “The Sage”.

Ren is considered one of the most important tenets of Confucius teaching. He used it to describe the deep and sincere feeling for the welfare of others. Confucius focused his philosophy on true compassion for others and humanity and he considers this as the only true path to individual happiness. For him, a good [ren] man rests in his humanity [ren], a wise man profits from his humanity [ren]. Likewise a man who does not possess ren cannot bear adversity and cannot long know joy.² Confucius tells us to be filial, honest, sincere, dutiful, wise, courageous, and sympathetic, to him these virtues are the building blocks to bring us to a moral attitude of ‘Ren’. To him ‘Ren’ had been translated as “benevolence, humanity, co-humanity, love, altruism, goodness, the good, authoritative person, and self”³

As a child I learnt this way of life from my father, who taught and inspired me to always care and show compassion to people especially my siblings. As the second children in a family with five children, our father taught us to always share our joys and pains as a family. My father drew

¹ Foot, P (1978) : Virtues and Vices and other essays in Moral Philosophy, pp2-3,

² McArthur, M (2010): Confucius London: Quercus

³ Rainey, L. D (2010): Confucius & Confucianism, the Essentials. P.34.

inspiration and backed his teachings with inferences from the Holy Bible because he was a staunch Christian. He often reminded us of the need to show compassion to others by quoting the following scripture from the Bible - "Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God."⁴ This biblical instruction from God is solely backed and reaffirmed by Confucius in his concept of "Ren" for him according to his recordings as found in the Analects; he says that "Ren means to love men"⁵

As a child, I failed to follow this principle on several occasions and I paid dearly for it. I remember a particular incident where I failed to follow this principle because I was carried away with the need to achieve short-term success in a school test. While I was in high school, I recall preparing for an important test with the help of my elder brother who had taken the same test with the same teacher the previous year. Based on his guidance on the style of questions to expect in the test, I was able to excel in the test. Unfortunately, most of my friends did not do well in the exam and they had to retake the test. I lost their trust and friendship because of my failure to share my knowledge on the style of the exam questions to expect in the test. Even though I was successful in the test, I did not find any fulfillment because my failure to share my knowledge and show compassion to others had caused my friends to fail the same test. This experience gave me a clear perspective on my father's teaching and the Confucius principle of Ren.

⁴ KJV (Online): 1 John 4:7

<http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/search.php?q=love+one+another&hs=1>

⁵Trinity.edu (Online): Ren, Selections from *The Analects*, translated by Randall Nadeau, Trinity University

[http://www.trinity.edu/rnadeau/Asian%20Religions/Lecture%20Notes/Chinese%20Religions/Analects%20\(Ren\).htm](http://www.trinity.edu/rnadeau/Asian%20Religions/Lecture%20Notes/Chinese%20Religions/Analects%20(Ren).htm)

I was able to put my past failure behind me because I made a conscious effort to always show compassion and care for the welfare of others. During one of my classes in college, one of my friends was terribly ill and he could not continue attending classes that semester due to his ill health. I decided to visit him in the hospital during my free time. He was very happy to see me because I was his first friend from school to visit him in the hospital. We spoke about his illness. He was looking for a kidney donor because his kidneys had failed and as a result, he had to be placed on dialysis. I could not bear the thought of not seeing my friend again if he passed away as a result of this illness. On my way out of the hospital, I requested to speak with one of the doctors/nurses to learn more about the process and explore the possibility of donating one of my kidneys to save my friend's life even though I hadn't informed my friend and my family.

A week later, I started the process the necessary tests to confirm if I was a possible match for my friend. All my test results were good and I was a match for my friend. However, I was overweight and the doctor suggested that I would have to lose at least 15 pounds before he could proceed with the transplant operation. I set out quickly to overcome this temporary setback. With the help of one of the physical fitness instructors in my school, I developed a strict diet and workout plan that I followed over 2 months to reduce my weight. After 9 weeks of intense dieting and physical exercise, I had lost 22 pounds and I was certified fit for the transplant operation.

My friend and his family could not hide their joy at my commitment towards saving my friend's life without requesting for any incentive from them. We had the kidney transplant operation on May 14, 2005 and it was very successful. I felt a lot of pains while recovering from the surgery.

However, those pains were quickly overturned with joy especially after speaking to my friend on the phone. My friend was able to complete college two years after and he is happily married with one child today.

I strongly believe that if everyone practiced the concept of “Ren” as expounded by Confucius, the world would be a better place today. It is a very important virtue to me and I have found great satisfaction in helping others without expecting anything in return. One of the things lacking in our polity today is the absence of love for one another and that has been characterized by the absolute state of anarchy that we find ourselves and the state of insecurity that has overshadowed the world today.

References

Foot, P (1978): *Virtues and Vices and other essays in Moral Philosophy*, pp2-3

KJV (Online): 1 John 4:7. Available from:
<http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/search.php?q=love+one+another&hs=1> (Accessed September 30, 2013)

McArthur, M (2010): *Confucius* London: Quercus

Rainey, L. D (2010): *Confucius & Confucianism, the Essentials*. p34.

Trinity.edu (Online): Ren, Selections from *The Analects*, translated by Randall Nadeau, Trinity University. Available from:
[http://www.trinity.edu/rnadeau/Asian%20Religions/Lecture%20Notes/Chinese%20Religions/Analects%20\(Ren\).htm](http://www.trinity.edu/rnadeau/Asian%20Religions/Lecture%20Notes/Chinese%20Religions/Analects%20(Ren).htm) (Accessed September 30, 2013)