

“Children of a Different Tribe - UU Young Adult Developmental Issues”

by Sharon Hwang Colligan

(as copied online from <http://65.109.176.35/cdt/toc.html> with minor formatting for readability)

I. Introduction

- 1.1 List: Formative Stories We Never Heard
- 1.2 We Are Children of a Different Tribe
- 1.3 UUs are a Recognizable People
- 1.4 List: Children of the Same Tribe

II. Liberal Religious Young Adults: Developmental Issues

- 2.1 Introduction: a lack of material
- 2.2 YRUU vs. UUYAN: Coffeehouse example
- 2.3 Adulthood
- 2.4 Career, Religion, Sexuality
- 2.5 List: Eight Models of UU Young Adult Ministries

III. What I Learned from People of Color

- 3.1 Overall
- 3.2 Asian, Latino
- 3.3 Black
- 3.4 Jewish
- 3.5 Native American
- 3.6 UU Young Adults of Color

IV. An Anthropology of UUYAN

- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Theology
- 4.3 Psychology
- 4.4 Gender
- 4.5 Sexuality
- 4.6 Bi-cultural
- 4.7 Circle Instinct

- V. Naming: Toward a Language of Our Own**
- 5.1 Intro: a language of our own
- 5.2 The UU Conversion Experience: the Magic Pool of Communion
- 5.3 Dangers of the Magic Pool: Eddies, Idolatry, Addiction
- 5.4 Stolen by Fairies
- 5.5 Bridging Trauma Syndrome: The Mark of the Cliff
- 5.6 Cliffing and Soul Loss
- 5.7 UUism and Soul Retrieval
- 5.8 Bridging Trauma Syndrome: Four Types
- 5.9 The Eddy at the Second Cliff
- 5.10 Fairy Godbrothers and other UUYAN Elders
- 5.11 Soul Retrieval: How to Do It
- 5.12 Successful Bridging
- 5.13 Paganism and Resistance

I. Introduction

1.1 Formative stories that we never heard

God is an old white man in the sky.
The world is a battle between good and evil.
The spirit is higher and better than the flesh.
The spirit is something separate from the flesh.
What is important about man (or about his intelligence, his civilization, his religion, etc.) is that he is above the animals (or the women).
The basic animal nature of man is wrong and you must rise above it.
You are going to hell.
You are unworthy.
God is angry.
God doesn't love you.
God will punish you.
You will be excommunicated.
Fear God.
Sex is a sin.
Masturbation is a sin.
Homosexuality is a sin.
Sex doesn't belong in church.
Perfection is desirable.
Being better than other people is desirable.
Cleanliness is next to Godliness.
Don't talk about sex, religion, or politics in nice company.
The body is a hindrance to the spirit.
Your body is weak, ugly, dirty, wrong.
People are born sinful.
Pagan religions, atheism, agnosticism, or other churches are undesirable.
There is only one right religion.
Christianity is better than other religions.
The Bible is better than other good books.
Obey the word of your Lord.
Unquestioning faith is beautiful.
Homosexuality is foreign and frightening.
Religious leaders and church ministers are male.
UUism isn't a real religion.
UUism is a religion for dry rationalists.
UUism does not offer powerful, ecstatic religious experience.

1.2 We Are Children of a Different Tribe

I am not a Native American.

Nor am I a child of the dominant Christian (or anti-Christian) culture of America.

I grew up in the shelter of UU Societies (UU: a European-American free religious community, for tradition's sake named Unitarian Universalist, more accurately understood as Unitarian Universalist Transcendentalist Humanist Feminist Pagan.) I was taught by Jews, Hippies, Asians, Scientists, Montessorians. I learned in Sunday School to be skilled in trance journeying, to visualize myself as a tree, to cast circles invoking the Four Directions, to gather for celebration and meditation on the turning of the

seasons, to invent my own ritual expressions as my spirit moves. The word God was not feared, but was translated for children as love, or mystery, or specialness. At thirteen I was gathered in a safe and sacred place with others of my age, and taught that sexuality was an interesting, good, and special thing, well worth making careful decisions about. We were taught about disease and birth control, about shyness and communication, about honoring homosexuality and masturbation, about the goodness of our bodies. We were taught to talk with one another with frankness, care, and trust. We were not divided by gender; I had never heard of a world ruled by an old white man in the sky. I slept in comforting embraces with friends of both sexes, knowing there is safety in togetherness, knowing our elders trusted our wisdom.

I was not taught that my upbringing was unusual; I was not taught that any of this was different from what other kids learn.

But our Youth know that they are different. They give all kinds of names to this feeling of difference: they say, I'm a vegan, I'm a queer, I'm a Pagan, I'm a punk rocker.

I'm here to say: the reason we feel we are different is because we are different. Our formative experiences—of childhood, of youth, of spiritual transformation—are profoundly different than those of the dominant culture. We are Children of a Different Tribe.

1.3 A recognizable people

A recognizable people

You'll hear a lot these days around the UUA about how UUs are a bunch of white, middle-class, individualists. I think that there is a grain of truth to that, but mostly it's a bunch of malarkey.

If you ask the KKK, or the Christian supremacists, they'll tell you: the Unitarians are not "white" any more than the Jews are. Unitarians are heretics, unbelievers, subversives, communists, atheists, race-mixers, homosexuals, heathens, and dangerous religious frauds.

So long as we are busy pretending to be "white" and rehearsing our "white" identity, we will not be able to have an honest relationship with anyone, let alone our friends of color. The first step in cultural diversity is understanding what your culture is.

Especially among the ministers and UUA staff, they love to say these days that UUs are rabid individualists, that they cannot Respect Authority. I was involved for years in the Anarchist and Pagan communities, and let me tell you: the UUs have tremendous respect for their leaders.

They do, however, expect their leaders to have the same amount of respect for them.

Look around you. Think about what your culture actually is. Learn from the people of color: just because a lot of authorities are saying that your people are this that or the other, doesn't mean that it is true.

Another thing I was always told growing up is that UUs have nothing in common. We are so incredibly diverse, I heard over and over again. There is no way of predicting what you will find from one congregation to the next. Now again, there is a grain of truth to that; but what that idea does is it's a thought-stopper: it stops us from ever even thinking about what we are like as a people.

So I grew up thinking I could assume I had nothing in common with UUs in other places. Then I went to work at the UUA. They have a weekly chapel service there, a different minister from around the continent every week. I was really surprised, because week after week I saw the same thing: they all sounded like they had grown up in the same family. I mean, the same mannerisms, the same way of making jokes, pretty much the same general attitude and character. I thought, how do they do that?

Over the years I've gone around the country and visited lots of congregations. And you know, whether they're in Rhode Island or Texas, whether they quote the Bible or the Buddha, you go in there, and they all pretty much look and act like Unitarians. It's really recognizable.

I've visited one town where the congregation didn't have this familiar look from the moment I walked into the service. I thought, Oh, okay, here we go. And then the minister got to the part where they say, will all the new people please stand up. And just about the whole congregation stood! It turned out they had just had some big surge of publicity recently, and were being flooded by visitors.

If you are Jewish, or Queer, or a person of color, you maybe know the feeling of looking around a room to see if any of your people are there. The cues might be subtle or obvious, but a lot of the time, you can "just tell." You recognize each other.

UUs are a recognizable people.

I once served on a short-term committee made up of representatives from around the district. One day we all went to dinner together. We all sat at one long table, about fifteen people maybe. I didn't know anyone there very well, didn't really know anyone's name.

I was looking around and my eye was caught by the image of a youth representative talking earnestly with a silver-haired woman. The youth had this great purple dye in her hair, and the elder was wearing a lavender dress that really highlighted her silver beautifully. I thought, like wow, this is awesome, purple across the generations. I wanted to point out the scene to the person next to me, but first I took a closer look around the table.

Every single person at that table of fifteen was wearing purple! Different shades, different styles, each one tailored to the individual. I started laughing. I told the people sitting next to me. I thought it was astonishing and hilarious. The woman sitting two seats down heard me and got really defensive. Because she was wearing green instead of purple! She had to make this whole long speech about her spiritual path and all this to defend it. It was amazing.

UUs really are a recognizable people.

Now, I am going to make a lot of generalizations today—maybe you think that I've already started. But when you're talking about cultural patterns, you're talking about generalizations. That's the nature of it. The exceptions are not really the point. I mean, of course not every UU is a vegetarian. But every UU knows lots of vegetarians, and every UU event either provides vegetarian meal options or runs into trouble about it. Not every UU is a political progressive; but to be a Republican UU means that you experience yourself as a minority. That's not true in all places. UU culture, on the whole, is highly lefty and vegetarian. The exceptions only illustrate the point.

The other important thing to remember is that if you look at us as a people, our immigration rate is enormous. 90% of our congregational members did not grow up UU. That is a huge crashing wave of immigration, of the outside culture flooding into our space. And we don't really have any formal initiation rites, citizenship classes, or creedal tests to orient people to our cultural norms. So given all of that, the fact that we are still a recognizable people is really remarkable.

1.4 Children of the Same Tribe:

Where we find our siblings and cousins: places and groups that can cause the Fairy Mark.

UU congregations, yes, especially in certain corners: RE; Denominational Affairs; women's, queer, or pagan circle-worships; small fellowships or small-group worship; leadership retreats. UU conferences, camps, retreat centers.

But also people whose childhood, adolescent, or formative community experiences were with:

- Liberal Jews, Quakers, and Congregationalists (esp youth groups and summer camps)
- Neo-Pagans and Feminist Spiritualists

- Parents who were
 - atheist
 - hippies; back-to-the-landers
 - humanist
 - mixed-race, -class, or -religion marriage
 - read kids Greek mythology instead of Bible or TV
 - socialist
 - vegetarian Humanists:
- Ethical Culture Society
- some psychologists, social workers
- many schoolteachers
- Zen Buddhists, Sufis, Taoists
- Folk Music community
- Queer community
- Creative Arts community
- Anarchist community
- Certain intentional communities, communes, retreat centers
- Certain alternative, humanist, or liberal-religious schools, colleges, departments, professors
- Science Fiction cons; role-playing games
- Hacker culture (esp Linux)
- Society for Creative Anachronism; Renaissance Faires
- International/multicultural/multi-lingual perspective, especially outside the dominant European countries
- Ultimate Frisbee teams

These are our people...

II. Liberal Religious Young Adults: Developmental Issues

2.1 UU Young Adult Developmental Issues – Introduction—A Lack of Material

UUYAN was organized in the early 1980's by people who did not want LRY to end. The same is still true today: the driving motivation of many key organizers is the memory of YRUU cons and the need to keep that magic alive.

There are many good things about this, and also some things that are worth questioning.

