



# What is Hyphen-21 ?

*It falls to the hyphen  
between words that are broken  
to ride the poison  
of sell and spin  
and make our forum  
clean again.*

## Introduction

I'm writing this piece to give as clear an answer as I can to the question, what is Hyphen-21 ?

I have divided my answer into various sections, each of them offering one or another slant or perspective. Thus, the first section attempts to address the question directly. But also there is a story to tell, and this story is another part of the answer. So is the list of activities the charity engages in. These are all part-answers contributing to the whole.

Does answering that simple question really have to be so complicated ? Is the charity so very involved or mysterious or - for that matter - significant ? Is there no other way of providing the answer than by sounding like some imitation Sufi circumlocutor or riddling Greek oracle ?

Perhaps I'm just being a bit obtuse. But I keep thinking of all those preachers through the centuries intoning with mellow vowels how I and my Neighbour are equally to be loved, and at the end of the sermon the congregation roars Amen and dashes out of the sacred gathering-place to burn a "witch" or otherwise commit violence for God. Communication is a risky business and sometimes one serves truth best by speaking at angles and on several notes.

## So what is Hyphen-21 ?

Here are various statements that seek to offer plain answers to the question, what is Hyphen-21 ? :

Hyphen-21's web-site <https://hyphen-21.org/> records a number of initiatives which share a common values-base which the charity seeks to promote. That values base can be found in the "Background Section" which you can access by looking along the top of the web-site's Home Page.

The initiatives the charity supports all have to do with achieving and enriching the connection between I and Other, thereby securing and strengthening the bindings of a community under strain - even though much of the work can seem to be restricted to minor aspects of the functioning of the welfare state. In a sense, each initiative serves in and through itself further to articulate, exemplify and strengthen the position and values-base the charity has taken.

These initiatives are based as much on a philosophy of opportunism as any fixed plan, though particular budget applications do of course require detailed goal-setting and assessment indicators.

The charity seeks to oppose itself to all forms of fundamentalism (and there are very many of these, different surrenders to fixed slogan or mechanistic or black-and-white thinking, golden calf in preference to still small voice, letter of the law in preference to its spirit, usually for protection from anxiety and responsibility, and also often as a way of blaming and excluding people not part of your tribe ; and they occur in all walks, not just in areas of formal faith) ; it seeks as well to support and form a mutually supportive network of people who oppose

themselves to fundamentalism and who wish to speak in terms harder to articulate and to live by than the oppressive, hooligan languages of Slogan, Spin and Sell.

Although the charity had an initial interest in social work skills and values, it is no longer about social work as such. However, social workers may perhaps take strength from it, alongside the many other people who seek to operate in areas and activities in which benevolent skill in relationship is essential and relating honestly is hard.

*Riding the hyphen through chaos  
I know I am safe  
so long as my footing holds.*

*Together we swirl  
I and this hyphen  
weightless through the storm.*

Some of the activities to which the charity gives its name have been ignored, some have won significant support, and most involve a measure of difficulty, occasionally so intense that support and good counsel for the instigator is crucial. Here are some examples :

- "Poems for the wall" offers poem posters for display in schools, libraries, prisons and healthcare settings. The poster collections have specialised in bilingual poems, celebrating diversity. In 2007 the "Poems for...the wall " contributed to the Mayor of London Equalities Report ; and around the same time, packs of the poems were delivered to several UK embassies around the world. More recently the project has produced a collection of poem-posters on mental health and another on learning disability.
- Funding has come from : the Association of London Government, the Poetry Society, the Baring Foundation, various departments of the NHS, the King's Fund, the Foreign Office, the Mayor of London, the John Lewis Partnership and above all the Arts Council.
- A code of professional conduct in mental health ward rounds and similar meetings. This code has been adopted by several NHS Trusts and has been commended by the Dept of Health. Properly implemented, the code results in ward rounds more sensitive and respectful to the person at the centre of it, who is often in a very fragmented state.
- A model for involving people with mental health problems in the interviewing of senior staff of mental health services, including Consultant Psychiatrists. The model entails a separate panel of service users, properly trained and trustworthily directed. They assess candidates specifically on their relationship skills, identified as Essential Requirements in the post's Person Specification. Therefore, if a candidate is marked down by the user panel, that candidate will not be offered the job. To help them draw their conclusions, the user panel turns to findings from research by Truax and Carkhuff, Rogerian therapists. The research found that therapists who help people change have the following qualities in common : Warmth, Genuineness and Accurate Empathy. Those are the qualities that can bridge the gulf between Me and Thee. If humanity as a whole, even 50 % of humanity, consistently deployed them, the ice-caps on the world's poles would not now be melting and Creation would be safe from us.

