Ubuntu: I am because we are and because we are, you are. This simple statement encapsulates a profound understanding of human interconnectedness.

It is a statement of being.

What does it mean?

‘I am’ and ‘you are’ refer to the individual and ‘we are’ refers to the community. Does it mean that the individual is more important than the community or that the community is more important than the individual?

Or are they interdependent and therefore in balance?

Balance would mean that the individual understands that s/he derives her/his identity from being in community, i.e., in a bond of individuals. It is this bond that provides the security and sustenance that allow for free development beyond simple survival needs. The shared experiences of individuals in the bond form the basis on which a culture is built. This sharing in which each one takes something from everyone else, means that each one is because they all are. Through sharing they develop affinity with one another and though they are bound by their culture, the culture promotes the growth of the individual identity.

And as each one is constantly contributing to the culture, the culture is constantly changing.

It is dynamic, constantly expanding to accommodate new developments. A static culture is a sign of stagnation.

The relationship between the individual and the community, therefore, is one of interdependence and, ideally, is based on mutual respect.
In the family, the basic social unit, the bonding is between parents and children. Parents give children life and the genes that make them the individuals that they are.

Each child inherits a unique set of genes that makes her/him different from her/his siblings and allows her/him to develop in a unique way. Each has a different personality.

But it is not only genes that help to make the individual. Genes are like seeds that need fertile soil in which to grow. They develop in the environment in which the individual is nurtured.

Individuals are born into a family that has established a way of living, a culture, and as they learn the ways of the family culture, they develop into social beings. Each child’s genetic uniqueness determines how s/he responds to the way the family functions and helps her/him to develop in her/his own way.

That is why brothers and sisters are all different. Even though they all live together, they have distinct identities. In an extended family, which includes grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, etc., the individual comes into contact with a wider culture and has the opportunity to develop a more complex identity and a greater sense of responsibility.

The family structure gives the individual a social identity. Without the family, the individual would have no communication skills and would not develop an understanding of what it means to be human.

The individual is not simply a recipient of the socialisation process but also takes part in it and contributes to it. Each individual plays an important role in developing the social unit that is the family. Every action of the individual, whether parent or child, adds to the building of the unit and helps to determine its direction. If there is mutual respect, it will function for the benefit of all.

As the family is the basic building block of society, a healthy society depends on the healthy functioning of the family. Society, the extension of the family, provides the individual with many more opportunities to grow and develop. At the material level, it provides all kinds of services that we take for granted, such as water, electricity, goods for all our needs, security, health care, etc. In addition, it provides the individual with opportunities for personal...
development through education, the arts, work and careers.

An understanding of the interdependence between the individual and society leads to an understanding of one’s responsibility to oneself and to one’s society. As society nurtures the individual, it is to the advantage of the individual to contribute positively to it.

In doing her/his best to build a compassionate society, the individual is doing the best for her/himself.

Ubuntu is the essence of democracy.