One of the key questions is: do the exact same techniques that create UU community and magic for youth also create magic for young adults? Are the community-building activities we crave at fifteen the same as what we crave at twenty-five?

I think the answer is both yes and no, and it is important to look at both parts of that answer. What do we keep, what do we maybe translate at little, what do we grow out of and grow into? If we don't look at both parts of the question, we risk ending up with Young Adult programs that alienate the Bridgers, either because they are full of people who are adults pretending to be youth and radiating a scary stagnant energy, or because they are full of adults who know nothing of the conference culture with which most Bridgers identify.

Most youth leaders never realize that people get their Masters degrees studying how to create safe, empowering programs for youth. That the games, structures, and traditions of YRUU were formed in dialogue with religious educators, advisors, and parents who read a lot of books about adolescent psychology, adolescent spiritual growth, adolescent developmental needs.

YRUU feels good because it was designed carefully with you in mind.

When I started leading Young Adult groups in San Francisco, I tried to look for similar books about the needs and issues of young adults. There is really a surprising lack of material. There are entire libraries of material on adolescent development, on what teenagers feel and need and are going through. But once you turn 18 or 21, it's like whomp, that's it. You're done, or something. It's wacky.

So, I'm going to try and cover some of it here, based in my studies and my life experience and three years of weekly conversations with circles of UU young adults about their spiritual lives and development.

2.2 YRUU vs UUYAN: The coffeehouse example

I'll start off with an example of contrast between youth and young adults. Everyone says that adolescence is a time of identity formation, and also a time when self-esteem is really a key issue. Fundamental questions are, Who am I?, and, Am I OK? You experiment with identity, and you want people to love you for who you are. Now I'm not saying that need ever goes away; but in young adulthood, especially after you get out of school, the focus changes. It's less, Am I OK? and more, Am I doing OK? Less about who I am, and more about what I am accomplishing. After a certain point, people get fed up with being told, "you're wonderful no matter what you do." They want to know, did I do it well, or not? Young adults want to start making an impact on the real world. It starts to be less about self-esteem, and more about achievement.

An example of how this affects programming is the coffeehouses or talent shows we have at conferences. At a youth coffeehouse, the goal is to give every kid a chance to be celebrated. It's a beautiful thing to see the shy kid who hasn't spoken all weekend finally get up and read a poem he wrote. The quality of the poem is just not an issue. We are all beautiful.

At a young adult coffeehouse, people are much more interested in the excellence of the performances. There's a joy in seeing other community members do something really well. People want to be encouraged and inspired by the possibilities of achievement, to call each other to excellence. It's more important to see one person whose skill inspires you, than to see five UUYANers in a row get showered with unconditional love for doing random things on stage.

It's a different phase. In some ways, the needs are opposite.

So what are young adults worried about achieving? What are the developmental tasks of young adulthood? I'm going to mention some areas: Adulthood, Religion, Career, and Sexuality.

2.3 Adulthood

The first time SF-UUYAN held a circle on Adulthood, everyone said they couldn't imagine what we would talk about.

But when we asked, "What does it mean to be an adult?" and began passing the pine cone around the circle, the stories flowed. People talked about their changing relations to their parents—the excitement and pride of being treated as a peer, or asked for advice; the fear and stress of having to solve life problems alone; the frustration of parental relations that did not change; the reversals of becoming a caretaker when a parent gets sick.

People talked about the word "adult" in a moral sense, to "be an adult," to have the strength to do the right thing, to face ethical dilemmas with justice and maturity, to "be an adult about it."

They asked, When did I first know I was an "adult"? Am I an adult? What does adulthood mean? Do I agree with that definition?

Many people told stories of finding their adulthood while traveling: of confronting a bear alone in Alaska, or surviving illness in an isolated village where no one speaks your language, or driving a U-Haul truck across the country for the first time by yourself.

(Those orange U-Haul trucks were mentioned often enough that I started to think they should be granted a mythological ritual status in the coming-of-age lore of our people...)

Many people expressed a profound spiritual fear of growing up. They said, when I was a child, the grownups I saw were scary. They seemed grey, spiritually empty, without any real friends, without any real dreams. Being an adult means losing your soul. One said, growing up means you have to stop growing. One or two people were able to think of older adults that they knew who still had a spiritual vitality, a courageous passion for life, that they admired, and they described them to the group. The others listened hungrily to these stories, wanting to be given hope that it is possible for the spirit to survive adulthood.

We went from a circle that claimed to have no thoughts or feelings about adulthood as a topic, to expressing deep feelings about independence and responsibility, to the realization that for many of us, becoming an adult was something we deep down believed we would not survive. No wonder it was hard to think about.

And no wonder some of these same people were still trying to arrange UUYAN programming as if we were all still in YRUU.

What are the implications for Young Adult Ministry work? In San Francisco there have been three programmatic responses:

We organized community rituals and rites of passage for claiming adulthood. We have twice held a weekend-long conference where the curriculum gives people a structured opportunity to reflect on what becoming an adult means, culminating in a formal ritual for taking a spiritual step into that rite of passage, into adulthood.

We began asking congregational elders we admired, especially those who had been raised UU, to come and visit the young adult group and just talk to us. We got to see that there are people who are still alive inside, who are still passionate about their ideals, still growing and discovering, still believing that life and life decisions are important and meaningful. When we started the Guest Elders program I admit I was afraid the young adults would be bored, but they all listen with rapt attention, every time. We bring in an

elder congregant every two months or so, and invite at least one elder to speak at every conference and overnight. Contrary to what most older UUs seem to believe, young adults are hungry for intergenerational relationships. Often that's the reason, they tell me, they tried coming to church.

We have also continued to have an occasional adulthood-related circle topic now and again. Just to change it into something that can be talked about, in a spiritual community setting. It makes a difference.

2.4 Career, Religion, Sexuality

Young Adulthood is a time when people are making their major life decisions. People are finding their life's work, their home, their spiritual calling, their marriage partner. In some ways, these commitments define young adulthood: once you have all these factors in place, you are much less likely to seek out a group for young adults; if you are 39 and still haven't found a partner or a steady job, you are likely to still feel yourself a young adult.

What are Young Adults thinking about? What are the life challenges we face?

Career choices

Maybe you think that this is too boring to talk about in church, but for many UU young adults, the potential conflict between the desire to live out one's spiritual values and the need to be economically self-sustaining is a significant life struggle. Young adults need a supportive environment in which to talk about career in the context of ethics and spirit. They also need information about different alternative career options, and older role models who can talk about what the decision to be a "starving artist" or "corporate sellout" (or "lifelong activist" or "social service worker") feels like twenty or thirty years down the road.

Religious commitment

At most congregations I visit, I look around the pews and see a sea of older faces. There are maybe three young adults there. But when the time comes for visitors to stand and be greeted, two of the three young adults stand up. Clearly, they are not going to stay. But they came. And then at coffee hour, when I ask the elders why there are no young adults in the congregation, the answer I most often get is that "young adults are not interested in church." I think of all those young adult visitors, and I wonder what is not getting through.

For lifelong UUs, especially for YRUU leaders or for the spiritually sensitive, young adulthood is the time when we consider becoming ministers. Not everyone takes that path, just as most young Catholics do not actually become priests or nuns, but the process of consideration is deeply meaningful. UU young adults may have just finished four or fourteen years of Unitarian Universalist religious education. They don't want it to suddenly end, or to go to waste.

UU Adult RE is, for the most part, not set up to meet the Young Adult religious hungers that I see. Partly because of YRUU and partly because of the larger culture, most young adults of this generation are not "recovering Christians." They are just as likely to be struggling between Zen and Wicca as between theism and atheism, and the Goddess is old news. They often express interest in religious discipline, admiring Catholic nuns or Orthodox Jews or Buddhist monastics. This interest in discipline, by the way, is not because they have low self-esteem and want to gain the security of being mindless cult zombie, the way their elders fear. It's because they want a challenge to try their by-now-formidable spiritual and theological powers on.

UU young adults ask me: is UUism strong enough to challenge me? Deep enough to deepen me? Real enough for me to be proud of? Fellowship and comfort are good things; but I can get that at a cafe. I want to know about the religion. And I want to feel its power, not just believe in some principles on paper.

Sexuality

Like career, marriage (or relationship) is something that if you haven't got it figured out by a certain age (let's say maybe 27), anxiety starts to set in. Forming lasting adult relationships is a young adult developmental task.

Like religion or career, for some young adults this task is relatively smooth, and for others it is a source of crisis. But for most, it is a topic that they need a chance to talk about, at church, in a spiritual setting.

I've got more to say about UU young adult sexuality in another section, so I'll be brief here, but I will say this: we need an OWL for young adults, especially for UU-raised young adults. You changed us with the sexuality education you gave, and young adulthood is a major moment in the human sexual lifespan. Adolescence was about safe experimentation; but young adulthood is about sink or swim. It is just not fair to dump us into the "Adult" curriculum with the general population 55-year-olds, or to claim that the adolescent curricula are adequate to our needs.

AYS taught us to use caution in our youthful experimentation. It did not teach us to have courage for risking an adult commitment. When you are thirteen, it makes sense to say "no" anytime you feel scared. When you are twenty-three, or thirty-three, a different kind of guidance is needed. This is another example of an area where the message needs to change from youth to young adulthood.

My liberal-Catholic stepsister was given a full semester of religious education in preparation for her marriage. UU young adults are different, but in spite of or maybe because of that difference, we too need guidance and support from our religious community.

2.5 Eight Models of UU Young Adult Groups

1. The "Pizza Model":

Just send out flyers, offer free pizza, and young adults will come. At least, at first they will. This model consists of a budget and an enthusiastic volunteer, but is otherwise "contentless,"—and most often fails, after the first few meetings.

2. The "Party Model":

Same theory—raw enthusiasm plus a bit of money—but usually with a bit more content in terms of activities and entertainment. Often praised by participants, but tends to generate few responsible leaders.

3. The "YRUU Reunionism" Model:

Just get everyone together and do what we did in high school. Contains a slightly higher level of content than above—i.e., includes some workshops. Tends to alienate people who don't want to stay stuck in high school, or who were never part of YRUU.

4. The "Just Like the Congregation" Model.

Pulls members primarily from the pews rather than the YRUU alum list. Holds social potlucks and other activities that are very similar to the mainstream congregational life. Tends to have more longevity than the three models above. Tends not to attract younger YA's, nor YRUU grads.