There have been periods when psychiatrists were not expected to display such qualities, let alone be tested for them at interview. This recruitment model was commended by CHI, the Dept of Health assessment service of a few years back. Despite the commendation, this model has not been widely implemented.

- Hyphen-21 has sought to alert senior NHS managers to the fact that the top-down directive requiring Care organisations to consult with and answer to healthcare patients as if the latter are just customers, and as if care itself is just a commodity in a box, often leads to careless, damaging and even dangerous management practice. For good consultation is no less a task of skill and art and care and empathy than good case-work is. It requires the same skill-set.

## Origins and some history

Hyphen-21 was formed and became a charity in 1994.

The formalities of setting it up were conducted by an organisation that shared office space with me at the time, in the old Bishop's Palace, Fulham Park, London SW6. That organisation was called the National Association for Voluntary Hostels (NAVH). Its Director Emlyn Jones was a friend of mine. His Secretary Hazel was used to doing the paperwork to enable small new charities to start out. It was part of the role of NAVH to do so.

A common way to achieve charity status is by becoming at first a company limited by guarantee, an advantage being that Trustees of a limited company cannot be held liable for bankruptcy or other troubles such as litigation. NAVH was used to doing things this way, and that is why Hyphen-21 is a company as well as a charity and reports each year to Companies House as well as to the Charity Commissioners.

And Emlyn Jones helped put our first title together – Action for the Education and Advancement of Social Responsibility (AEASR). This was hardly catchy, but neither was Child Poverty Action Group, which I used as a model. To have a bit of a mouthful for a title makes you say the words ; it serves to spell out what your charity stands for. Admittedly, the phrase “education and” was an extra I hadn't bargained for, but Emlyn thought we'd need it to convince the Charity Commissioners we weren't planning to be “political.”

The formation of the charity was not of course the beginning of the story. That starts much earlier with the failure in the 1980's of a prolonged attempt on my part to shape “social work” into a coherent movement, or self-sustaining body of skills. I realise that this statement sounds rather grandiose. By now social work had become an arm of the State Welfare provision, shaped and functioning according to various acts of legislation ; people employed as social workers often felt quite quickly divorced from their original inspiration to “help the under-dog”, or “work for justice,” or be part of a general movement simply make society more human.

But at the time in question, there was a yet greater sense of alarm. Everything social work stood for felt menaced. Thatcherism was not in sympathy with social work's notions of community and social responsibility and social workers felt the political tide and language of the times were not merely directing their activities, but denying their whole necessity. New legislation at that time seemed further to threaten the whole social work ethos, pushing its practitioners more into a resource management role, and further and further from a position of “standing alongside” vulnerable human beings.

I remember hearing someone from Oxfam saying at a conference in Regent's Park that social work should join other “movements” in campaigning for the alleviation of world poverty. “Yes, that's it !” all the social workers in the audience felt. “That's what we're for !” Then, milling about excitedly in the coffee-break, we realised that our common response was pure wishful thinking. Social work was not a “movement” at all. In the nineteenth century, when it all began, yes, maybe, to a tiny degree. But not now. Social work had become an instrument of the State, merely helping the wheels turn – certainly not a force for change or influence on policy-making.

Then I had a good couple of years as manager of a mental health community centre in Fulham. I had recruited a competent team of four young people, each highly motivated and sufficiently

*...All that matters of me  
resides outside my skin.*

*Here I am gossamer  
an eye-lid's flicker  
but where we meet  
and what we make there  
shall never leave the Earth.  
We have to make precious  
the space between us.  
It is humanity's last hope.*

*Our medium is diamonds  
if only we will shape them...*

sane, lively, trained and skilled. They shared the basic social work knowledge-base of psychology, sociology, social policy, how groups work and how to help them work well together to get results, etc etc. This new team quickly revitalised the Fulham centre and watching them deal sensibly with difficult human situations, innovate, get things done, and as a central part of the process connect to people with real respect, good grace, and facilitative and affirming attentiveness, I thought, what on earth is going on here ? I am witnessing something precious and significant at work and it is powerful and effective and makes me proud and hopeful to be alive. It is still called "social work." Yet the credibility of the core body of skills and knowledge which fuels this work, is fading away, even while the need for those skills and that knowledge becomes ever more obviously universal ; it's not just this mental health community centre in Fulham that should benefit from them. Society as a whole would have more hope if the skills and perspectives this team is deploying here in this building were applied across the board, in industry, in politics. We need to advance from where we are, with this social expertise that we have learnt ; we have simply no right to carry on retreating.

