



Hyphen-21(supporting Community)

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Restating the Position, 2012

The charity Hyphen-21 is founded on the recognition that there is such a thing as community, after all. Human life cannot be just a grab for self from birth until death, for me and for mine, my tribe, my possessions, my outward shows, doing and accruing whatever-I-can-get-away-with. That life is not a human one and cannot be borne. That is death in life and visits death on others. We belong to community, we become through community. Not only does community therefore exist, it matters centrally, an essential element of each individual's welfare, meaning and survival. By definition, community means relationship and connection. Therefore, if community, and hence humanity, are to survive, the skills of creating and maintaining healthy and health-instilling relationship and connection have to be of central interest and in confident and widespread operation. The charity's very title refers to the hyphen which connects Me to Thee (from the theologian Martin Buber's book "I and Thou." The book contrasts two polarities of relating to Otherness - the mode "I-It" and the mode "I-Thou"). Maybe, in a rushing world, the only solid ground that remains to us is the precarious slash that joins Me to Thee. This is where we have to build.

Even naming the skills of connection is hard, but practising them is harder still. For now, let us just say that they start from the principle that "You" are no less the centre of the universe than "I" am. The Universe speaks through you as crucially and as miraculously as it speaks through me. Therefore, we need to attend to each other with some care, if not awe. The future of at least this part of the Universe may depend on how well and truthfully we make connection.

But how can I then achieve this mystery of human connection? The Metta Sutta, a Buddhist tract on neighbourliness, talks about practising "loving-kindness" or the "skills of love" as a requirement for satisfactory living, but does not go into detail on what constitutes the skills required. The therapist Carl Rogers offers some clues, finding that "Warmth, Genuineness and Accurate Empathy" are what make the difference in a therapeutic relationship. Does this Rogerian triad constitute the elements of love? Can that word love be used with confidence outside a pop song or place of worship? Can the word be used with confidence as a description of the basis of a professional set of skills, the essential bindings of a civilised society?

Hyphen-21 and the position it takes seem not to sweep people along, or attract them in hordes. There is no sense of being part of a movement here. On the contrary, the position seems to be a defensive one, even fugitive. But if we think in terms of fraught frontiers and what a temptation it is to build barbed wire fences along them, and from these defences strike at worrying outsiders from "over there", in case they strike first, then any insights we can offer on how to build bridges across the divide, how to break down barriers between Us and Them, how to ride the hyphen that creates real connection, those insights may be of use, however small the scale or isolated the instance. And we do keep hearing from individuals who contact from time to time that this or that initiative described on the Hyphen-21 site has influenced practice and behaviour elsewhere.

Now, a few years into the twenty-first millennium, the principles underlying this small charity are more sharply thrown into relief than ever, as retrograde and ultimately lawless forces move in on non-profit making organisations associated with service, such as the NHS, and challenge and undermine the principles of "regulation" and central planning, found over years to be necessary for equity, fairness and social health. That hooligan process goes hand in hand with astonishing abuses, and overweening and irresponsible greed manifest everywhere and at all levels, whatever national political parties are in power. The quantitative and materialist standards and measures and perspectives once restricted to the grocer's shop seem now to have spread far past their appropriate boundaries, a process of global colonisation to which no one has yet found an answer. Christ, struggling to meet the challenge of the Pharisees, said "Give unto Caesar..." But what if this Caesar of the greasy till has monopolised the whole world and all worlds, inner as well as outer? Then there is nothing left to give to God, whoever God ever was or is or may yet be. We have to find answers, we have to find ground. Whenever we do, on whatever scale, we must proclaim and hold.

Hyphen-21 works along just a few fraught frontiers and we promote and focus on just a few initiatives. Several are in the area of the mental health services, positioned as they are at a fundamental fault-line, one of the most fraught frontiers of all, running through all societies and in a sense through every individual. We all fear "losing it." That and the fear of death are perhaps the two greatest fears of all.

The initiatives we emphasise do not grow much in number and several established ones do not necessarily advance very far. But that does not mean they are neglected. Several, once on the map, have needed constant tending, constant defending, so that reporting on them annually can sometimes feel difficult. Sometimes one cannot record an obvious amount of progress. One can only refer to the struggle of keeping a thing alive. But in some cases, that has taken more energy, and represents more of an achievement, than some easy advance might have done.

This statement should end by mentioning the project "Poems for the wall."

At first sight, it seems to stand out from the rest of the Charity's activities, not just for the facts that a/ it is extraordinarily and internationally successful and b/ it is the only one which (sometimes) receives funding, but because it has to do with the arts. Certainly, by and large, it is less of a grind, less hard graft, more easily digested and more commonly supported, than the other projects with which the Charity is engaged.

But the principles behind it are also Hyphen principles. These poems on public display, most of them bilingual, offer and describe vivid human connection across a divide. In a sense, the Project's poems, when they are able to act on people, function in the same way as those conversations between police cadets and ex-psychiatric patients that have been part of the Charity's work, or that code of painfully honed words, chipped from bad memories, whose aim is to make psychiatric ward rounds more sensitive and respectful to the people at the receiving end. The poems too cross a frontier and, in doing so, enhance and redeem community. In securing community, we redeem ourselves.

Rogan Wolf, December 2012