5. The "Social Group" or "Closed Clique" Model.

All four of the above models (plus the one below if the staffing ends) are prone to this syndrome. The YA group consists of a particular group of tightly bonded friends. This is generally a valuable experience for members, and is perceived proudly by the congregation as a successful YA group. But once the bond is formed, new members very seldom feel comfortable joining. The group tends to remain "the" young adult group of the congregation as they age together into their 30's and even 40's—but is very seldom perceived by new YRUU grads as a place they can belong—effectively blocking access for years.

6. The “Hire a Chaplain” Model.

When there is a good-hearted minister, intern, or other official staffperson dedicated to caring about Young Adults, and a reasonable amount of time allowed, there will be a group. This model tends to be more successful than the ones above at attracting younger YA’s, and is basically essential for a viable campus program. Can tend to offer YA’s more comfort than actual empowerment.

7. The “Inspiring Leader” Model.

Different in quality than the average Enthusiastic Volunteer, the Inspiring Leader is one who knows and shows that UUism changes lives. They may be a leader of poetry workshops, or pagan worship, or social potlucks, or political forums, or soup kitchen projects, but their love, vision, and commitment to the human spirit of the group members is noticeable and inspirational. It motivates group members toward their own religious commitment and leadership. An essential ingredient for a truly successful YA program.

8. The “Young Adult Program” Model.

Evaluates itself not just on number of attempts made or number of bodies counted, but also on participant age, race, gender, background (esp., raised-UU or not), spiritual/religious growth, and leadership development. The program has goals and evaluates the outcomes. It offers age-appropriate religious education, worship, inclusive fellowship, skills development, and a clear vision for how the program changes lives and changes the world.

Which one are you?

III. What I Learned from People of Color

3.1 Overall

One of the things that makes me different from most of the other current UUYAN leaders is that I identify as a person of color. So in my adolescent quest for identity, when I read books by people of color, I was open to thinking that these ideas might apply to me. And I have carried that back into my experience of UUism.

Clearly, in the few minutes we have here I cannot say all that can be learned from the cultures of the world, or from all the freedom struggles of American minority groups. I am just going to give a few highlights, a few examples. Like most of what I am saying here, I am hoping these will serve as conversation starters, and will inspire other people to go out and do some writing and research of their own.

I'm going to start with some general things I learned, and then also give examples from some particular communities.

Ethnicity Matters

One of the most important ideas I learned from communities of color is that ethnicity matters. UUs have a keen awareness of each individual's profound spiritual need to be unique, to express and be acknowledged for who you are. What UUs are less often able to perceive is that this spiritual need for uniqueness and selfhood extends into the collective or ethnic dimension. Just as I have a spiritual need to know myself, who I am, so also do I have a need to know my people and who we are.

Ethnicity is Key to Young Adult Spiritual Development

I also learned that ethnicity is an especially strong part of young adult spiritual experience. Taking up the mantle of adulthood is taking up the legacy of the ancestors. Finding your calling as an adult is finding the way in which you will serve your people. If a young adult is not given an opportunity to reflect on this in a spiritual context, important developmental needs will not be met, and connections that could ground a person over a lifetime will not be made. The urgent young adult need to be a warrior, to serve, to lead, to make an impact on the world, risks being wasted in shallowness, misdirection, or despair.

Passing for White

I learned about the experience of "passing for white," how that might be seen as a privilege, but how it comes at great spiritual expense. Some people of color are so light-skinned that they can "pass," but to "pass" often means losing your soul. (Queers, Jews, and dissidents also often struggle with painful issues of "passing.")

This raises two images for me:

One is:

People of color in white liberal institutions are often closeted in a peculiar way: our physical identity is visible to anyone, but we seldom or never mention the emotional or spiritual aspects of our ethnic experience. The nonwhite self remains invisible and not present, even when the nonwhite skin gives an illusion to the contrary.

The second is:

Is it possible that one explanation for the pain and alienation of raised-UU young adults is that we are being asked to pass for white?

Learning from Other Peoples

Finally, I learned that if I am willing to experiment with the idea of UUs as a cultural minority group, there are things I can learn from the experiences and struggles of peoples of color that can really help a

lot, particularly from those leaders of color who are concerned with the spiritual welfare of their young adults. Here are some brief examples.

3.2 What I learned from the Asian-Americans and Latinos

Asian-Americans

I learned about immigration into a foreign culture, and how that can result in children who don't speak the same language as their parents, or hold the same worldview. Basic ideas about human nature and child development—say, the idea that every child has an “adolescent rebellion”—are different from culture to culture.

I learned the idea of a “first-generation” person, a “second-generation” person, a “third-generation” person; and I learned that the difference between their experiences are very real. In the multigenerational process of adapting to a new culture, children often find themselves in the odd role of being teachers, of having greater mastery over the nuances of the new culture than their elders.

The same core values may find different expression in the new and old cultures, causing bewildering conflicts between generations whose very sameness can cause the appearance of difference.

Latinos

From the Latinos I learned that it is possible to have a multi-racial culture—that people of different colors can see themselves as one people, one ethnic group. Having different heritages does not necessarily stop you from still being one cultural group, in a very real way.

3.3 What I Learned From the Blacks

There are two things I learned from African American progressive culture that are of enormous importance to me, and that are pretty much opposite from what I learned in white UU progressive culture.

One is about leadership.

White liberals often idealize “leaderless” groups. But from the perspective of an oppressed community, getting rid of your leaders is nonsense.

I learned to understand that leadership, even strong leadership, is about serving your people, protecting them, helping them work for what is right. Or helping them find spirit again, when their spirit has been broken. It's not about tyranny or ego.

It doesn't mean that leaders don't make mistakes, even tyrannical mistakes. But they still need to be valued, and educated with care and respect. In an oppressed community, to encourage assassination of your leadership is just plain irresponsible. Strong leaders are precious; they save hearts and lives.

The other is about children, cultural identity, and protection from harsh realities.

Educators of liberal white youth may teach them to celebrate the idea that I, individually, am different or unique; but they avoid the idea that I am part of a people, a group that is collectively different from the dominant culture. They teach us to ignore differences, that everyone is basically the same.

If a child feels profoundly different from the other children, the commonly assumed goal, in white liberal culture, is to reassure the child that this is not true.

Educators of minority youth do not have that luxury. They know that youth need to be given a sense of cultural identity, history, and pride if they are going to make it into full adulthood.

As a UU child, I wasn't taught that there are powerful active organizations in this country that would like to see me and my kind destroyed. Being called a “heretic” and burned at the stake was something that happened only in the distant and foggy past. In college, as I struggled with the culture shock of entering the outside world, I saw that the Black students had been better prepared than I had been. They knew that

the outside world would be full of hostile forces, forces that denied the inherent worth of all people. I had not been told. I was not prepared.

Every parent feels the desire to protect their child from the awful knowledge of oppression in this world, but sometimes, knowledge is the better protection.

3.4 What I Learned From the Jews

From my Jewish friends I learn that it is possible to be both a religion and an ethnic group at the same time. Some things about that seem paradoxical, but that doesn't stop it from being true. Just because you've become a Buddhist—or a secular humanist, or a neopagan priestess—doesn't mean you've stopped being a Jew.

The Jewish people think of themselves as a tribe. A tribe is a people who are bound together by history, by culture, and by a network of community relationships. Formal religion may be a strong part of that—but it is not necessarily a defining part.

I think the UUs can learn a lot from the Jews about how to think of ourselves as a people.

Jews are a people who are both white and not white at the same time. I think that this is also true of UUs. It's an important thing to talk about, to learn about.

Another important thing I learned from Jews is that one aspect of cultural difference is about gender. In Jewish culture (Chinese culture too), the woman was the one who is supposed to go out into the marketplace, to be loud and aggressive. The man is supposed to be a gentlemen scholar, a sensitive poetic type. Standard American butch/femme just doesn't apply in the same way.

It is my perception that in UU culture, definitely in our current generation of UU young adults, gender roles and experiences are very different than in the dominant culture. I'd say in some ways they are reversed.

3.5 What I Learned From the Native Americans

It's hard to put into words what I learn from the Native peoples. What they have taught me is how to survive, how to understand my experience and my life.

But I'll try and make a list. I learned:

That a tribal, circle-based people can exist within modern American society. It is not easy, but it is possible.

That "religion," like many of the constructs that we struggle with, is a white man's idea. What we had before was our Traditions, the Way of the People.

The stories I read about Indigenous children who were taken from their home communities and dumped into Christian boarding schools gave me the closest image I could find to explain the way I felt when I entered the public school system, or tried to cope with the outside world.

That who you are as a people is about culture, history, practice, and relationships—not about color.

That the study of Colonialism is essential to an understanding of the world, especially of racism, economic exploitation, and environmental disaster.

That the Tribal Government that the dominant culture recognizes may or may not be the legitimate leadership of the people.

That our ceremonies are not "empty rituals," but are necessary to keeping the people—and the earth—whole.

3.6 What I Learned From UU Young Adults of Color

What I learned from UU young adults of color is: we do not want to be made to feel different from the rest of the community.

I also hear a painful contradiction: we do not want to be made to feel White.

One way of saying this is, we do not want to be different, but we do want to be whole.

I learned that this paradox is a need that we must address if we are to be able to integrate our friends of color as true members of our spiritual community.

What I see is that the spiritual journeys of ethnic experience, which are profound in every human life story, but acute for those in minority groups, are not yet being addressed in our mainstream UU culture. So the same people who are angry at being made to feel different are also angry that our spiritual experience is not being addressed.

What I know is that it is possible to make ethnicity an experience that includes all of us.

I believe that being White is not the same as just being European-American. I believe that cultural Whiteness is not a skin color, but a psychic condition, a condition that children are not born with, and that can be reversed.

I experience the energy of Whiteness as an annoying psychic hum that can fill a room—eeeeeeeeee—made up of some combination of denial, ancestral pain, conformity and fear. The same energy that makes it hard for people to dance, or to perceive alternate realities. It's a drag.

And it scares not only people of color, but also young people and most new people away from the church like some kind of electronic insect repellent: eeeeeeeee.

But it doesn't have to be there.

At an UUYAN conference we designed recently in PCD, we chose not to mention racism or anti-racism. Instead we made certain questions part of the experience of the whole community: Who are your ancestors? Who are your people? How do you intend to serve your people in this lifetime? In a spiritual context, these questions were deepening for all. And though we never mentioned or drew attention to race, the young adults of color got to see our spiritual struggles shared in common with our European-American friends. How do I relate to the ancestors in this modern world? How do I relate to that special group that is my people?

It was comforting to know that European-American young adults feel just as ignorant and awkward and ambivalent and eager as the young adults of color do. And while we were talking about it, the Whiteness level dropped through the floor. The weird hum stopped, and the human spirit came in.

IV. An Anthropology of UUYAN

4.1 Introduction

Culture is a mixture of history, religion, shared experiences, living relationships.

