

**Living at the Neighborhoods of Boundaries:
Trickster at Work and Play**

The Rev. Duane H. Fickeisen and Ellen Buller¹
Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley
June 13, 2010

*“Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile,
a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment,
or the smallest act of caring,
all of which have the potential to turn a life around.*

— Leo Buscaglia

Opening Words
Ellen Buller

The impressive looking bird is Trickster, the Raven, an important character in native American legends.

Trickster creates and destroys; he fools others but usually get fooled himself. He is very clever and cunning but acts on impulse. ²“He knows neither good nor evil yet he is responsible for both. He possesses no values, moral or social, is at the mercy of his passions and appetites, yet



¹The Rev. Duane H. Fickeisen is parish co-minister and Ellen Buller is a lay Worship Associate of the Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley, PO Box 207, Boiling Springs PA 17007; 717/249-8944; www.uucv.net.

²

<http://www4.hmc.edu:8001/humanities/beckman/western/Trickster.htm>

through his actions all values come into being."

Trickster keeps us off balance and opens the door for creativity & invention. His rampant curiosity usually backfires, but, then, something new is discovered, though usually not what was expected.

Trickster is busy these days putting up "road construction" and "detour" signs. But if we never had to get off the highway and follow a meandering country road, we never would see the wildflowers, or be able to purchase farm fresh brown eggs, produced by chickens pecking around our feet.

If Trickster hadn't caused our car to break down in a small town deep in the south, I never would have had the gift of an entire afternoon, sitting in the shade of a magnolia tree, listening to a church gospel choir rehearse, followed by a dinner of the best fried chicken ever.

Sometime the unexpected twists and turns facing us are more profound and gut wrenching than a faulty carburetor: a parent with Alzheimer's disease; a child with a disability; physical or mental pain from illness or an accident.

I've always bristled at the platitude: "God never gives us more than we can handle." Instead of taking comfort, I find that statement condescending. And there's something unsettling in thinking that God sets up obstacles and breaks our hearts to see if we are up to the task, or if we'll break. Perhaps it's Trickster who challenges us, and it is God, in whatever form we embody him or her, who helps us find our inner strength.

Even though he may be motivated by his own selfish desires Trickster can do us a favor by forcing us to experiment, do something different, maybe even something forbidden.

So consider doing something backwards, break your own traditions and let the new in.

First Reading

from *Trickster Makes this World*

Lewis Hyde

The boundary is where [the trickster] will be found — sometimes drawing the line, sometimes crossing it, sometimes erasing or moving it, but always there, the god of the threshold in all its forms.

He is the adept who can move between heaven and earth, and between the living and the dead. ...[H]e is sometimes the messenger of the gods and sometimes the guide of souls. ... Sometimes it happens that the road between heaven and earth is not open, whereupon the trickster travels not as a messenger, but as a thief, the one who steals from the gods the good things that humans need if they are to survive in this world. ...

Every group has its edge, its sense of in and out, and trickster is always there, at the gates of the city and the gates of life, making sure there is commerce. He also attends the internal boundaries by which groups articulate their social life.

We constantly distinguish — right and wrong, sacred and profane, clean and dirty, male and female, young and old, living and dead — and in every case trickster will cross the line and confuse the distinction. Trickster is the creative idiot, therefore, the wise fool, the gray-haired baby, the cross-dresser, the speaker of sacred profanities.

When someone's sense of honorable behavior has left him unable to act, trickster will appear to suggest an amoral action, something right/wrong that will get life going again. Trickster is the mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence,

doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox.³

Sermon⁴

Duane Fickeisen

Trickster — the creative, amoral shapeshifter — has little patience; his fearlessness arises from naivete rather than courage; and he pays no attention to mercy or to comfort in his inevitable failures. He does not seek shelter from danger, beg for pain relief, nor let fear or cowardice stand in the way of action.

He is a dangerous character, living on the edge. We are drawn with fascination to edgy risk-takers, and we can learn something from them, though we ought to be careful.

Despite wily plans trickster is often the victim of an unexpected outcome. Yet somehow he emerges from misadventures — not quite unscathed — but patched back together and ready for the next opportunity to bust the boundaries. That resilience, which is possible in myth, is not so readily available to mortals.

Trickster is present in many cultures, often characterized as an animal considered to be clever, to stick its nose into other people's business, and to mimic others. Thus he takes on the form of Raven, Coyote, Rabbit, Monkey, and Spider in different places. In Norse folklore, the god Loki is the trickster. Think Bart Simpson, Wylie E. Coyote's adventures laying traps for Roadrunner, or Br'er Fox and Br'er Rabbit.

Trickster is almost always male. He has a great, insatiable appetite. His constant hunger for sex, food, and novel adven-

³ Lewis Hyde. *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art*. (New York: North Point Press, 1998) pp. 7-8. Adapted and rearranged.