These quite ordinary insights led to some local approaches and a great deal of letter writing. Still thinking in terms of a particular occupation, I coined a title - "Where Now for Social Work ?" and came up with a programme for strengthening what seemed to be the essential elements of an occupation founded upon social responsibility and - if you like - the skills of love, with a view to the creation of a clear professional identity and firm self-belief ; a less defensive, more effective and independent public identity, so that people of the highest calibre would want to join it ; and a suitable support-base that may not after all be that of a top-down hierarchical Town Hall bureaucracy. And I thought of a major national conference that would cover these main topics and seek to make real advances on them. It would bring together a large number of social work professionals from all levels of the profession, and also representatives of similar disciplines and activities sharing the same essential values base. Oxfam and Greenpeace, for instance. That conference would be the first of many, a rolling programme of them, perhaps annual, so that a position and authority would emerge, a real "movement" and momentum for social responsibility.

And in those last years of the Thatcher era, this idea made progress and won support, to the extent that it almost secured funding from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Anton Obholzer, Chair of the Tavistock Clinic gave it his public backing, as did various Directors of Social Services, various heads of social work courses, the ex-Bishop of Durham, the Association of Social Work Directors, the National Institute of Social Work, etc.

One of the initiative's firmest supporters was Dr Phyllida Parsloe, then the Director of the University of Bristol's School of Social Studies. Dr Parsloe also sat on the Joseph Rowntree project-selection committee. At the climax, she had the job of presenting my proposal to the committee and then to tell me it had been turned down. Her explanation was that the Ayatollahs of the Greasy Till had already arrived on the committee by then, (I think the phrase she actually used was "the men in grey suits") but on consideration I believe now that our proposal was flawed in itself. Our budget requirements were too large and our aims too open ended. I also think now that the conferences we envisaged would have failed anyway. Social work itself was flawed and depressed and lacking in focus, conviction and determination. Identifying instinctively with the victim, it adopted too easily the victim role itself. There would not have been enough common ground or firmness of purpose in such gatherings at such a time.

*All of me that will ever count  
is what we make*

*of my surrender.  
I am a space of unmeaning*

*filling a skin  
for one swift season ;*

*it is the meeting - points  
of my story*

*that will mark my value  
and affirm my actuality.*

The idea for Hyphen-21, then, emerged from the aftermath of the failure of the Joseph Rowntree bid.

It felt at first like a small cloud of dust among the ruins of the grand edifice, slowly forming into a new tentative shape, all rather dim and sad. Phyllida Parsloe suggested it. The charity would offer a platform, a kind of soap-box made from drift-wood, based on a set of principles applicable to social work, which would speak for and, to a small degree, act for the social work perspective in response to this or that event in Society. Letter-writing. Pamphlet production. By doing so it would seek in some small way to keep alive the essential meaning and statement and voice of social work as a movement of social concern, a position formed and informed by a variety of skills, disciplines and bodies of knowledge, enhancing society, acting for improvement in the way society works and binds and includes and celebrates humanity.

Another influence was David Jenkins, the “Red” Bishop of Durham, now retired : he coined the phrase “Communities of Endurance” as a strategy for keeping something important alive in Thatcher’s era of denial and anxiety, a time of enormous flux, uncertainty and dissolution, a time which urged and pressed people towards fundamentalist answers and hard material shapes, (“There is no such thing as Society”) away from the core realities, the still small voice of connection at centre.

Quickly the whole notion that the charity had a “social work” focus faded. The profile or title of a particular profession acting in particular places and for particular times was actually not the point. A named profession is just a set of clothes which may or may not soon turn to rags. The form within the rags is what matters, the values and skills that apply everywhere and at all times. For instance, were the same ambitious conference idea to be floated now, in 2017, it would not be entitled “Where now for social work?” It would be: “Where now for community?” or “Where now for society?” or “What asketh humankind to have ?” (*pace* Geoffrey Chaucer).