It is a fluid thing, with boundaries that may be softer here or clearer there, with layers and variations and changes, different in different regions or for different generations.

But it is something real, a formative part of our human experience.

Culture is something that may not be visible at first glance. But it is real. Ask the Canadians.

It shapes our lives, our thoughts, our language, our dreams in a way that makes us who we are. Ask the Irish.

UUs often try to identify our Living Tradition in terms of “beliefs” and theology, a habit we retain from our dialogue with the Christianity. I think it would be useful for us to begin looking at our tradition more in the way of the Pagan or Indigenous peoples: as the Ways of our People, as observable characteristics of who we are and how we live.

4.2 Theology

If theology means your basic understanding of the universe, then UUs are actually not a very theologically diverse people. We all are actually in one religion. If theology means the language and symbols through which you articulate your understanding, well then, yes, there is a certain amount of diversity there. But, for example, there’s an enormous amount of unity about the idea that we are diverse...

The God of the UU’s is a God of many faces.

“Hey, that’s a metaphor. It may not be the ultimate truth.”

The God of the UUs is a God that encourages questioning and dialogue, heresy and open eyes.

“Okay, look, stop saying God. We’re atheists. I get my spiritual experience through hiking in the woods, and I get my truth from a scientific study of reality.”

The God of the UUs is a God of earth and science, a God of this physical world, is the world itself, with all of its ordinariness, complexity and beauty.

(There are lots of people around to talk about theology so I’m not going to dwell too heavily on the topic now.)

4.3 Psychology

When I say “psychology” here I don’t mean people’s psyches, but rather the field of psychology, and the assumptions it makes about people as it practices its trade.

Members of cultural minority groups sometimes find that the standard psychology that the average counselor was trained in may not be a good fit. Places where the average counselor or self-help books may misunderstand tribal UU people include:

Self-esteem. A UU kid may appear shy or socially awkward, but that’s very seldom because of low self-esteem. The self is known to be beautiful and sacred; it’s the self’s relation to the outside world that is problematic.

Issues with authority. A UU kid’s assumptions about authority are very different from those of, say, a Catholic kid. Like “self-esteem,” what appears to be an issue with “rebellion” may not actually be.

Christianity. Certain kinds of conversations that make sense to most Americans like, Does God exist? or, How do you handle guilt? can draw a complete blank from the raised-UUs in the room. Assertions from a

counselor or workshop leader that, for example, religious fear and guilt are universal human nature may cause confusion and anxiety rather than the intended reassurance or liberation.

Right and left brain. The rigid separation of consciousness into a rational, analytical mode vs. a dreaming, poetic mode is also not a universal experience. UUs are taught from an early age to see poetry in science, and to think critically about our mystical visions. We are also taught to listen to and celebrate our inner voices rather than repress them, so that the term “subconscious” is not entirely appropriate. This is a very different way of structuring consciousness.

Childhood trauma. In the dominant culture, early childhood trauma is seen as the most likely cause of a psychological problem. Among raised-UUs, we are actually just as likely to be suffering from early adulthood trauma. (Bridging Trauma, the Mark of the Cliff.)

Inhibitions. Many therapies and workshops are designed around getting the person to release their inhibitions, which are generally presumed to have been inflicted by an abusive or unnatural authority system. But the inhibitions a raised-UU feels are more likely to be the result of authentic intuition, or healthy instinct. These are not necessarily inhibitions you want to get rid of.

These are a few examples of places where the assumptions of the dominant culture—or even first-generation humanist or feminist culture—may not work for us.

4.4 Children of a Different Gender

I went to lunch one Sunday after services with about fifteen young adults. Several were first-time visitors; most were not raised UU. Just a group of young adults interested in liberal religion. Since there were so many strangers, the leader tried to keep the check-in simple: say your name, and maybe something about your name. People all said how they had gotten their name, how their parents or sometimes they themselves had chosen it. After we had gone around the table, I made a mental count and realized that fully half the group had made reference to feminism in their naming story. “My first name is actually my grandmother’s maiden name; my parents didn’t want it to be forgotten.” “My name sounds like a boy’s name, but actually it’s a woman from the Bible. People say she’s portrayed as bad, because, well, she killed a lot of men. But I think she’s a really strong woman.” “My name is Mark, but it was really supposed to be Martha. My parents really wanted a girl.” “My mother named me after a woman she admired. My father didn’t get much say in the matter.” “I read this [feminist] science fiction novel, and it changed my life. I named myself after one of the characters in it.” No one else commented on this or seemed to find it remarkable. It was a profound symbol to me of the impact of feminist culture on our lives.

We grew up with feminism. Our teachers encouraged the girls to take leadership, and encouraged the boys to be sensitive. That was how our world was. Like all children, we learned to be good, as we were taught.

Mostly, I think this is a good thing. I believe in feminism. But there are some side effects on feminism’s children that need to be sorted out. When I look at the UU young adult community today, I often—not always, but often—see a gender dynamic at play that is almost a perfect reversal of what the previous generation grew up with, and that causes some of the same kinds of pain.

The young women are people who were told to grow up and rule the world. They are full of motion, ambition, and energy. They never question their right to make demands on the boys. Often, they are busy sowing wild oats, having sexual adventures, believing that both sex and respect are the divine mandate of the Goddess.

The young men, on the other hand, are people who were told to control themselves, to be careful not to hurt anyone, to remember that sex and power are not entitlements. They were taught to be nice. Supportive, cooperative, helpful. So, for example, if a young UU man likes a young UU woman, what he

does is he goes over to her and tries really hard to be harmless. He doesn't want to oppress anyone by expressing interest or desire, so he just hangs around and acts cooperative. The more he wants her to like him, the more submissive he acts. Not surprisingly, the young UU women find this boring, frustrating, incomprehensible, and just not sexy. He doesn't understand why this doesn't work, or why all the young UU women are off dating "bad" men instead of "nice" men like himself.

Most UU young adults would really prefer to be with someone from inside the community, but the relationship advice we are working with often just doesn't fit the situation we have inherited.

4.5 On Being UU-Sexual

One noticeable thing about UU youth and young adults is that a rather large percentage of them identify as Queer. Maybe it's just because we're more open and aware: after all, the Kinsey study found that 90% of people have at least some homosexual experience in their lives, so maybe young UUs are just more likely to admit it, or be proud of it.

But I think there is something more than that. I see UU young adults, happily settled in longterm heterosexual partnerships, clinging fiercely to a Queer cultural identity. There is something about it that really matters to us. We know that we are not really straight.

When I was 21 I was living near the UC Berkeley campus and a member of a bisexual support group. Someone on campus was interviewing people for some Queer studies thing, and I volunteered. I went to her office and she asked a series of interview questions—how old were you when you first knew you were queer, stuff like that. The questions never seemed to be phrased quite the right way, making me feel slightly confused, but I was used to that and took it for granted. We were working through a section on formative adolescent experiences when the conversation digressed for a while. She was explaining to me why she identified as a lesbian rather than as bisexual, talking about a certain feeling she had only with women, a feeling of deep connection, of realness, a kind of completeness of love. Something clicked in my head. I knew the feeling she was talking about. I knew when I had it and when I didn't, but it wasn't about gender. "I think I'm group-sexual," I said.

"What?" she said.

"My formative experiences were with a group. I mean, not all at once, in an orgy or anything, I mean, not usually. But a sexual community. We talked to each other, we were together. I mean, we had private relationships, but we knew the group bond was primary, we all knew that... I don't know how to explain. But I know that I do not feel... right... unless I have that. I look for that. Something is still empty, otherwise. The way you say you feel about men."

I was happy to have thought of the answer to her question. But what happened next was weird. She put down her pencil, and said, "I've never heard of anything like that before," and kind of stared at me.

Here she was, a professional sex researcher in the free love capital of the country, and she had never seen anything like me before.

I didn't think my experiences were that weird.

My sexual ideas are not that weird. At least, among UUs, they're not. I was designing a flyer for an UUYAN event a while ago and we were talking about how to handle the sexual policy thing. I was saying that I don't like the legalistic "sign here" thing they had done on the OPUS flyers, because I don't think that's appropriate for adults. But, I was saying, we have to find some way to let people know that this is a loving space, but we're not having an orgy here. The planning group started frowning a little, so I laughed and said, Well, OK, I mean it is an orgy, but it's not that kind of orgy.

They all laughed, and knew exactly what I meant. No one dropped their pencils or anything.

In UU land, I am not some kind of sex radical. I'm a fairly conservative, responsible person. I'm just UU-sexual, that's all.

There are a lot more aspects to being UU-sexual than just the experience of sex in community, although that is a deep one, for sure. And it's not just about conferences, either. I think the difference is actually theological. The relationship you have with God is the same as the relationship you expect with your lover. The differences are deep. I found some of it pretty well articulated in the Queer spirituality and Lesbian cultural books from the seventies and eighties (many of which, I later realized, were published by Beacon Press). It's the main reason why I knew I was a Lesbian all through my teens and young adulthood, even though the actual relationships I had were 98% with men. Those books were saying exactly who I was. Even just the idea that Queer culture has, that sexuality is an important part of everyday life, part of society and intellectual life, not just "behind closed doors," was important. Or the belief that your body is a good thing. Or the idea that you are probably going to be close friends with your ex-lovers, even after you break up, and that this intimacy and bonding is part of what holds the community together. Or that rigorous monogamy is not the be-all and end-all of sexual ethics and integrity.

It's not just about conference culture, either. Here's another story.

Nine or ten UU young adults, gathered for a weekly evening drop-in circle. The majority of the people who are in the room are not conference goers, were not necessarily raised UU, are not AYS graduates, although some of us are. The topic is sex and dating. We are passing a pine cone around the room, allowing each person a chance to speak uninterrupted. I start to notice a surprising thing: we come from a lot of different sexual and religious backgrounds and identities, but by some coincidence, each person happens to mention that they are someone who feels very comfortable talking frankly about sex with their partner, or potential partner. Not only comfortable, but like it was obvious, like how else could you feel? One after another, people shake their heads in bewilderment, remembering partners and most other people in their lives, who feel uncomfortable or just unable to talk about sex.

What's the name for a sexual identity where your body is still attached to your verbal self, your talking mind? Talk-osexual?

As a teenager I knew that sex was not about particular physical acts so much as it was about life energy. Something that radiated from nature and the trees as much as from myself or my lover. Not a hard driving force, but a liquid energy that suffused everything.

