



# Hyphen-21

## Introduction

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

I have divided my answer into various sections, each of them offering one or another slant or perspective. Thus, the first section attempts to address the question directly. But also there is a story to tell, and this story is another part of the answer. So is the list of activities the charity engages in, which can be found on the charity's web-site. These are all part-answers contributing to a whole and at least one of the parts contains passages that could just as easily belong in other parts.

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

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

## So what is Hyphen-21 ?

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

Hyphen-21 is reasonably described by the contents of its web-site [www.hyphen-21.org](http://www.hyphen-21.org)

Hyphen-21's web-site records a number of initiatives which share a common values base which the charity seeks to promote. That values base can be found in the "Background Section" which can be accessed on the top left side of the Home Page of the web-site [www.hyphen-21.org](http://www.hyphen-21.org)

The initiatives the charity supports all have to do with achieving and enriching the connection between I and Other, thereby securing and strengthening the bindings of a community under strain – even though much of the work can seem to be restricted to obscure corners of the functioning of the welfare state. In a sense, each initiative serves in itself and through itself further to articulate and strengthen the general position and values-base the charity has taken. These initiatives are based as much on a philosophy of opportunism as any fixed plan, though particular budget applications do of course require detailed goal-setting and assessment indicators. Anyone can add their own contribution to the web-site, so long as at least two of the charity's members or advisors agree it is suitable, and in line with the charity's values base.

The charity seeks to oppose itself to all forms of fundamentalism (and there are very many of these, different enslavements to fixed slogan or mechanistic thinking, letter in preference to spirit, usually for the purpose of domination ; and they occur in all walks, not just in areas of

It falls to a hyphen  
to ride the storm  
the breaking of towers  
the slick intrusions  
of sell and spin.

formal faith) ; it seeks as well to support and form a mutually supportive network of people who oppose themselves to fundamentalism, and who wish to speak in terms harder to articulate and to live by than the oppressive and life-denying lout-languages of Slogan, Spin and Sell.

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

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

- “Poems for...” offers poem posters for display in healthcare settings and in schools. Recently the poster collections have concentrated on bilingual poems, celebrating diversity. The “Poems for...” idea has been extended recently to the Mayor of London Equalities Report 2007 ; and packs of the poems have been delivered to several UK embassies around the world. Also the project has received a commission from the Department of Health to produce an audio version of some of the bilingual poems.

Funding has come from : the Association of London Government, the Poetry Society, the Baring Foundation, NHS Estates, the King’s Fund, the Department of Health Equalities and Human Rights Group, the Foreign Office, the John Lewis Partnership and above all the Arts Council.

Recently Hyphen-21 was threatened with litigation by the director of another organisation that supplies poetry in healthcare settings. He accused Hyphen-21 of deliberately choosing a name similar to his own, in order to win benefit from the resultant confusion. At the time of writing it can be said that the litigation threat has been withdrawn, alongside various defamatory public statements.

- A code of professional conduct in mental health ward rounds and similar meetings. This code has been adopted by several NHS Trusts and has been commended by the Dept of Health. Properly implemented, the code results in ward rounds made more sensitive and respectful to the person at the centre of it, who is often in a very fragmented state. However, even in those Trusts that have adopted the code, implementation is patchy and incomplete, and to a depressing extent, efforts continue to be made by professionals to weaken the code and sabotage its power to improve the ward round experience for the person who’s the focus of it.
- A model for involving people with mental health problems in the interviewing of senior staff of mental health services, including Consultant Psychiatrists. The model entails a separate panel of service users, properly trained and supported. They assess candidates specifically on their relationship skills, skills that are marked as Essential Requirements in the post’s Person Specification. Therefore, if a candidate is seriously marked down by the user panel, that candidate will not be offered the job. To help them draw their conclusions, the user panel turns to findings from research by Truax and Carkhuff, Rogerian therapists. The research found that 50% of therapists fail to make any positive difference to the lives and well-being of their patients. The 50% who *are* effective have the following qualities in common : Warmth, Genuineness and Accurate Empathy. Those are the qualities that can bridge the gulf between Me and Thee, skills we can associate with “Goodness”. If

humanity as a whole, even 50 % of humanity, consistently deployed them, the ice-caps on the world's poles would not now be melting and Creation would be safe from us.

Many psychiatrists are not used to being tested for such qualities, or to the expectation that this aspect of their work requires high skill. The model was commended by CHI, the Dept of Health assessment service of a few years back. Despite the commendation, this model has not been widely implemented.

