
THE HYPHENATED TRIBE

I first heard the term Hyphenated Tribe at the 2009 General Assembly when Rev. Abhi Janamanchi proposed that we Unitarian Universalists were “a faith where theological crossbreeds, cultural mutts, religious hybrids like you and me can struggle and connect in the hyphenated space between perspectives.” Since my post-GA plans that year included a trip to Glacier National Park in the middle of the Blackfeet Nation I was primed to think about tribes and tribal identity. This led to wondering about what holds us “theological crossbreeds, cultural mutts, religious hybrids” together. I’ve been wondering about it ever since and have come up with a thought or two.

Although we’ve sometimes been characterized as a ‘cult’, Unitarian Universalists have all the characteristics of a tribe or an ethnic group. We are, to quote the Miriam Webster dictionary on tribes –“a social group comprising numerous families, clans, or generations together with slaves, dependents, or adopted strangers.” Remember that – **adopted strangers**. We share a self-name (we’re Unitarian Universalists), we work together in joint endeavors (at the very least we gather together on Sunday morning for worship and/or fellowship); and we are composed of a number of smaller local communities called congregations. Our common UU heritage is Euro-America (although we wish it otherwise) and our language is predominantly English.

Unlike the First People of the Blackfeet Nation, however, our tribal composition is heavily weighted toward ‘adopted strangers’, sometimes known as ‘come-inners’. We’ve come from different religious traditions --including the tradition of “NONE”--into this Unitarian Universalist tribe that has a rich history passed along through the written – as opposed to the spoken -- word. We are a unique tribe in that way. It’s a rare Unitarian Universalist who sits in the same place that their great-great-grandparents occupied. We don’t often think of Beacon Hill in Boston as our tribal lands. Our ceremonies are few and far between. To the world outside the Blackfeet Nation, the First People identify themselves first as Blackfeet. How many of us would choose “Unitarian Universalist” as our primary identity?

I’m not going to venture too far into the fascinating world of identity but do want to remind us that most everyone has a hyphenated identity. Abhi Janamanchi described himself as a Muslim-Hindu-Physicist-Banker-Minister. I’m sure you can come up with at least 5 of your own. Under most conditions I identify as a Minister-Musician-Wife-Storyteller-Mother. These hyphens are born out of our life experiences that we bring to this free faith of ours, where being a mutt or mongrel is an intentional first choice. So it’s no surprise that we Unitarian Universalists are a hyphenated tribe: UU-Humanist, UU-Buddhist, UU-Christian, UU-Pagan, UU-Atheist, UU- Jew, UU – well, the list goes on and on. We are a faith where we struggle and connect in the hyphenated space between theological perspectives.

This hyphenated space we Unitarian-Universalists inhabit replaces the stories passed on through oral tradition, a deep rootedness in a place, and a plethora of shared traditions and ceremonies. We have to work to forge an identity that adds the Unitarian Universalist descriptor to our individual hyphenated identities without losing the other descriptors. That work – that forging of a common identity and assigning its place in our lives – is the work that takes place in hyphens. Hyphens are that space between what we are and what we are becoming. It’s an in-between space. That’s where I’ve been asked to live with you for the next year. So, in the interests of having a happy and productive time together, I thought it would be good to talk a

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little about how we might look at the work the UUFMC branch of our tribe might do in this hyphenated space. Let's start by looking at the hyphen itself.

There are different ways of drawing a hyphen. We're used to seeing it expressed as a straight line in between two words. But let's think of it more like a river flowing between two points that might represent the gentle ups and downs of healthy congregational life, flowing along without too much fuss or strain. Now imagine spikier ups and downs when the wind has risen. The river is still flowing, but there's more energy in the ups and downs. Some rivers have rapids, where the waters form whirlpools. Can you think of a time when you felt like you were caught in a situation where you were going in circles? The water is still flowing, but in a way that causes disorientation and maybe even panic. Then there's the river that flows over and around underground rocks and other obstacles. Everything appears smooth, but just below the surface the waters twist and turn.

The River Hyphen holds that space between what we are and what we are becoming. If you make that hyphen a two-headed arrow you'll see that one arrow points to where you've been and one points to where you're going. In other words, one arrow points to your history – the way you have been together. The other arrow points to your vision – how you would like to be together (values) and where you would like to go and how you get there (mission). The line itself indicates transition. Whether it is wavy, squiggly, circular, or spiky depends on how well our boat filled with cargo called 'tasks' can navigate the river.