I got in trouble, my freshman year in college, because I hadn't yet learned that this was in any way unusual. I was lounging around with my new women friends in the dorm, just chatting after midnight sometime, and I said, "Wouldn't it be great to have sex with a dolphin?" They all stared at me in horror. "Um, dolphins are really... big," one of them finally said. I didn't really understand. Years went by before it dawned on me that they had been thinking of a very literal physical image, one that had really and truly not crossed my mind when I spoke. At the time, I really didn't understand why they didn't find the life energy of dolphins pleasurable.

4.6 UUs are a mixed-heritage people

In many countries in Latin America, it is common to say that we are a mixed-race people: we honor a Spanish father and an Indian mother of our nation.

I perceive UUs, also, as a mixed-heritage people.

If you ask UUs about the experience of living in two worlds, almost all of them have a story to tell. At first this really surprised me. Then after while, I thought, no, it makes sense. I mean, something made all of us weird, or we wouldn't have joined this church, right?

I began exploring this question as part of my quest to discover the spiritual journeys we might share if we chose to see our people of color as central and collective instead of special and peripheral. Like other questions I explored in this way, it turned out to be core to who we are as a people.

We are the children of the marriage of the Unitarians and the Universalists.

We are the children of both the dominant culture and the UU circle culture.

We are, many of us, members of interracial families.

Or, we are people of color living in white community.

Often, we are members of both our UU congregation and another religious community that is important to us.

We may live with one foot in both gay and straight worlds.

We may be the children of a marriage between a Jew and a Gentile.

Or, we are someone who grew up poor, but had a privileged education.

We might be in the United States, but remembering the spiritual home we found in Mexico, or India, or Germany.

To be “bi” is a really special thing, a source of deep spiritual journeys, anguish, and wisdom. I believe that if UUs were to hold a few workshops and start giving each other permission to share our bicultural experiences, a lot of our “whiteness problem” would drop away really fast.

Just as a possible discussion starter, here is a list of images, stereotypes, and experiences associated with biracial people. My thanks to my sister Anna for the work she did on this in college and shared with me.

A biracial/bicultural/mixed-heritage person is...

A “tragic mulatto,” doomed to frustration

An exotic erotic attraction

A traitor

Not real

Never at home, never really belonging anywhere

At home everywhere

A rebel, revolutionary, an empowered fighter for equality

A bridge walker

A bridge

A future ideal of a world without categories

A bringer of special gifts from other places

A racial Queer (just like gender Queers), thus linked to trickster gods, messenger gods, doorkeepers, translators, clowns, spiritual healers A shaman, an artist, a prophet, a walker between the worlds

4.7 Handstands and Chalkboards: stories of the circle instinct

When I was a kid, I used to do a lot of headstands. Head and hands on the floor, feet in the air. When I was ready to switch back, I’d push myself upward with my arms before letting my feet fall back to the floor. It felt good, like jumping.

One day a neighborhood babysitter saw me do this and she said, Wow, that’s really unusual, most people can’t push up into a handstand like that, that’s great! I remember frowning, and feeling a wrongness, and trying to get her to dismiss her comment. She persisted, very friendly, affirming my specialness, my superiority. I shrugged and tried to forget about it. She was a nice person.

But the next time I did a headstand, I found myself coming down from it very slowly. I somehow didn't feel any impulse to jump.

I continued for years to stand on my head, but I never leapt upwards through a handstand again. I wasn't sure why, but I knew I didn't want to be praised like that again.

I didn't want anyone to call me "superior."

When I was 20, my employer showed a videotape aimed at increasing multicultural sensitivity in the workplace. One scene showed a room of women working at sewing machines. A manager came into the room and asked one of the women—say her name was Julie—to stand up where everyone could see her. He praised her and honored her for her excellent work, and handed her a cash bonus in front of the group. He was trying to be a positive, motivational manager. Her eyes filled with horrified tears and she fled the room. Poor Mr. Manager! What did he do wrong?

The videotape explained that Julie was a Native American, and that her culture prized community so highly that to separate out an individual from her peers would be a cause for trauma. Julie could barely return to work the next day because of her agonizing embarrassment, the narrator said. The manager talked with her, and she explained that she would much rather have received the bonus quietly, in an envelope that did not draw the attention of her peers.

I thought of my headstands, and I knew that I was like Julie. But I didn't know why.

As a child I read a story about a white elementary school teacher and her frustration in her attempt to use standard American classroom techniques on a Native American reservation. The core image of the story is this: she sends a group of Indian boys up to the chalkboard to do a math problem. Each one with his own piece of chalk. "See who can do it the fastest. The first one to finish, turn around. Ready, set, go!" Six little boys start scratching numbers on the board. The first one finishes, then stands there, hesitating. He does not turn around. One after another they finish. When the last boy is done, they all turn around together.

The teacher, the narrator of the story, is bewildered. And a little bit frustrated. How are you supposed to motivate children who do not compete with one another? This is not what they taught her back in teacher school.

The story stuck with me, because I knew that, even as an inarticulate child, I couldn't have turned around either. I knew exactly what those children might have been feeling. But the teacher didn't. That worried me. I am not a Native American. So what made me so different?

One more story, again about the power of the circle instinct. This time the people are not Native, but Chinese American children.

It's Christmas Eve, in a prosperous suburban home. A huge pile of glittering presents is waiting under the tree. It is the tradition in this family to have a party in the evening, and then allow the children to open the gifts at midnight. The evening is long, and five children of different ages are on best behavior. By midnight, everyone is a little tired, especially the adults.

It's time to open the presents. One of the moms announces that she is Santa, and calls everyone to come sit around the tree. She gives each child the first brightly wrapped package. Anticipation fills the air.

Then a small crisis strikes. Someone, on his way to the tree, stumbles, and accidentally breaks an elaborate crafted item that one of the children has been working on for weeks. The young artist flees the scene in tears. An adult follows to comfort her.

After a few minutes of waiting, the remaining adults announce that the Santa Claus should continue. Open the presents, the adults tell the remaining four children. The children hold the packages in their laps, but none of them can move. They glance at each other, and at the hallway down which their sister disappeared.

The adults, who are tired, urge them on. Open the presents! They say. She's all right! She'll be back in a minute. The minutes drag on. The adults urge and grumble.

The children clearly want to respect the needs of their elders, and also to open the pile of presents. But they cannot do it. Without a word exchanged, they wait. Not until their number is complete again can they begin.

When a child attends UU Sunday School, this feeling for the Circle is one of the primary lessons that is taught. UU teachers need to maintain classroom order, but they do not want to teach conformism or obedience, and so instead they teach: notice the Circle. Notice that it is something that we love. Notice how it feels when you respect the Circle, notice how it feels when the Circle breaks.

Even if, like most UU children, you never attend YRUU and just drop out at the age of nine or ten, this memory of the Circle leaves an imprint. An imprint that has deep theological, cultural, and personal implications. An imprint profoundly different than that of children raised under systems of hierarchy and competition.

V. Naming: Toward a Language of Our Own

5.1 Toward a Language of Our Own

One thing that is very important to any minority culture within a dominant society is having our own language, a language of our own. We need at least some words to describe the experiences that are ours, that may not be talked about in the dominant culture. The UUYAN I inherited in 1997 had begun to coin some words: Bridger (for those people transitioning from UU youth to UU young adulthood), Cliff (for the terrible nothingness at the end of the youth programs), Circle Worship (to give a name for Youth-style worship that isn't limited to the Youth age range.) But I believe we could use more.

I have begun to create some words and names, like the Magic Pool (with its attendant dangerous Eddies and Addictions). I hope as we talk, study, and name our experience, we will continue to give our Circle selves greater power from which to speak.

A story about language, from back when I was first taking on the role of an UUYAN leader in my district. I met with some district YRUU leaders who were aging out and interested in talking about creating conferences for UU young adults. Because, they said, "There is such a deep need."

Their eyes, their body language, were full of urgency and yearning and the fear of unbearable loss.

"Yes," I said. "I know. I understand. But, um—just for the record—can you tell me what, specifically, you think is needed? So I can have it in your words. So I can make sure that UUYAN works to meet it."

"Conferences," their leader said. Her body language put a universe into that one word.

But she stopped, after that one word.

"But what kinds of things at conferences?" I persisted. "What kinds of activities? What kinds of qualities, what kinds of experiences? What would fill that important need?"

She didn't know how to answer me. I was a fellow UU; I was supposed to just know what the word conferences meant. She tried more meaningful glances, more urgent body language, more vivid energy exchanges. I persisted in asking for words.

Someone else tried. "You know. Community." Someone said, "Workshops." And then, "And uh, you know, worship and stuff."

I tried, but that was as far as we ever got. Four words. Conferences, Community, Workshops, Worship.

These were intelligent, beautiful young people trying to communicate to me about experiences that formed the emotional, spiritual, and social center of their lives—about a community program in which they were considered to be the leadership—and they could not find more than four words to say what it was.

That conversation stayed with me, haunted me. Their urgency, and their inability to speak. "There is such a need," they told me. That part they were able to say. "There is really an urgent need. Such a need for it."

What is "it"?

5.2 The UU Conversion Experience: the Magic Pool of Communion

A story about an UUYAN conference:

It's the beginning of a new cycle of UUYAN organizing in our district. There hasn't been a real conference for a few years; most of the registrants don't know each other. A lot of them have never been to a conference before.

First scene: Friday night, about 6pm. People are still arriving; orientation will not happen for another couple of hours. The planners have decided that people will be most comfortable if we start gradually, so the event scheduled is an "adult-style" coffeehouse with some really good musicians performing. The

conference participants—remember, most of them are new—help set up the chairs. They set them in neat rows, like pews, or an audience.

When I walk into the room, I see them all sitting in rows, and scattered. Lots of empty seats between each person, no one sitting close to one another. I feel a little concerned, but they're happy enough, or so they tell me. They like the music. The rows and the separation are normal adult behavior. It looks a little like church on a Sunday morning.

Next scene: the following morning, Saturday, 9am. Fifteen hours later. Just after breakfast and before the first workshop. Something is different. If this were a play, you'd think that Scene Two was supposed to represent an alternate reality, not the same people. The participants are now sitting close to one another, in groups or piles. Their bodies lean trustingly against one another. Hugs have become part of a normal greeting; reassuring or affectionate touch has become part of a normal conversation. "Normal" conversation is no longer the polite social chat of the evening before; now it is either a free-flowing sharing of the heart, of real life issues, or a free-flowing sharing of silliness, of spontaneous word games and free-association humor.

Something has melted. The "normal adult" well-being people claimed to be feeling during last night's music performance now seems like a distant and shallow mask.

Walking into the conference after a morning errand in the outside world, I can feel the conference like a strong energy field that is warm, like a physical warmth; relaxing, like a bubble bath or a day at the beach.

It's this energy field that the YRUU call, "community."