- Hyphen-21 has sought to alert senior NHS managers to the fact that the worryingly sloganistic, even mechanistic, NHS "Choice Agenda," requiring Care organisations to consult with and answer to healthcare patients as if the latter are just customers, and as if care itself is just a commodity in a box, often leads to careless, damaging and even dangerous management practice. The charity's efforts in this regard have so far been ignored.
- A paper on the Hyphen-21 web-site proposing a coherent strategy for sustaining care-staff morale and belief in their own skills appears also to have been ignored. It has been displayed on the web-site for years.

### Origins and some history

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

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

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

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

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

We must learn to give praise  
to the space between us

this miraculous air  
we house and inhabit

where connection  
may be arrived at.

I think with some confidence now  
to make precious

the space between us  
is humanity's last hope.

But at the time in question, even the slightly subdued version of social work practiced in the 80's felt menaced. Thatcherism was not in sympathy with social work's notions of community and social responsibility and social workers felt the political tide and language of the mainstream was running out on them. New legislation at that time seemed further to threaten the whole social work ethos, pushing its practitioners more into a resource management role, and further and further from a position of "standing alongside" the vulnerable human being.

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

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

These quite ordinary insights led to some local approaches and a great deal of letter writing. Still thinking in terms of a particular occupation, I coined a title - "Where Now for Social Work?" and came up with a programme for strengthening what seemed to be the essential elements of an occupation founded upon social responsibility - the need for a clear professional identity and firm self-belief; the need for a less defensive, more effective and independent public identity; and a suitable support-base that may not after all be that of a top-down hierarchical Town Hall bureaucracy. And I thought of a major national conference that would cover these main topics and seek to make real advances on them, that conference to be followed regularly by others, so that a position and authority would emerge, a real "movement" and momentum for social responsibility.

And in the last years of the Thatcher era, this idea made progress and won support, to the extent that it almost secured funding from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Anton Obholzer, Chair of the Tavistock Clinic gave it his public backing, as did various Directors of Social Services, various heads of social work courses, the ex-Bishop of Durham, the Association of Social Work Directors, the National Institute of Social Work, etc.

All that matters of me  
resides *outside* my skin

All of me that will ever count  
is what I am willing to pass on

I am a fog of un-meaning  
filling a skin these few seasons

It is the *meeting - points*  
of my story

that will mark my value  
and affirm my actuality.

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

The idea for Hyphen-21, then, emerged from my own deep depression following the failure of the Joseph Rowntree bid.

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

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

Quickly the whole notion that the charity had a "social work" focus faded. The profile or title of a particular profession acting in particular places and for particular times was actually not the point. A named profession is just a set of clothes which may or may not soon turn to rags. The form within the rags is what matters, the values and skills that apply everywhere and at all times.

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

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

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

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

The charity's first AGM took place in the old Bishop's Palace by the Thames, opposite Putney. About twenty people came. Various initiatives were agreed as appropriate to the new charity's aims and approach. Our long term goal, we agreed, was to make ourselves a web-site. A kind of modern-day pamphlet-station, a virtual printing press, a sort of confused and fumbling Fabian Society online.

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

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

We would define ourselves by what we did, what we recorded on the web-site. Our actions would paint our portrait, a task that would never be complete. Words alone are suspect and often hollow. And there are already so many words.

### Membership of Hyphen-21

A charity is legally required to have Trustees. These are responsible for overseeing how the charity is run. The obligations of a Trustee can be found on the web-site of the Charity Commission.

Until recently, Hyphen-21 had three Trustees. Following the threat of litigation mentioned earlier, and their securing of a signed settlement with the Plaintiff, two resigned. The Plaintiff had assured all three Trustees that they might have to pay ruinous sums in court costs, were Hyphen-21 to lose the threatened court case. The two who soon afterwards resigned had young children and one was breast-feeding. Following receipt of the plaintiff's letter, the breastfeeding Trustee visited her GP complaining of sleeplessness and stress.

The third Trustee is called Mary Young, an ex-psychotherapist aged 82. Mary took no part in securing the settlement, and merely told me to get legal advice and she would pay for it personally. The legal advice thus obtained gave assurances that the threat of litigation had no

A word written without much hope  
on a page without much future -  
I have no meaning.

But now other words enter the reckoning  
tapped out  
on our uncertain key-board.