⁴ ©2010 Duane H. Fickeisen, Boiling Springs, PA

ture is the source of trouble as he schemes to feed his hedonistic desires. Many trickster stories mention things usually off limits in polite company, emphasizing the boundary-crossing nature of trickster. The stories often involve a penis, vulva, anus, or excrement — or all four. Because trickster is amoral, he displays no shame or concern about the effects of his actions. He is self-referential, with almost no regard for the good of the community. Sure sometimes he brings back valuable boon that benefits us. He doesn't do it for our benefit, but rather for his own, or just for the adventure of it.

Trickster's misadventures call into question assumptions we make about what is foolish, what is out of bounds, and how things are in the world. He invites us to work and play in his neighborhood, at the boundaries; away from the relative safe (and sometimes boring) orthodoxy of the middle. He lures us to ignore caution, to break the rules, to challenge the status quo.

So we feel a push-pull with trickster. The wise are cautious in every dealing with him; alert to danger and risk and remembering that he really doesn't care about our welfare, yet sometimes is right.

Trickster doesn't edit himself. He tells complete lies without guile and speaks when and in ways that are least appropriate. The Salish of Idaho have a story about Coyote that illustrates this:

"I will be the Sun-god," declared Coyote, and the people allowed him to try. He took the Sun-lodge across the sky. But he watched everything that the people did. Seeing people in secret love, he yelled down to them, much to their embarrassment. He told on those who were hiding. The people were glad when that day was over. They lost no time tak-

ing Coyote from the Sun-lodge.”⁵

Sometimes allowing shame to strike us dumb is a good thing. Other times it can get us into trouble. Tripitaka, a venerable Buddhist monk, travels with Old Monkey, the trickster. When villagers offered Tripitaka a woman, “he bowed his head and fell into complete silence.” Monkey, of course, would not have been struck dumb at such an offer. Each time they encounter evil, Tripitaka is unable to speak. He is so kind that he fails to see through the disguise of monsters in masks who seek to block their passage. So Monkey begs, “Master, please put away your compassion just for today! When we have crossed this mountain, you can be compassionate then.”⁶

Too much virtue can be a problem just as we’ve noticed that complete lack of virtue can result in trouble. Monkey’s intervention is toward moderation and balance. But notice that it serves Monkey’s desire to get going and not be delayed.

Even though trickster may get us into trouble, we are attracted to adventure, to the creativity and the erotic charge that comes with living at the edge.

Consider, for example, the realm of the arts. A few examples of the creative boundary crossers include artists who combine media in new ways, explore whole new realms of expression, and bring us fresh insights as a result. Andy Warhol, Jackson Pollack, Mark Rothko, and Van Gogh reflect trickster’s influence. Or consider rock and roll, jazz, and rap in the realm of popular music. All of them crossed boundaries of conventionality. John Cage, Steve Reich, Phillip Glass, and others have brought us new and sometimes disturbing ways of expe-

⁵ Hyde, op cit. p. 153.

⁶ Hyde, op cit. p. 153-4.

riencing life through sound. Great cooks who were influenced by trickster have explored the fusion of elements from different cuisines to create something completely different, often with wonderful results.

Or consider explorers. The Vikings who found Newfoundland or Labrador and established a settlement there around a millennium ago ventured far beyond their usual fishing grounds in search of something unknown. Or Columbus and his crew who 500 years later sailed past the assumed edge of the world to discover the already occupied West that then became the “New World” to them.

The settlers who left from Carlisle or St. Louis to start over in the frontier west must have felt some of trickster’s lure. One of my great grandmothers is alleged to have been the first white baby born in the Oregon Territory. This no doubt conveniently ignores the undocumented pregnancies of native women inseminated by earlier white explorers — surely there were some. Nevertheless, my great great grandmother had been pregnant on the wagon train, which had to have been a challenge to say the least. Danger and opportunity seem more often than not to be wed to each other.

Another boundary that trickster challenges is our penchant for dividing the world into binary categories. Good/bad. True/false. Male/female. Straight/gay. Rich/poor. Black/white.

Consider gender. Trickster is a shapeshifter able to change his appearance even across species or to become a pine needle or a stone. He’s the archetypical cross-dresser. Maybe the boundaries are not as fixed as we assume, Maybe male and female are not exclusive and binary— not as simple as whether or not someone has two XX chromosomes or an X and a Y. Maybe gender is not even a polarity where each of us

falls somewhere on a continuum from male to female, but rather can best be represented by two scales, one of relative femaleness and the other of relative maleness, and maybe the degree that we express each is variable over time.

People whose gender is ambiguous are viewed in some cultures as having special abilities to connect with the spirit world in order to benefit the community. Thus androgyny is a common characteristic of shamans in many traditions. While the shaman hopefully does not share trickster's amorality, there are parallels in their ability to travel between realms.

Or consider this story from West Africa's Yoruba culture. Eshu who is a god of crossroads and trickery, often poses difficult choices in the service of teaching.