I happen to think that this is not really the right name for it; a "community" is more like all the people who live in the same town together. They may or may not feel this deep sense of love and connection. Even if they are hippies who have all moved into the woods together to form an Intentional Community, they may or may not have this energy field with each other. Chances are, at least most of the time, they don't.

The conference is not a community. It's a weekend event. What it is, is a religious ritual. I think a closer word for that magical feeling that YRUU calls "community" is actually: communion. Because it feels like a relaxing bath, I've been calling it "The Magic Pool of Communion." And because I tend not to use Christian language, I've been calling it just: the Magic Pool.

This Magic Pool is a powerful thing. People organize their lives around it, and yet they don't really know how to explain what it is. They just say "conferences," "community," sometimes "workshops," or "worship." YRUUers sometimes call it "UUism." Other people might try "circle worship," "youth worship," or "participatory, experiential worship." They might also try "mysticism," "ecstasy," sometimes maybe "paganism" or "animism."

I often hear adults say that there is a spiritual nothingness, a spiritual flatness, at the center of UUism. They write about it in *World* magazine. They speculate on whether it ought to be filled with Ecofeminism or Science or Christianity.

One thing is certain. The youth who go to conferences do not think that there is "nothing" at the center.

The Magic Pool of Communion is a powerful ritual and a powerful spiritual experience. As far as I can tell, it is the UU conversion experience. Not only youth converts, but also young adults, ministers and lay leaders will tell you: intellectually, they think the ideas are nice, but they first knew they were really a UU when they attended a certain conference, summer camp, assembly or retreat. That's why our adult lay Leadership Schools last for a week and focus so much on bonding: we know that once someone has been to the Magic Pool, chances are high that they will serve this movement for life.

Even if they still can't explain what it is.

Being a visitor to a UU congregation can be a frustrating experience. It's like, you know that there is a flame burning somewhere, because it attracted all of these people. But you might not see it really burning at the Sunday Service. (I have seen it there, but not often.) You might not see it at coffee hour or at the monthly potluck. If you ask, people might give you a little printed card full of nice words, or they might say, "well, it's the community." Those things make reference to it, and yet they are not the flame itself. It's as if you can't find it, but you can smell it. It's around here somewhere. Maybe it's being used to heat the building, or something. A lot of these people have seen it—they look happy.

Maybe it's hidden down in the basement somewhere. (Like, near the RE rooms?)

I have talked to people who have been in a UU congregation for years and they are still feeling confused and looking. And they are still "new members"—when they finally give up and leave, they will feel as if they never were able to quite make it "in." No one could explain to them how to reach the spiritual flame, the center, the Magic Pool.

One of the reasons why it is hard for people to name and talk about the Magic Pool is the paradoxical nature of its magic. On the one hand, a visit to the Pool is a rare and ecstatic experience that totally changes your whole life; on the other hand, what it feels like while you're in it is profoundly, profoundly, ordinary. Like, everyone is finally acting normal.

The spell we cast is that "it's OK to be yourself." Just normal people, humans. Humanism.

The trick is, when you really do that, "normal" turns out to not be what you see on TV.

5.3 Dangers of the Magic Pool: Eddies, Idolatry, Addiction

Why talk about this Magic Pool? Well, the first thing is just to try and create language for our experiences. I'm a UU, and I believe that language is humanizing, spiritual, and empowering.

But once we have the language, there are also some important issues we can name and address.

One is that, despite the feeling of ordinariness, the Magic Pool doesn't happen automatically. The professional religious educators who helped design the YRUU conference structures know that; but the youth graduates who go on to try and start young adult groups mostly don't. One of the main reasons why UUYAN (and the dream of a truly intergenerational UUism) has had so much trouble sustaining itself over the years is that the youth program graduates have learned how to swim and sometimes to lifeguard, but not how to build a new pool.

We can coast on our memories of LRY or YRUU for a while, but it's not the same thing as having a pool of our own.

Another thing is that Magic is powerful, and can be dangerous, especially when handled by people without enough training. I'm going to name three "Dangers of the Magic Pool" that I see pretty often when I look around at UU young adult groups: Eddies, Idolatry, and Addiction.

Eddies

Eddies are like little whirlpools at the edge of the Magic Pool. They happen when the boundaries are not carefully constructed, and they can really smash people, make them hurt, or spin people around, make them crazy.

I once attended a local young adult group as a new visitor, and on my way out the door got caught in an Eddy. It started as the meeting drew to a close, so that during check-out I started feeling like a crazy person. By the time I had walked to my car, I was gripped by a strong suicidal impulse. Now, I am not normally a suicidal person. I have never contemplated suicide in my life. But I couldn't start up my car, because I felt I might drive off a bridge or something. I sat there in the dark in my car for about twenty minutes. And then the feeling went away, completely. I was back to my normal self and I drove home just fine.

Later I tried to figure out what had happened. That particular young adult group was one that consisted almost entirely of check-in. Ten or fifteen people came every week, and opening check-in lasted like an hour and a half. I mean, people were sharing every detail of their lives. It was their main ritual. For a new person, it was extremely boring. I didn't know these people, and they didn't know me. I was given a place in the circle, but I couldn't actually participate in the same ritual. I couldn't both be who I was and be in their Pool with them. I was hurled, by the powerful Magic of unconditional love, against the rough wall of exclusiveness and disregard. I got caught on the edge, battered and spun.

What's peculiar about an Eddy is this: it is caused by the Pool itself, in combination with edges that are not carefully tended. I mean, I didn't even know these people. It's not like I had been rejected by my best friend. They weren't even my only access to UUYAN. They were just another group in my district I was visiting out of curiosity.

A feeling of rejection, of being unseen or not belonging, that might otherwise be fairly mild or survivable can become a major trauma if it happens in relation to a Magic Pool. People can get spun and crushed. When we build a Magic Pool, we need to be careful of smoothing our boundaries, of seeing that people can enter and exit in spiritual safety. We need to keep an eye on issues of age, gender, race, class, identity, lifestyle, and newness, to make sure that potential rough spots don't combine with the force of our Magic and cause someone a major trauma.

And for those of us who have had them, we need space to talk about our Eddy experiences. People tend to:

be unable to acknowledge the depth of their trauma. Like, how could such a minor incident be such a big deal? Why am I still so upset?

remain caught in the distorting power of the Eddy, so that they insist that they were "raped" or "lynched" or "driven to suicide" by some objectively minor and relatively forgivable incident

try to quit UUYAN or UUism altogether, to just delete the Magic Pool from their life, instead of just looking for a way to deal with the Eddies on the edges.

And the Eddies can be dealt with, the boundaries smoothed, sometimes even with just a few words. The Eddies are mostly minor, compared to the Pool itself. But we do need to be aware of them, because people can get really hurt.

Idolatry

Idolatry is the sin of worshipping a false god, or of confusing an image of God, a physical idol, for God itself, of which the image is only an aspect, only a symbol.

If the Magic Pool is where we find divinity itself, then Idolatry is about confusing one particular image or aspect of the Magic Pool experience, for divinity or for the Pool itself.

So, for example, someone might decide that what made YRUU what it was, was how you could just tell people whatever was really on your mind, and then end up creating an UUYAN program that feels like some kind of therapy group. And when they notice that the Magic is not happening, the person would respond by trying to get people to be more and more revealing, as if self-exposure itself could make the Magic happen.

Common UUYAN idolatries:

- Conferences themselves
- YRUU
- Youthfulness itself

- Open sexuality
- Social justice activism
- Breaking of various dominant-culture social taboos
- Being out in the woods
- Spontaneity and the lack of structure
- Less often: discipline and keeping to structure
- Consensus process
- Less often: diversity (especially, of opinion)
- Altered states of consciousness
- Personal therapy, or, emotional intensity
- Just getting together with all my best friends

It's true that these are part of the divine experience; but be careful you're not worshipping the wrong thing, something that is not the experience itself.

Addiction

Addiction is a kind of idolatry of the Magic Pool itself.

There are people who only come alive at conferences. The annual conference might be the only time all year that you feel like a person. The only time you get touched. The only time your soul is really present and you can feel like yourself. The only time you feel free. That is a powerful experience. And it's basically a good one.

But conference-addiction can cause a kind of “jonesing,” a desperation, that can distort a person's best judgement. One problem I encounter with this is that UUYAN organizers can tend to confuse conference-addiction with conference leadership potential. They are not the same thing. Leadership is about service, not about hunger. Hunger and desperation can sometimes be channeled into a motivation to volunteer, but a volunteer is different than a responsible leader. Hunger is not a good motivation for leadership. It distorts judgement. We need to make sure our leaders are well fed, and that they are not trying on any level to eat us.

We also need to do what we can to make sure that our Magic is something that makes people's lives better, not just during the conference. We need to think about fostering strength, and not dependency. “Conference-addiction” in a way is just a joke. But I think many of us know at least one life for whom it is really not a joke.

Our Magic is wonderful, and it is powerful. May we do our best to serve it well.

5.4 Stolen by Fairies

I think that parents of UU children sometimes are not aware of the profound effect that UU RE is going to have upon their children.

(I can hear you all laughing: you know what I mean.)

Actually I think that even the Sunday school teachers and youth conference organizers are not always aware of just how profound an effect they're going to have.

I've sometimes joked with a friend and said the experience is like being stolen by fairies.

An innocent person wanders into a certain part of the woods, or maybe they disappear from their cradle as a baby. They spend a single night, or maybe a brief moment or an eternal year, in the fairy land amid the music, the laughter, the earthy but unspeakable beauty. And then they are dropped back into the human village, to try and resume a normal life. But they are forever changed. They can hear the faint sound of the fairy music. Sometimes they bring great gifts to their people; sometimes they spend their whole life haunted, trying to go back, following the fairy song.

YRUU conferences are a fairy land, a forest surrounding a Magic Pool. Once you have bathed in it, you are changed forever. You become something different than what you were. You have experienced something; your sense of what is possible has changed. Your relationship to what is possible has been altered. You have become a fairy, or a unicorn, or something. It's as strong an experience as making love for the first time. It changes you. Even if it only happened once. If you have been to the Magic Pool, you are a different kind of person. Your hopes and fears and dreams have been changed.

I think that this experience of the Magic Pool is the UU conversion experience. Most people don't become committed UUs from some intellectual theological decision. If you ask UU leaders, most will tell you: what made them really become a UU, what made them decide to become a minister or a lifelong lay leader, was a UU summer camp, or youth conference, or leadership retreat. That was when they really understood, really fell in love, really knew that this is what matters. It was the Magic Pool.