So **what** is our cargo of tasks? Based upon your latest ministerial survey, your Board has identified several areas, all of which relate to growth – not only in terms of the numbers of members, but also in our stature in this community. They think we can do this by developing and implementing a strategic plan. Components of this plan would include developing an articulated statement on how we would like to be together – called a Covenant of Right Relations. Flowing from this will be guidance on how to resolve conflicts, how we care for each other, how and what we learn together, and how we take our message into the community. Along the way we will document what we have learned, so you can continue to have a record of what's been done. Knowledge of your history is a powerful tool. Helping a congregation discover their history is a basic tool in the consulting or interim minister's toolkit. A congregation that knows its history and uses it to inform future actions will grow not only in breadth, but in depth. I don't mean using congregational history to justify the seven last words of a congregation – "we have always done it this way." I mean using congregational history to understand how current attitudes and practices have evolved and sometimes hardened into a reluctance to consider new ways of being and doing.

How are we going to deliver this cargo of tasks? Happily, there are lots of navigational aids -- resources -- to help our tribe along the River Hyphen. I – as a consulting or developmental minister -- am one of them. The hyphenated time is a time to allow the developmental process to work. We begin by knowing and coming to terms with your history. You have already done much of this with my colleague, Rev. Jan Taddeo. I have read the excellent history provided by Allie Gore and see that you have much to be proud of. I'm going to be looking more closely at your history and asking your help in discovering areas that might hold unresolved, painful issues that might keep you from being your best selves. And I'm going

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to suggest that you make this history available to anyone who indicates an interest. Adopted strangers more quickly and effectively become part of the tribe if they know the tribal history.

The next thing we do is start the process of discovering a new identity. Again, you've already done wonderful work with your ministerial survey. You say you want to grow, call a settled minister, become more tolerant and more diverse -- especially more multi-generational -- provide help for struggling families and pay off the mortgage. We're going to look at these components in more depth. Is it realistic, for instance, to work for age-diversity in an over-55 community? How are we going to pay off the mortgage AND provide help for struggling families? I don't have answers to these questions. It's my joy to help you forge your own, unique identity.

One of the results of this work on the River Hyphen is sometimes a change in leadership. Quite often structural changes allow a chance for leaders to step into other roles and make room for new people to step forward. One of my particular interests is fleshing out the concept of 'followership' in our tribes. As I continue to research and write about this, I will be sharing my findings with you.

A fourth aspect of our work involves renewing denominational linkages. Again, you already are active in the Northeast Cluster and I know several of you have attended our General Assemblies. We here in Florida are fortunate to have a wealth of experienced consultants in all aspects of tribal life led by our chief, Rev. Kenn Hurto. I will be encouraging all of us to take advantage of the skills and resources provided by our larger tribe.

Finally, it is my hope that we end our time together committed to new directions which will include calling a full time settled minister in the near future. I will be devoting a forum to the sometimes arcane distinctions between types of ministers, what they do, and their relationships with congregations.

Coming to terms with your history, discovering a new identity, changing leadership, renewing denominational linkages, and committing to new directions – these five activities are the HOW we will work navigate the River Hyphen toward our future growth. But let's step back from the WHAT and HOW of our adventure and examine the WHY of it. Is this trip really necessary? What do we think we're doing here in our hyphenated tribe?

I want to read some excerpts of a report that appeared in the July 26 edition of the Christian Century under the headline, "Can creedless Unitarians make it another 50 years?" "Can creedless Unitarians make it another 50 years?" In this article Religious News Service reporter Daniel Burke wrote, "some say the UUA is held back by members' reluctance to proclaim religious tenets – a tricky task for an association that includes Christians, Buddhists, Jews, pagans, humanists and spiritual refugees from a host of more dogmatic faiths. Professor David Bumbaugh at the Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago says the UUA has always shied away from God-talk for fear of offending members and shattering congregations. But Bumbaugh has made the rounds recently at regional UUA conferences, encouraging them to publicly wrestle with foundational questions. "What do we believe? Whom do we serve? To whom or what are we responsible? Those are the questions with which every viable religious movement must wrestle," Bumbaugh has said. "So long as those essential questions remain

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unaddressed, the dream will remain unfulfilled”. An internal UUA report from 2005 suggested that more than dreams could die. The whole association could collapse if members continue to muffle religious discussion, the report said. “The consensus of experts from an array of fields—from organizational development to systematic theology – is that to grow effectively, a religious organization needs clearly defined boundaries,” the report states. “And one cannot put even the most permeable boundary around nothing.”

