

Trickster Makes This World
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May 11, 2008

At my installation as your minister, the Rev. Matthew Crary of the Riverside Universalist Unitarian Church delivered what is called the "charge to the minister." He startled me and, as I recall, he startled a few of you by encouraging me to be a trickster. The trickster image came to him when he read this paragraph from a sermon that I had delivered a few weeks prior to the installation: "Ministers do not have the same scope of action that congregants have," I said. "Ministers have multiple roles, roles that sometimes conflict with each other, but the welfare of the congregation must be first and foremost. The trick is how to put the wellbeing of the congregation first, while still being an authentic human being who takes seriously the freedom of conscience that is part of our religious tradition."

What does trickster ministry look like? In the book *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art*, author Lewis Hyde writes that the trickster brings to life the playful and disruptive side of human imagination. Playful and disruptive are not precisely the first terms that come to mind to describe ministers and ministry . . . but perhaps they should be. For ministers, it comes naturally to be earnest, responsible, action oriented, and direct. Interim ministers are hired to be analytical, action oriented, and direct. Congregations in transition between called ministers need the direct communication that interim ministers provide. I very much enjoyed serving as an interim minister elsewhere, yet I have now chosen settled ministry, and you have chosen me. I shifted from interim ministry to settled ministry because I wanted a ministry offering the possibility of more joy, even at the likely cost of diminished short-term accomplishment.

The goals of interim ministry differ from the goals of settled ministry. Interim ministry looks inward, and settled ministry looks outward. Interim ministry is about getting the house in order, so to speak. Settled ministry is about the "radical hospitality" of welcoming the stranger and making the world a better place. "Making the world a better place" does not mean grandiosity. Being driven by grandiose plans is sustainable neither for individuals nor for a congregation. Yet during periods of settled ministry, healthy, growing congregations are focused outward. A

religious congregation is not a social club. According to the Rev. Peter Morales, *declining* congregations (not thriving congregations) describe themselves as being like a close-knit family. Such congregations are “imploding,” he says.¹

For an interim minister, trickster consciousness is optional. For a settled minister, trickster consciousness is mandatory. In the realm of mythology, the trickster was Hermes for the Greeks, Mercury for the Romans, often Coyote or Raven or Hare (Rabbit) for Native Americans, Krishna for Hindus, Eshu for the Yoruba in West Africa, and Legba for the Fon in West Africa.

According to Lewis Hyde in *Trickster Makes This World*:

“Once upon a time, the gods were closer to this earth; once they walked among us and sat at our tables. But that was long ago, long before the enduring divisions that shape this world were drawn. The Fon in West Africa call the female portion of their androgynous creator Mawu; she is the mother of the trickster Legba. In ancient days, when Mawu lived here on earth, Legba was her obedient servant. When he did a good deed the people ignored him and thanked Mawu, but when he did an evil deed the people blamed him directly, as if Mawu had nothing to do with it. Legba complained of this arrangement. Mawu replied that in governing the world it is best if the master be known as good and the servants be known as evil.

‘Very well,’ said Legba.

Now Mawu had a yam garden and Legba told her that thieves were planning to steal her crop. So Mawu assembled all the people and announced that anyone who stole from her garden would be put to death. That night Legba stole Mawu’s sandals and, wearing them on his feet, stole all her yams. When the theft was discovered, Mawu assembled the people and searched to find a foot that matched the footprints in her garden. When none could be found, Legba asked if Mawu herself might have come in the night and forgotten about it.

¹ The video clip of the Rev. Peter Morales saying this is included on a DVD produced by the Unitarian Universalist Association. The DVD contains excerpts from the fall 2007 conversations among 12 Unitarian Universalist ministers who are serving growing congregations. The Rev. Alice Mann of the Alban Institute facilitated the conversation.

‘Who, me? That is why I do not like you, Legba. I will measure my foot with that footprint.’
When Mawu put her foot down, it fit the print exactly.