People will work year-round on administrative committees just for the chance, once a year, to drink from the Magic Pool. Once you have tasted it, it becomes the center, the source of meaning and renewal, the place the soul comes alive. UUs tend to call this "community," but I think the right word is something more like "communion." It's powerful stuff. People will shape their lives around it. We have to have it. It's what make us human again—or maybe fairies again.

5.5 Bridging Trauma Syndrome (the Mark of the Cliff)

Definition: something UUYAN is seeking to eradicate. A psychological or spiritual condition found primarily in raised-UU adults. The "Cliff" is a reference to the trauma experienced by UU young adults as they are pushed out of the beloved spiritual community of UU youth programs, out into what feels like nothingness. The "Bridge" is a reference to efforts by UU activists to replace the nothingness with a Bridge into a viable UU young adult program and appropriate young adult community. These activists are working for the widespread establishment of a ceremonial rite of passage for the new young adult, called the Bridging Ceremony, but these efforts are still in the beginning stages. In most UU communities, there yet exists no Religious Education program to help the Bridgers reflect on and receive guidance through the psychological transition into adulthood; and with a few exceptions, there exists no age-appropriate spiritual community to welcome the Bridgers on the other side.

I see the Mark of the Cliff on raised-UU adults of all ages, and so I know that the Cliff has been around for decades, maybe even generations. I suspect that Bridging Trauma is a widespread situation among our raised-UU adults. No one has done any research, that I know of, on exactly how widespread. Our statistics tell us that only 10% of our currently active adult population grew up inside the church. A lifelong UU is a rare creature to be spotted and pointed out: Look, there goes one. To me, this is chilling: Where did they all go? The ones that are still around often look kind of injured, limping. What happened to the ones who are gone?

If I ask random congregants about this, they say, Oh, the children are so bright and shining, they have a kind of spiritual freedom and self-love that we never had, I hear that they are all geniuses. They must all go on to wonderful things. If I ask the youth and young adults where their old friends from youth group are now, I often hear a different kind of anecdote. I hear about drug addiction, despair, resentment, cynicism, alienation.

That shining light, the free spirit, the community leadership of YRUU mostly does not seem to survive adulthood.

The Cliff is a silent disaster, knocking wave after wave of our children out of the sky just as they are spreading their wings to fly.

As with most disasters, people have differing methods of trying to cope. The strongest and most common is denial—“That’s not really happening.”—or its cousin, minimization: “It’s not really as bad as you say it is.”

Maybe, after all, Bridging Trauma doesn’t disable the majority of our raised-UU kids. Maybe it’s really only a small minority, or maybe the trauma is really not that severe. After all, most of our young people do manage to finish school, get a job, form a family. They’re normal. Right?

5.6 Clinging and Soul Loss

The Mark of the Cliff is a mark of shell shock, of a soul in hiding.

The Mark of the YRUU is a soul that is present, shining from the body and the eyes. You can call it self-love, self-trust, social confidence, spiritual aliveness. A complete respect for one’s own body, mind, and experience. This is the Fairy Mark, the mark that we see in other people when we recognize each other, when we know that they are in on the secret: the inherent worth and dignity. It’s OK to be yourself.

The Mark of the Cliff is a light that has gone out, been hidden or lost. Sometimes it is masked with an artificial glow, a kind of bravado, or a pleasant conformity. But you can still see it: the faint traces of fear, of shock. The dimness of the energy field.

There is a belief in some cultures that when a person suffers a trauma that is too painful or too incomprehensible to endure, their soul will just flee the scene. Leave the body. Soul loss. The closest Western Scientific word for it is “dissociation.” Soul loss causes a loss of vitality and will for living. It can cause a loss of concentration, of memory, of creative or original thought. It can cause clumsiness, bad luck, and compulsive behavior. The person may feel empty, numb, depressed, or just not themselves. The soul has left the body, has withdrawn from its seat inside the body, behind the eyes.

Bridging Trauma. I see it on the faces of the raised-UU young adults that arrive in San Francisco and find their way into the young adult circles there.

If I meet them in the earliest stages, the look is one of confusion, or bewilderment. Like, what is happening to me? Why don’t things seem to be the way they used to be? (If the person enters a good UUYAN program at this time or sooner, the Mark of the Cliff will probably be avoided. But good UUYAN programs are still rare.)

If I meet them a little later, the look is one of shell-shock, or maybe pain or horror or fear. That is the Mark of the Cliff: a spiritual injury, visible like a bruise or scar.

Later, as the soul goes further into hiding, the look of pain is covered over by different versions of bravado, conformity or cynicism. Their eyes, behind the social smile, are guarded. The Bridger has fallen. Their link to spiritual community has been broken.

This condition of alienation, of a deep split between the official public self and the spiritual inner self, is pretty common in all people these days, UU and non-UU. The condition is called Soul Loss. The healing solution, according to the shamans, is Soul Retrieval.

5.7 UUism and Soul Retrieval

One of the things that is interesting to me about UU young adults is their relationship to soul retrieval. There are two things in particular that are interesting.

One thing is that UU young adults really want it. Soul retrieval. They want to find a way to be their true selves. They are not afraid, or looking for escape. When I sit in most New Age or Pagan workshops and people are asked what they want to experience, they say things like “peace,” “light,” “healing,” “beauty.”

When I ask UUYANers, most of them say, “realness,” “honesty,” “friendship,” “truth.” The difference is significant. “Realness” is very different than “light.”

UUism is a religion of soul retrieval, of a quest to affirm the real self.

The second thing is about spiritual maturity and power. Most modern people leave their body at a very early age. You do a soul retrieval on your average American adult and what you get is someone who is four, five years old. That’s basically where the person is, emotionally. You do a soul retrieval on a raised-UU, and you get someone who is seventeen. They are old enough to talk, to think, to have theological opinions, to describe quite clearly what is happening to them. It’s an amazing difference.

This older soul, even from its distance, is often able to provide better help to its body than the younger souls do, and so the person is often what you might call more “high-functioning” than your average dissociated person.

The raised-UU adult suffering from Bridging Trauma Syndrome may look like a reasonably average citizen. But though the memories may be repressed, or discarded as childish, the soul does not forget the Beloved Community, the feeling of the Magic Pool. Wounded by the Cliff and unable to enter fully into spiritual adulthood, they try nonetheless to carry their loyalty forward, even with their true power injured or in hiding.

5.8 Bridging Trauma Syndrome: Four Types

Introduction

The Recovery movement says that children’s responses to the trauma of an alcoholic home can be divided into four basic coping strategies. The child becomes a Hero child, a Rebel child, a Clown, or Lost Child. The author Starhawk uses something similar when she says that people’s responses to an oppressive system can be seen as divided into four basic coping strategies: Conform, Rebel, Manipulate, or Withdraw. She also names a fifth option, Resist, which is the attempt to stay conscious and to act to change the system itself. In the language of alcoholism and codependency, that fifth option would be the path out of the traumatized family roles and into Recovery.

In terms of the Bridging Trauma Syndrome that I am trying to give words to, I think the fifth option is soul retrieval, and then also successful Bridging, successfully carrying your full spirit forward into full adulthood.

I think the four patterns of trauma response can be seen in Bridging Trauma also. These are the trauma response patterns that I have seen:

- The Good Church Girl or Boy
- The Youth Rebel
- The Religious Fanatic
- The Lost Child

Bridging Trauma Syndrome: 1. The Good Church Girl or Boy

The Good Church Girl or Boy responds to the Cliff, to the trauma of the outside world, by never leaving church. They become a model congregant, committee chair, trustee, or minister. They serve with loyalty and reliability, and help hold the institutional church together. Like the Hero child in an alcoholic home, they are considered part of a success story, someone you can point to as an example of raised-UU well-being.

But if you look at them more closely, you find a surprising degree of conformity, timidity, a sort of channeling of the party line. If these are the best of our youth programs' graduates, then originality, courage, and fire are strangely absent.

The hidden soul is the Mark of the Cliff.

Bridging Trauma Syndrome: 2. The Youth Rebel

The Youth Rebel takes an opposite strategy. They reject the bland and conformist congregation and become a passionately dedicated advocate for the youth and youth culture. They make very loyal YRUU advisors.

But staying close to YRUU when you are no longer a youth does not in itself heal the wound of the Cliff. The spiritual distortion can still be seen, in a kind of stagnation, a stuck-in-the-past feeling. Mixed with all that universal love you can feel a tense edge of bitterness. The person might tend to teach the youth to see themselves as superior to, and/or as victimized by, the adult community. To portray adults as oppressors and spiritually dead, rather than as sources of support or as role models for people to dream of becoming. And at its worst, this syndrome can lead the person to seek emotionally or sexually inappropriate peer relationships with their youth advisees.

Bridging Trauma Syndrome. Cliff Children, I sometimes call them. Former youth, who have not yet made it across the spiritual Bridge to full, authentic UU adulthood. They may be 30 or 60 years old, but some part of their soul has not yet found a way to come forward.

People in one of the first two patterns generally tend to retain close ties to the church and to be visibly identified as raised-UUs. This is less likely to be true of people in the 3rd and 4th patterns.

Bridging Trauma Syndrome: 3. The Religious Fanatic

Cliff Child Number Three is the Religious Fanatic. By "religious" I don't mean Jesus here, or even institutional UUism. This person is most likely to be a Pagan, or a sex liberationist, or a social activist, or a chemical psychedelicist. This person chooses a third method of acting out their loss and their need. They cling to some particular namable element of the UU youth experience that might have been different from the dominant culture, and they become dedicated activists for its cause. They are most likely to give their leadership and volunteer energies and community identity to a non-UU organization.

Now, activism and alternative lifestyles I think are good things; but when a person approaches them from a condition of Bridging Trauma, they are unlikely to be approaching it in a holistic, balanced way. There is a kind of franticness, obsessiveness or desperation, a cultish kind of aloneness to it. Like, "You people don't understand."

Without the full presence of their soul to guide them, and without the balancing effects of a trusted UU community in which to reflect on and refine their passion, these people may pursue their particular cause, or group, or drug to the point of causing life damage, impoverishment, or abusive relationships.

Bridging Trauma Syndrome: 4. The Lost Child

Cliff pattern number four is the invisible person, the Lost Child. Like the people in the first three patterns, this person is functioning at well below their true adult potential. But this one, this Adult Child of the Cliff, this one you never hear from. They may quietly go forward into a family or job, but they spiritually disappear from the life of the community. Their voice becomes a whisper, and then silent. If their life malfunctions significantly enough, they may end up in a treatment for low self-esteem. But it's seldom self-esteem that's the problem. It's culture shock. They know that they are lovable, intelligent, and good. What they do not know is how to cope with the outside world.

