

## **A HYPHEN'S PROGRESS: A Journey of Faith, Identity, & Belonging**

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Flash forward from the mythic past, if you will at warp speed, to a review of the *Star Trek* movie released last Spring, eleventh in the epic film series, by Natalia Anatova, Editor of *Global Comment*:

“There is something particularly eerie and vulnerable about . . . the threshold of exploration . . . : [where] a human body is suspended in space, graceful and horrible, seconds after being ripped from the safety of its ship . . . . For all its outstanding action sequences, this is what makes the [movie] work . . . . : the idea that imagination has consequences.”

Trisanku's neurotic imagination had tragic consequences, and even today we shudder to imagine future outcomes of feeling suspended between two worlds like a human hyphen in that final frontier of faith. You may not feel sympathy for Trisanku's predicament, caused by his own egoism and narcissism. But perhaps you can identify, as I have, with his isolation—caught upside down and in-between worlds. For most of my life, I have felt caught in-between.

Growing up in India, I felt like a social outcaste, a cultural hyphen, a religious hybrid:

- an only child of a short-lived marriage between a lower-caste Muslim father and an upper-caste Hindu mother,
- being raised by my mother and maternal grandfather who became my surrogate father,
- learning a different language and culture from my own,
- less affluent than my schoolmates,
- and yet, despite all this, having the audacity to fall in love and marry a girl from a respectable Hindu family.

In many people's eyes, I was Trisanku, the triple sinner.

Despite my best efforts to blend in (I became a devout Hindu, prayed to various deities, went to the temple regularly, and even wore a sacred mark on my forehead to prove my credentials), I felt isolated from a society that seemed hostile to the values and ideals I held dear. A part of me wished for a metaphorical sage to liberate me from my isolation. And appear he did, not once but twice.

After my beloved and I married, we felt drawn to the *Brahmo Samaj*, a Unitarian-Hindu religion. That association led me to the International Congress of the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF) in Bangalore where I met, among other Unitarian Universalists, the Rev. Dr. Spencer Lavan, then Dean of Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago. Spencer saw something in me that I had not seen in myself and encouraged me to study for the ministry. So I took a leap of faith,

leaving behind for a time my wife and infant son and my native land to come to the US.

In the US, I felt like an alien from outer space. According to the INS, I was a “resident alien.” I did not know where I fit as a Hindu-Muslim-Indian with a physics degree and a banking career, studying to be a minister in an unfamiliar faith. I felt I did not really belong in the local Indian community either as my calling put me at odds with all the doctors, engineers, IT professionals, and motel owners.

To this day, my vocation continues to be a conversation-stopper each time I am asked by a fellow Indian, *“So, what do you do for a living?”* Let me just say that, over the years, I’ve gotten really good at giving lengthy elevator speeches, sometimes long enough to make multiple trips up and down the Sears Tower, to get them to understand what I do!

In the anonymity of Chicago, I wanted to belong--as a natural part of the human landscape, not an aberration to be tolerated. I wanted to be comfortable in the presence of others and know they were comfortable in mine. I did not want to be caught upside down and alone, once again, like Trisanku in the fault lines between worlds, cultures, and faiths.

It was then that the late Reverend Frank Robertson, my second metaphorical sage, who was then Minister for Religious Education at the Unitarian Church of Evanston, invited me to his church.

Frank and Spencer gave me an incredible gift. They helped me see myself as more than just the sum of my identities. They showed me what Unitarian Universalism was all about:

a faith open and welcoming to people regardless of ethnicity, theology, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or political affiliation;

a faith where “theological crossbreeds,”<sup>1</sup> cultural mutts, and religious hybrids can struggle and connect in the hyphenated space between perspectives;

a faith where being a mutt or a mongrel is not an awful place of last resort but an intentional first choice.

Instead of promising a heaven of sameness, I was invited into a community of individuals working at creating a heaven on earth.

Thus far I have been telling my own story to point out some of the reasons people might have for joining a Unitarian Universalist church.