The people began to laugh and shout, ‘The owner herself is a thief!’ Mawu was humiliated. She left the earth. She didn’t go very far, though – only about ten feet up. And Legba was still her servant: every evening he would come to her and give an account of the day’s activity and receive his instructions for the day that followed.

And again, whenever Legba did anything wrong, the people would blame him, and Mawu herself would join in the reproach. Irritated, Legba conspired with an old woman. Every evening after she had washed her dishes, this old woman would throw the dirty dishwater up into the air and soak Mawu with it. Angered, Mawu soon departed. Now she lives on high and Legba, her son, lives here on this earth.’²

The trickster aids in the evolution of consciousness. How can we become more adept at differentiation – psychological differentiation so that codependency lessens, intellectual differentiation so that bamboozlement lessens, moral differentiation so that we take fewer short cuts, and spiritual differentiation so that the risk of projecting our truth onto others lessens? Consciousness does not evolve through admonition. The Ten Commandments, for example, tend to evoke True Believers and True Resisters, black and white. In contrast, the trickster specializes in shades of gray – not the monochrome gray of the dishwater that soaks Mawu but the gorgeous grays of photographer Ansel Adams.

Tricksters have certain characteristics, according to Lewis Hyde in *Trickster Makes This World*: They are playful, not inclined to be obedient to parents. Tricksters are radically anti-idealist; tricksters stories are made by and for a world of imperfection (yet they are not tragic).³ Tricksters have the ability to create and work with contingency.⁴ For tricksters, it’s all about the

² *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art*, Lewis Hyde, North Point Press (a division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux), New York, 1998, p. 173.

³ p. 91

⁴ p. 97

lucky break.⁵ They make good use of the contingencies of life. They are prepared to jump on opportunities, to set traps and to rely upon the habits and character of others to spring the trap. Tricksters have no shame, and they break silence.⁶

The trickster can be an agent of harmless release or of radical change. The trickster knows how to slip the trap of culture.⁷ Trickster helps outsiders enter a group, change its structure, and give themselves a place at the table.⁸ Trickster does not control a lot in life, but hopes to.⁹ Trickster is a mischief-maker and thief. Through theft, trickster creates new meaning. Trickster revels in the pleasures of standing in the threshold.¹⁰ Trickster is a joint worker, one who shapes by disjoining parts and rejoining them in new ways.¹¹

Trickster stories aid in the evolution of consciousness. “Ideally the experience of such a story leaves the listener not so much freed from all constraints as freed from their tyranny and therefore more flexible and open to change,” says Lewis Hyde. “The teller of the tale offers up ‘Apollo and Hermes’ (or ‘the Chief’s Son and Coyote’ or ‘Yasoda and Krishna’) as open-ended symbols into which any listener can pour her own drama of transgression and containment and explore its possible resolutions . . . It is not so much trickster unifies the soul as that . . . [he] puts its powers in touch with one another across their necessary divides.”¹²

Trickster shows that indirectness can be a virtue. Trickster makes a way where there appears to be no way. The circuitous route, the long and winding road, the path that disappears into a forest may get us to where we *need* to go (though it may not get us to where we *want* to go).

“Indirectness is a mode of communication that allows for more information to be held in a whole,” according to Rita Nakashima Brock, who is the co-author of *Proverbs of Ashes*.¹³

⁵ p. 133

⁶ p. 153

⁷ p. 204

⁸ p. 207

⁹ p. 215

¹⁰ p. 227

¹¹ p. 257

¹² p. 266

¹³ My reference notes are not precise. I either heard Rita Nakashima Brock say this during my years on site at Starr King School for the Ministry (fall 2001 through spring 2004) or she wrote those words in *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us*, Beacon Press, Boston, 2002. Here is the link to

Dare we own the trickster within? Dare we become more adept at differentiating ourselves from parents, peers, and children? Differentiation is not disloyalty. On this Mother's Day, may we honor our mother (or her memory). As we honor her and *because* we honor her, may we not shy away from the difficult psychological task of being alone in the presence of the mother. May we own the trickster within ourselves and call forth the trickster within others. May it be so!