The Cliff affects different people in different ways. I hope that these images will serve as conversation starters, and that the discussion will go on in our communities.

The Cliff is real.

For adults who grew up in close UU community, it is often the defining story of our lives.

Let's give it words, let's talk about it.

Blessed Be.

5.9 The Eddy at the Second Cliff

One Eddy that deserves particular mention is the Eddy at the Second Cliff, the border trouble at the upper edge the official UUYAN age range. As Eddies go, it's a large, slow, and deep one. People might first feel its destabilizing pull at the age of 27, and remain caught in its slow deep twist for a decade or more. It seems to affect men more often than women, perhaps because the Cliff of difference between UU culture and the dominant culture is higher for males than for females. (UUYAN is a culture whose values are considered "feminine" by the dominant culture.)

In this Eddy, like others, the victim is being crushed and spun between two powerful opposing forces—the inclusive unconditional love of the communion Pool, and the pressure of the spoken or unspoken demand that older young adults "age out" of, be stripped of their membership in, the Community.

If the person caught in this Eddy sees only a Cliff on the outside edge, then his only hope of escaping drowning in the vortex is to try and swim back toward the center of the Pool. But if he receives no new help or guidance at the center, he will only be pulled by the current outward again toward the terrible Eddy and the terrifying Cliff.

The UUYAN movement has tended to unwittingly collaborate in the stirring of this Eddy, responding to the victim's struggle by alternately pulling him toward a changeless center or pushing him violently toward the Second Cliff.

Confused and hurting, the people caught in this Eddy over the years continue to participate in the community and to serve it as best they can, often taking on volunteer roles at events, which helps to affirm their position and membership. But the spiritual twisting of the Eddy causes them to radiate varying levels of perceptible desperation, resentment, bitterness, alienation, rage and fear, which, in turn, increases the outward pressure of the community's desire for them to "move on."

I want the Eddy replaced by a gentle ramp, a sloping beach, or at least a poolside ladder with clear firm steps that can be clung to and followed to safety. UUYAN needs to be a place where people can get the guidance they need to learn how to safely grow up. UUYAN should be about Bridging, about proudly claiming and developing adulthood, not about Bridging-Denial, not about pretending that we can hide in the Pool forever and nothing will ever change.

5.10 Fairy Godbrothers and other UUYAN Elders

I believe that one important aspect of smoothing the transition out of Young Adulthood is to formally recognize the continuing love that UUYAN holds for our older members and "alum," especially for those who so openly and generously send their love, loyalty, wisdom, and ongoing support back to us after they have moved on. In PCD we has some conversations about introducing words to honor the special role of older Friends of UUYAN, or the Larger UUYAN Family.

I suggest three age-related titles (each with varying permutations) among the elders that honor us by their supportive participation in UUYAN community:

Elder UUYAN brother/sister. (Fairy godbrother, big sister/brother, elder circle sister/brother.) People, usually in their 30s, who may still have one foot in Young Adulthood, but who acknowledge also their boundaries and responsibilities toward their younger circlemates.

UUYAN auntie/uncle. (Fairy uncle/auntie, Circle uncle/auntie.) People, usually in their 40s or 50s, who have firmly established their full adult identity, and still chose to serve the UUYANers of the next generation. (These people may include “old LRYers” or parents of Bridgers—and may still be perceived as “youth” by the dominant elder-centered church culture.)

UUYAN elder. (Fairy godmother/father, Circle Elder, Circle godmother/father.) People, usually in their 60’s or 70’s, who nurture UUYAN with their invaluable perspective, experience, institutional support, and long-term steady love.

Note: a person who, though technically over 30, is still struggling with significant Cliff Trauma or similar issues, may not yet actually have undergone the spiritual change enabling him/her to yet claim one of the three elder titles.

5.11 Soul Retrieval: How to Do It

I believe that every UU worship and conference is, or should be, a soul retrieval ceremony.

Here’s a list of some elements that help bring hidden souls home:

Safety. The first requirement for a successful soul retrieval is the establishment of a genuine community space where the person will be welcome for who they are.

Note: Filling the room with “love” and “white light” can tend to keep the authentic self away. The goal is not “goodness” but realness, and acceptance.

Beauty, pleasure, fun. Make the world an attractive place to come to.

Naming, history, orientation, storytelling. The missing soul is lost, alone, confused, and afraid. Tell it stories that name its experience, factually or metaphorically. Reassure it, and offer it a path to come back into presence and community. (This can be as complex as a long series of rituals or sermons, or as simple as the usual conference orientation speech, or a good game of All My Friends and Neighbors.)

Meaning, purpose, mandate. Give the soul a reason to show up. Explain why it is needed, why its energy will be welcome. If you come back, you can help your friends. You can change the world. Your energy is needed, your wisdom, your power, your capacity for deep feeling. I know you had a good reason to leave, but listen, there is a reason for you to come back, and stay.

(Note: for a more individual therapy-style discussion of soul retrieval, see the book by that title by Sandra Ingerman.)

5.12 Successful Bridging: Learning to Walk Between the Worlds

What does it mean to Bridge successfully?

The first aspect is about the transition from youth to adulthood. Adulthood is different than Youth. It carries dangers, responsibilities, challenges of its own. Can you stay fully present, fully yourself, even as your environment and your role change around you? Can you master your new tasks without losing your soul? That is the spiritual journey of the Bridger.

But there is also a second layer to spiritual process of Bridging. As an adult member of a circle-based subculture, you will be a Bridgewalker all of your life. You will walk between church and society, your home and your workplace, just as you once perhaps walked between school and YRUU. Can you learn to do that with pride, carrying the circle values and teachings into the outside world, carrying fresh air and meaningful challenges back into the circle? As a UU adult, it is your heritage to be a Walker Between Worlds. Learn to understand it, learn to do it well.

There is a third layer. The Walker Between Worlds is another name for the Shaman, a person who can journey between the realms of earth and spirit, who can move from the sunlit world of daily life to the

moonlit world of dreams to bring back messages, visions, information. This is related to the archetype of the Queer god: messenger, translator, trickster, doorkeeper, midwife, psychopomp, one foot in each of two worlds. The Humanist word, I think, is Artist. The old Hebrew, Christian, and Islamic word is Prophet.

UU young adults who can learn to successfully Walk Between the Worlds will become the Prophets of our people.

So may it be.

5.13 Paganism and Resistance

My name is Sharon Hwang Colligan.

My mother is Chinese and my father is Polish.

They were both born in Chicago.

I was born in Boston, and grew up UU.

I worked for the UUA in the Department for Social Justice when I was 19 years old. I am now 31.

I am in the process of creating a UU Circle Worship shamanic leadership school called the Circlemaker Institute for Magical Humanism.

Between the ages of seventeen and twenty-seven I was active in the anarcho-pagan-feminist-queer community, inspired by Beacon Press authors like Starhawk and Judy Grahn. I studied feminist psychology, and humanist magic.

As an anti-racist person, I chose to study Paganism from a cross-cultural perspective. I learned to honor many different circle-based traditions of immanent theology. Not only Wiccan and Celtic, but also Norse, Orisha, Native American, Egyptian, and Taoist traditions, among many others.

Eventually, I learned to honor UUism as one among this number.

UUism, at least in the form it takes in our camps, conferences, and Sunday Schools—which I believe are the heart of our spiritual community—is in my perception a Pagan religion. It is circle-based, earth-honoring, and present rather than distant in spirit. It honors human sexuality, and female leadership. It seeks harmony rather than domination.

In a cross-cultural context, that is pretty much the definition of Paganism.

The boring, overly rational, Protestant style Sunday morning services for which we are famous? They're a front.

They exist primarily to convince outsiders that we are really a Christian Church, or almost, just like one. To introduce them gently to our ways, in a framework they can understand.

The same is true of our divinity schools. They exist primarily to train a class of leaders who can talk to the Christians, who are trained to argue with them in their own terms.

You might say that they are experts in explaining our ways to White people.

It is a valuable skill, an important job. But training leaders who can talk to outsiders and anthropologists is not the same thing as training leaders who can minister to the needs of our own circle communities.

The 1999 survey of Unitarian Universalists reports that 90% of our current membership did not grow up UU. Our own people, the people who grew up inside our community, are for the most part not finding a home in our Sunday morning congregations. And why should we? They are not meant for us.

We are a Pagan people. Our real religious experiences we have when we are hidden out in the woods, or down in the church basement, or at midnight somewhere.

We have inherited from our Humanist traditions a story called the Progress of Human Civilization. This story says that Christianity was better than Paganism, the Protestants were better than the Catholics, and the Rationalists are better than the Protestants. Civilization and progress move us onward and upward away from our barbaric, tribal cave-man past. We evolve above and beyond our violent animal nature toward technology, spaceships, and world peace.

The Neo-Pagan movement, articulated through the feminist spirituality theorists, tells a different story, one called Honor the Old Religion. This story says that in the ancient past, before the arrival of the Patriarchal invaders, we lived in an earth-honoring culture. Women and sexuality were honored, as were children, and all people. Our religion celebrated the turning of the seasons, and differences were resolved in a Partnership rather than Dominator way. We used Power-From-Within, not Power-Over. Later, we were conquered by the Christian patriarchy, and all of that changed. We were forced to try and survive underground, in hidden places. To fight for freedom when we could, and pass on the culture of the circle as best we could, often in disguised or secret form. To do our best to survive, and to protect the ways of peace and Mother Earth.

This is related to the story that the Native American activists tell.

From an indigenous activist's viewpoint, the story of "civilization onward and upward" is absurd. Colonization by Europeans was not progress. It was destruction. The history of the tribe's interaction with the Christian-supremacist culture is a history of resistance.

UUs, too, are children of a history of resistance. We are descendants of people in Europe who fought for freedom, for the right to Power-From-Within rather than Power-Over. Our lineage has kept the spark of circle-based culture alive for two millenia. Sometimes we gained ground, sometime we lost it. Our struggle had different names at different historical moments. In the last few hundred years we have had some beautiful forward motion: the Unitarians gained us freedom from compulsory dogma, and the Universalists gained us freedom from Hell. The Transcendentalists rebuilt our access to nature mysticism, and the Humanists gained us final freedom from compulsory Christianity. The Feminists freed us from the bondage of male supremacy. Each generation carried the struggle for our human culture forward if they could. We have gained a lot of ground.

It is the task of the current generation to confront the dehumanizing power of compulsory Whiteness, to redeem our ethnic experience and tribal, circle-based ceremonies and rites of passage. If we do so, we can regain our ability to serve our young adults, and our true intergenerational community. And we can have a base of experience from which to make authentic human alliances with other tribes and the descendants of tribes, in our shared struggle against the forces of dehumanization and planetary destruction.