

Tribal Community, Universal Community

By

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As we move into the Millennium, there is a shift underway from *tribal* to *universal* community. Tribal community is the older pattern and is the experience of community through the lens of geographic proximity, ethnicity or religious background. Individuals who define their community in these terms tend to see their group in opposition to other groups. In addition, they tend to orient themselves more or less exclusively according to the values, beliefs and orientations of their tradition. In other words, they allow their sense of self to be formed and defined according to external authorities of their tradition.

People who experience universal community tend to see themselves as part of a larger whole, the experience of which transcends the regional or tribal framework in which they were born. While seeing things through a universal framework, they at the same time live in individuality and are inwardly directed. It is as if they simultaneously feel connected to a larger whole, yet are at the same time very much grounded in their sense of individual identity within that whole.

The key difference between the two orientations can be seen in their relationship to authority. For the tribal group, authority is something that comes from outside the self. It may come from the lineage leader, or more abstractly, from the tradition or dogma of the tribal unit. For the universal group, authority comes to be defined inwardly. The universal group insists on its right to know and interpret reality individually, and not as received, collected wisdom.

The shift from the tribal to universal community coincides with the appearance and development of global communications technology. As communications technology has evolved, it has become easier for individuals to see themselves as part of a global village that has values and beliefs and ways of living which to some extent transcend regional values, beliefs and ways of living. While living in the transcendent reality, it becomes easier to perceive what we have learned from our tribal traditions as a mere piece of the puzzle, rather than the puzzle itself.

Concurrent with the unifying tendency brought about in part by communications technology has been the breakdown of blind adherence to external authority and an insistence on individual definition. Implicit in this insistence on individual definition is a focus on individual responsibility. This focus, which represents a movement away from reliance on outer authority, can be seen in the growing numbers of people going outside of the sphere of established authority -- whether it be in healthcare, work or religion -- and making an attempt to find their own way.

In healthcare, this evolutionary movement is represented by the movement away from blind adherence to established medical practice and towards a kind of do-it-yourself form of healthcare, in which practitioners are more advisors than infallible authority figures. Likewise, in the workplace, there has been a slow breakdown of reverence for hierarchical management structures towards more cooperative ones. Similarly, the religious world in recent years has seen the global rise of new religious movements and the decline of the old. Even within traditional religions, there has been a deemphasis on dogma and a renewed emphasis on individual finding the truth through individual spiritual practice

As this evolution unfolds, it is likely that we will witness increasing clashes of values between tribal and universal tendencies. These clashes play out in the external sphere, for example between nationalist and universalistic groups. But they also play out internally, or within individuals. In this transitory period, many individuals may find themselves torn between the values and practices of the culture and/or region in which they were born and the emerging universalist order.

During this transitory phase, the social practices of the emerging, universalist community are still in the process of being defined. However these practices are defined, they probably will be built and informed by a set of values, which exist but have not been fully developed within the tribal order. These are the values of collaboration and consensus, which exist within the tribe in its relationships among its members, but are less evident in the tribe's relationships to others.

The practice of collaboration and consensus within the emerging universal community is likely to be a dynamic kind, fundamentally different from the stagnant forms that exist within current ecumenical or transnational movements. The emergent community will move beyond mere mutual respect of those with different cultures for one another towards a kind of dynamic interdependence, in which members fully interact and learn from one another. In other words, the peace as lived and practiced within the new emergent community will be enhanced, not compromised, by the multiple communities within the one community.