Between us a hyphen  
like a high wire across the gulf.  
We have to make meaning together.

basis in reality, and the Trustees would not be liable to pay any legal costs. The advice also gave notice that there was anyway no legal case to answer. Mary Young remains a Trustee.

The following joined Mary as Trustees at an AGM held on....:

- David Morris, senior advisor on Disability to the Mayor of London.
- Mevlut Ceylan, poet.
- Caite Doyle, Community Psychiatric Nurse.
- Graham Thorp, recently retired from being Head of Music at a school in Guilford. (Graham has a planet named after him !).
- Pat Pegg-Jones, business consultant.

Over the years, another, less formal role has evolved around this charity, which can be called an Advisor role. This role has no legal standing or obligation, but results from my personal need for advice from time to time and wish for support from and accountability to, people I trust. The Advisor role is otherwise difficult to define, except that the people concerned know that I see them in this role and are willing to be named to each other ; I will send them quarterly bulletins before these go up on the web-site, in case they have comment or criticism. I might also go to them to act as editors if someone sends in something they want published on the web-site (no one ever has). I go to the Trustees for the same purpose, the only difference being their role has legal implications. I go to other friends or colleagues for some of the same purposes, the main difference being they may not know they are being consulted on charity concerns or initiatives, as such. I am just talking to them about a particular issue I have, as friends do.

The Advisors of Hyphen-21 are quite wide-spread and I name them here :

- Peter Smith, NHS manager, mental health, Hampshire
- Lynette Cawthra, librarian, ex King's Fund head librarian
- Lucy Aphramor, poet
- Debjani Chatterjee, poet
- David Hart, poet
- Sarah Wardle poet
- Chris Meade, ex-Director Poetry Society
- Dr. Kate Dawson, GP, Outer Hebrides
- Victoria Field, Writer and Poetry Therapist, former Chair of Lapidus and Director of Survivors Poetry.
- Nick Viney, ex-farmer, Isle of Purbeck
- Baffour Ababio, psychotherapist,
- Roger Chaffin, Professor of Psychology, US University
- Anne Sheridan, NHS social work manager

### Burmese Metta 2007

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

\*from the Buddhist "Metta Sutra" quoted by  
Burmese monks, Sept 2007

I intend to set up a quarterly meeting of London-based Trustees and Advisors. We should set aside a week-end day for it, and I can reserve a rather special house in the Surrey woods for the purpose – a sort of reflective away day, for good counsel and ideas-sharing. People interested so far are : Graham Thorp, Baffour Ababio, Caite Doyle.

I do not believe numbers have to be large. Phyllida Parsloe was a strong supporter of the number three for planning groups or working parties, with respect to quality of interchange and propensity for daring and creativity. Those small groups then report to the larger for check and balance.

I earlier applied this same theory to the charity's Trustee total, with the added incentives of keeping the overall visible shape of the charity extremely narrow of profile and light of foot. There was also my discovery that many people are simply wary of becoming Trustees, in case it involves them in more work than they have time for, problems they do not want, or liability that is frightening.

We have now discovered that liability is not a consideration in all but the most flagrant breaches and I have also been challenged on my negative approach to the Trustee issue, that it should not be seen merely as a requirement to be complied with as painlessly as possible, but an opportunity to form a wide network and community of involved and supportive participants. I am interested in this challenge and in exploring the thinking further. It sounds positive and unafraid.

### Funding

Hyphen-21 does not have a budget as such. Any funding that has come our way is for one project only, not the charity as a whole. That project is of course "Poems for..." Most of the other projects described on the web-site come from my work as a free-lance social worker, paid for separately and independently by local NHS Trusts. The projects are only described on the Hyphen-21 site because my Trustees and advisors have agreed they belong there as part of the charity's aims and in accord with its principles.

Funding for "Poems for..." comes from funding bodies, most often the Arts Council, to whom I must account for how I spend their money. The project pays me a monthly fee, at present on the basis of 1.5 days a week, not as an employee of the project but as a free-lance worker paying my own tax. Neither am I an employee of the charity, nor a Trustee. I am the Company Secretary and all the work I do specifically for the charity is unpaid. This work is mainly a matter of keeping the web-site up to date, writing the quarterly bulletins, doing the annual accounts, writing the annual report and arguing about the web-site design.

I ought in conclusion to name my eldest son Joseph. Joe has worked unpaid for Hyphen-21 for many years now. He manages the web-site.

*Rogan Wolf*