One cannot put even the most permeable boundary around nothing. What we are doing here in our hyphenated tribe is trying to articulate the ‘something’ that is Unitarian Universalism. And we are not alone in the task of defining our center. In 2009 I went to a conference on the Emerging Church movement mostly attended by liberal Christians. In this liminal space, the 1200 people quickly divided themselves into the Youth – the under 30s -- and the rest of us. The youth immediately ‘got it’. One young person described herself as Lutheran-Catholic-Buddhist-Wiccan. That was fairly typical. In other words, they were taking what they needed from each of the world religions to cobble together a theology that made sense to them – a theology born from their own experiences. As I listened to these conversations and great plans for starting new communities of faith I became excited. They were talking about being on the cutting edge of the future of religion and without knowing it they were describing Unitarian Universalism. Would that they knew it!

My friends, it's not **what** we believe but **how** we believe. About thirty years ago Duncan Howlett wrote a book called "The Critical Way in Religion". He said that in religion there are two ways to ascertain truth and therefore what one believes. One way is through orthodoxy -- the acceptance of authority, e.g. the teachings of the church -- and the other through examining experience, sifting evidence and testing conclusions: the critical way. Our way. The "how we believe". That doesn't mean the orthodox teachings are necessarily to be rejected. To paraphrase Origen, the purpose and use of wisdom teachings is found when we realize it isn't just about understanding wisdom, but rather being transformed by it, in the direction of our somewhat changing highest ideals. So the teachings of ancient authorities are part of the evidence.

Unitarian Universalist theological reflection must always start with our lived experience as homo sapiens. If it doesn't fit with what we know about our real lives and the real world we're living in, it's off the table. We can only believe what our own experience convinces us of. The pluralism that we celebrate is not a goal but simply the necessary consequence of the fact that human beings will differ in their experience and thinking/feeling processes and therefore their conclusions. What we need to do is resurrect the skills to disagree with interest and respect – to learn how to disagree agreeably.

We need to learn to do this because when we have only words instead of shared experiences, all we can do is argue about words. How we express our own experience – and, more importantly – how we listen to another's experience determines how our tribe will be together. We are at our best when we invite each other to share the experiences that inform their beliefs. The tribe's strength is enhanced by focusing on the connecting experiences. So why do we keep focusing on the differences if what we value is a sense of community and what we envision are strong, welcoming, inclusive communities?

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I am not interested in exploring differences. I am not here to change minds; to convince one group of the 'rightness' of another group's beliefs. A religious community is not a debating society; it is a communications venue. Communication with our deepest selves through spiritual practices of prayer and/or meditation; communication with each other through small groups and lay ministry of listening; communication with our larger community by forming alliances with justice-making groups and supporting our members who are engaged in the great work of healing the world; communication with our larger tribe through participation in Cluster, District, Regional, and National activities; and communication with the transcendent through shared and considered worship.

I am not here to change minds. Your minds are fine. I am here with you to do theology. Process theologian Henry Nelson Wieman said, "We should always interact with people in ways that are creative rather than destructive." This creative way of doing theology has to do with what we believe is ultimately and authentically worthy of our love, gratitude, and service. It is manifested in worship, when we meet to bring these realities to mind and experience them again. This outside-the-box theology has to do with what is required of us for the sake of social and individual health. It is manifested in sermons and other conversation that urges us to repent wrongdoing – to say "I'm Sorry" -- and it summons our resolve to do better. The words we use - - 'Human Nature' or 'God' -- to explain the requirement that we heed an informed conscience makes no operational difference. *No operational difference*. This theology-without-labels has to do with what we trust in the long run will make for right and richness in our lives and in all life. It has to do with loyalty, sacrifice, and hope. This theology is manifested by interacting with people in ways that are creative rather than destructive.

I'm not here to change minds. I'm here to expand hearts. And I believe that in doing this theology together, we will change hearts. And with that heart-change will come the transformation required to nurture our own spirits, and to help heal our wounded, glorious hyphenated world. The transformation required to default to love. I'm here to fall in love with you and watch you fall in love with each other and with those strangers yet to be adopted into our hyphenated tribe. Blank adoption papers have been signed and the cargo is on board. Let's begin exploring the River Hyphen and see what we can find. Amen.