People like us join

to be part of a sanctuary;

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<sup>1</sup> From Tom Owen Towle’s *Wrestling With God*

to affirm a personal identity and be accepted for who we are, as we are;

to prevent our children from being, as the Reverend John Wolf said, “saddled with guilt or terrified of some celestial peeping Tom;”

to be in a religion that is this-worldly, concerned more about life before death;

to be part of a religion that calls no one a sinner, yet is deeply aware of the struggle for wholeness within the human heart;

or to live in a way that says, “You need not think alike to love alike,” for love has no boundaries nor barriers as we are “Standing on the side of love.”

Just because we like to welcome cultural mutts, religious hybrids, and theological crossbreeds does not mean that Unitarian Universalism is the religious equivalent of the Humane Society. That makes us look more like a temporary shelter than a life-long haven.

Our faith is not a “comfy homestead” either. Many of us *struggle* to belong in this faith—as people of color, as differently-abled people, as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning people, as Republicans, as Christian theists, pagans, atheists, secular humanists, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, or Buddhists. We all struggle.

It is particularly a struggle for those of us who are people of color, Latino/na, Hispanic because, as the Rev. Bill Sinkford said, “it is difficult to feel nourished by an aspiration, rather than a reality.”<sup>2</sup> Many of us find ourselves feeling a deep commitment to the promise of this faith while coming to terms with the frustration about our current reality as a predominantly Euro-American movement.

Yet, we stay. We keep showing up. We keep showing up even when it is uncomfortable for us and others. Why? – because we know we are not alone. We know that we belong here and that sometimes the struggle to belong is an integral part of the journey to belonging.

I have stuck it out, even through doubt and deep ambivalence, because Unitarian Universalism is the way I want to live my life. My Unitarian Universalism lets me live out my Hindu faith; it helps me be a better Hindu, a better human being.

I stay because Unitarian Universalism has a healing message for a broken world yearning for reconciliation and wholeness.

I stay because Unitarian Universalism is committed to working through race and class, homophobia and able-ism, though we have much to learn and far to go.

I stay to celebrate my multi-hyphenated identity not so much as an American melting pot but rather a South Indian *thali* – a selection of

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<sup>2</sup> From the *President's Report*, UUA General Assembly, June 24, 2009

tasty dishes in different bowls presented on a single plate. Each dish tastes different, and does not necessarily mix with the next. They belong together because they complement each other in making the meal a satisfying repast.<sup>3</sup>

I stay to practice *interstitial integrity*, a term I borrow from Japanese-American protestant theologian, Rita Nakashima Brock who says:

“Interstitial integrity is how I improvise a self, recognizing the diverse cultures and experiences that have made me who I am. It is how I mix a life together from myriads of ingredients.”<sup>4</sup>

I stay to find the strength to live honestly among the various *interstices* of my life; to *take responsibility* for the ambiguities of my pluralistic identity while seeking common ground with others.

But trying to live a life affirming a plurality of identities can be a counter-cultural process. Our culture tends to prefer its citizens to be “pure racial types” and monolingual people who can be categorized easily as citizen or alien, friend or foe, elect or damned, patriot or terrorist. It often seems to label people as “one of us” or “one of them” – no hyphens allowed.

In fact, many of the conflicts and barbarities in the world today are sustained through the illusion of a unique and choiceless identity or a restoration myth.

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<sup>3</sup> Adapted from a reference by Sashi Tharoor in his essay *The Idea of India*

<sup>4</sup> Rita Nakashima Brock, *Cooking Without Recipes: Intstitial Integrity*

As Amartya Sen, the Nobel prize-winning Indian economist, points out:

“The art of constructing hatred takes the form of invoking the magical power of some allegedly predominant identity that drowns other affiliations, and in a conveniently bellicose form can also overpower any human sympathy or natural kindness that we may normally have. The result can be homespun elemental violence or globally artful violence or terrorism.”<sup>5</sup>

But labels, restoration myths, and monochromatic identities tend to suck the life-force out of society. In seeking a utopian future, people live partly in an imaginary world, dissociated from the fullness of being that eludes them. They obsess about an imaginary heavenly future while “hanging around,” perpetually dissatisfied and lonely, like Trisanku.