As for the charity’s title, “Action for the Advancement and Education of Social Responsibility” soon palled. Other possibilities we played with included : “Community Groundwork” and “Campaign for the Healing Arts” (CHARTS). Eventually we changed our title to “Hyphen-21” a reference to the hyphen that connects I to Thou in the theologian Martin Buber’s book of that name. For, by the 21<sup>st</sup> century AD, the pace of change is so tumultuous that the world has spun itself into an empty blur. Each one of us is disinherited and hangs weightless in space, frantically kicking our feet. The charity seeks to emphasise the precarious hyphen between I and Thou, our construction of which will give us our only firm footing in a rushing world and our only hope there.

There are other ways of formulating the thought above and they involve the use of more familiar terms, terms so battered by centuries of over-use and mis-use that one hesitates to repeat them. Hyphen-21 supports any activity which recognises and addresses Thou as being as central in the universe as I am ; it will seek to oppose itself to activities and approaches which treat others as if they are less than equally central, or less than fully and equally human.

Hyphen-21 gravitates to areas of activity and to groups of people in which the individual is especially in question and where connection between individuals is especially difficult. It does so in the expectation that here, where there is fear and resistance, is also perhaps where connection will be most real, redemptive and vitalising. Too often I cross the bridge to Other only when you and I are both so similar that you are actually just a slightly different version of myself. But that is onanism, not I-Thou. The real crossing to Other is a leaving of me and my

### *Burmese Metta 2007*

*Who goes there  
on light feet  
“skilled in goodness  
and knowing the paths of peace”?\*  
that we may adjure you  
yield your last heart-beat  
to our survival  
teach us your skill  
reveal to us the paths to peace.*

\*from the Buddhist “Metta Sutta” quoted by Burmese monks,  
Sept 2007

fears and my comforts to encounter a self that's truly different from me, yet nevertheless as human and central to Creation as I am.

Hyphen-21 also has an interest in the arts, perhaps because the arts are particularly good at revealing, celebrating and connecting us to our common humanity, using modes of communication we can trust. Too easily we fall back on categorising other people and distancing ourselves from them – good art opposes that tendency, frees us from our boxes and our box-making and brings us closer to things as they are.

The charity's first AGM took place in the old Bishop's Palace by the Thames, opposite Putney. About twenty people came. Various initiatives were agreed as appropriate to the new charity's aims and approach. Our long term goal, we agreed, was to make ourselves a web-site. A kind of modern-day pamphlet-station, a virtual printing press, a sort of confused and fumbling Fabian Society online. A few years later the web-site was launched. Since then, we have found it quite hard to find a following for it. That is no reason for not keeping it up there, like a kite.

We would always be a bit hard to pin down, we realized. We would always be a slightly fugitive campaign and ambivalent position, concerned with principle, but deliberately suspicious of certainty. We keep being shown how dangerous people are who "know" they are right, who stand on certainty.

We agreed that small shapes are harder to shoot at or burn, and take longer to simplify, corrupt or dilute. But there is no excuse for disappearing and it is our duty to remain.

We would define ourselves by what we did, what we recorded on the web-site. Our actions would paint our portrait, a task that would never be complete. Words can have such power yet so often are suspect and hollow. And there are so many words filling the airwaves and the screens.

### Funding

Hyphen-21 does not have a budget as such. All and any funding that has come our way has been specifically for "Poems for the wall." Most of the other projects described on the web-site come from my own work as a free-lance social worker, paid for separately and independently by local NHS Trusts. The projects are only described on the Hyphen-21 site because my Trustees and advisors have agreed they belong there as worthy expressions of the charity's aims and principles.

Funding for "Poems for the wall" has come by way of funding bodies, most often the Arts Council. That funding paid me a fee for some years, on the basis of 1.5 days a week, not as an employee, but as a free-lance worker paying my own tax. All the work I have done specifically for charity itself is unpaid. This work is mainly a matter of keeping the web-site up to date, writing the bulletins, doing the annual accounts, writing the annual report and arguing fondly and often excitedly with my web-site designer.

I ought in conclusion to name my eldest son Joseph. Joe has worked unpaid for Hyphen-21 for many years now. He is my web-site designer and has been required also to manage the site many times over.

*A word written without much hope  
on a page without much future -  
what is my meaning ?*

*But now another word  
enters the reckoning, tapped out  
on our uncertain key-board.*

*Between us a hyphen  
like a high wire across the void.  
Let us find meaning there.*

Rogan Wolf