With no tolerance for the “hyphens,” humans leave behind too much destruction and express too little love. They create an ethnocentric morality that obliges them to take care of only their own, without providing a place for those on the margins. Ultimately, they create “*sacred societies*” instead of “*holy communities*.”

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<sup>5</sup> Amartya Sen, *Identity & Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*



Dr. Darrell Fasching, a professor of Religion at the University of South Florida, describes the difference between the two.<sup>6</sup>

“In a sacred society, all who are the same, fitting the description of an ideal type, are considered human and all who are different, all who are aliens and strangers, are taken to be less than human.”

In contrast (Fasching continues), “a *holy community* is founded on the hospitality to the very strangers that a sacred society rejects. (It has no sacred center . . . . because its center and sense of identity lies outside itself—in the stranger.”

I would like us to consider that the **center of Unitarian Universalism** lies outside of itself, in the stranger, in difference rather than in similarity. In our faith, **the margins do hold the center.**

Our “good news” affirms that God prefers the pluralism of a world of strangers to the uniformity of a sacred society; that *God loves difference*, and prefers to be discovered through difference rather than sameness, entering our lives through the presence of the stranger.

We are called to create holy communities where strangers are not only welcome but where all are enjoined to do the work of healing and transformation by wrestling with the strangers within themselves.

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<sup>6</sup> Darrell Fasching, *The Coming of the Millennium: Good News for the Whole Human Race*

In the Book of Genesis, an important struggle yielded not a curse, but a blessing.

*“The whole world spoke the same language using the same words.”*

When the people built a tower *“with its top in the sky,”* the LORD *“confused the speech and scattered them all over the earth”* so that not one understood the other. Babel gave us the gift of diversity: a world of strangers called to be in right relationship with one another, striving with humility and compassion to learn one another’s new languages and creating holy communities.

The hope of peaceful co-existence lies in recognizing many kinds of hyphens that express our diverse affiliations as common inhabitants of a wide world, sort of like the cosmic crew of the Starship Enterprise. We are not just passengers, cloistered in cabins on this spaceship earth. As Herbert “Marshall” McLuhan has said, “We are all crew.”

I believe that we are boldly going where no faith has gone before. Despite all the travail, economic uncertainty, and various other crises that threaten to engulf us, we are present at this sacred moment when new life is about to emerge from the womb of the past. What now begins to breathe can become our shared future of mutual openness to accept others in all their differentness while affirming our common humanity.

Will we recognize the mystery of this possibility? Will we be open to its opportunities to construct a more compassionate, sustainable, and interdependent way of being in relationship with one another and the planet? Do we dare to aspire to a higher level for humanity? Are we willing to help it be beamed up into the light of tomorrow? Or will we, once again, turn away scared, preoccupied, self-absorbed, and cynical? These are not questions. They are the agendas of today. They are the exciting, irresistible invitations to each of us to abandon prejudgment and our stubborn UU refusals to hear one another more deeply. They are the program and the means for us who struggle for justice and reconciliation, who are willing to sacrifice to attain a more just and equitable economic order, and who dream of a new global society based on cooperation and peace.

Not by the old rituals that separate us from earthly life like Trisanku, but by living authentically, can we take our consciousness intact to a more enlightened expression. If we join our dreams with the dreams of so many other people, real change is possible; and it is our task to link those dreams and make them a reality.

You are in the middle of your annual canvass when you are being asked to bless this church and its many ministries with your financial gifts. As you reflect on your financial commitment, I invite you to also reflect on what brought you here in the first place, what keeps you here, and

what impels you to be engaged and involved in the life of this church. Reflect how this community has deepened your faith, has nourished and supported you in times of struggle and need, and inspired and challenged you to live out your values in the world. And reflect on how you might by what you say and do and by how you live this one wild and precious life, be the religious community that embodies your deepest yearnings. Reflect on these things and make a deeper commitment.

Let me conclude with a traditional Hindu prayer:

May good befall all,

May there be peace for all,

May all be fit for excellence,

May all experience that which is auspicious.

May all be happy.

May all be healthy.

May all experience what is good

And let no one suffer.

Peace, Peace, Peace.

So be it. Blessed Be.

**LIVE LONG AND PROSPER!**