Eshu made a cloth cap. The right side was black and the left side was white. Two friends were working their land, one hoeing on the right side of the road, and the other clearing brush on the left side. Eshu came by on a horse, riding between them, wearing his cap. He greeted each of them warmly.

Later the friends stopped for lunch and sat together in the shade of a tree. The one who had been clearing brush asked, "Did you see the man with a white cap? He was very pleasant, wasn't he?"

The other responded, "Yes, he was charming, but it was a man in a black cap, not a white one." They fell into argument.

"You must be blinded by the hot rays of the sun to take a white cap for a black one!" The fight escalated and the neighbors came running but could not stop the uproar. Then Eshu returned, pretending not to know what was going on, and he asked what the cause was of the hullabaloo.

One of the neighbors said, "Two close friends are fighting.

They seem intent on killing one another, but they won't stop and tell us the reason they are fighting. Please do something before they destroy each other."

Eshu stopped the fighting and asked, "Why do you two lifelong friends make a public spectacle of yourselves in this manner?"

One of the them said, "A man rode through the farm, greeting us as he went by. He was wearing a black cap, but my friend tells me it was white and that I must be tired or blind or both." The second one said that the man had been wearing a white cap and that one of them was mistaken, but it was not he who was wrong.

Eshu responded, "Both of you are right. I am the man who greeted you." Then he reached in his pocket and showed them the hat with two sides. "Are you not the two friends who made vows of friendship? When you vowed to be friends always, to be faithful and true to each other, did you reckon with Eshu? Do you know that he who does not put Eshu first in all his doing has himself to blame if things misfire?"

In other versions of the story, it is two whole villages that fight and destroy each other. In a Cuban version, Eshu becomes a white man with hair and a beard on one side of his body and a black man who is clean-shaven and bald on the other.⁷

We have seen trickster in many roles, questioning our binary view of the world, fetching boon back from across a boundary, teaching by goading people to act in ways that court disaster, and illustrating, either by intent or unintentionally, the folly of shameless amorality.

⁷ Hyde, op. cit., pp. 238-240.

We are enticed to work and play at the boundaries, to break the rules and tap into the creative energy there. Whether we follow and how far we follow is a matter that should be moderated by balance, values, and principles. To forget that trickster does not care about our best interests can lead us to take risks we ought not take, to act in ways that cause trouble for ourselves and others. He's like the drunk who entices you to drink with him. We must account for Eshu. And yet... sometimes it is wise to follow. What gives the trickster his mystery and power is that we can never know for certain when we ought to follow to and beyond the boundary and when we had best stay on more conventional and safe ground.

Here we are on the boundary of summer. As the solstice comes and passes, the days will soon start to grow shorter. We experience the hot and humid days, alternating with cool and pleasant breezes, and the electric fireworks and deluges of summer storms. Gardens and farms are lush with beauty and abundance. School's out. Vacations and travel lie ahead for some of us. Several among us are recovering from surgeries that have hopefully restored mobility, vision, and health. So it is a time when we'll be hanging out at boundaries, perhaps considering changes and experiencing the creativity of the summer muses. Time to attune to trickster and to reaffirm the values and principles that distinguish us from his amoral stance.

How will you respond when trickster shows up this summer?

One more story: More than 20 years ago I went on a personal vision quest high in the Goat Rocks of the southern Cascade Mountains in Washington State. I backpacked into one of my favorite mountain landscapes — a rugged and wild knife-

edge ridge that divides two glaciers.

Late on the afternoon of the first day I stopped to camp in a meadow just below the last steep climb to the ridge. The few trees there are wizened veterans of winter, grown twisted in the thin soil among the rocks. I pitched my tent on one of the few small level spots around, close to a babbling small snow-melt stream. Raven perched on the nearest tree limb and announced his presence as he waited for an opportunity to steal some food. He was still there when I crawled out of my tent the next morning to make coffee and oatmeal.

After breakfast, I put water, my lunch, my journal, and a jacket into the knapsack and climbed the last mile to the ridge top. It was a beautiful, blue-sky day and the sun was quite warm. Raven followed closely.

When I reached the top, I sat on the ridge, facing east toward the morning sun. Steep cliffs both in front of and behind me fell off to valley floors far below. Raven perched nearby.

I had come to contemplate whether or not to respond to the call I was feeling to ministry. I had done a lot of homework, consulted with other members of the UU congregation where I was a lay leader, with close friends, and with the ministers who had been my mentors. I knew it was a crazy idea, that it would involve casting off a career in research science, a vested retirement plan and good benefits. I had at least some sense of the sacrifices that would be required to become credentialed and ordained. I was both eager to pursue the call and frightened of it. I had as much information as I might ever get. It was time to make a decision — to follow the call or to let it go. Not all calls are ones we should pursue, after all.

I knew about Raven's role as Trickster, knew some of the stories told by the first peoples of the Northwest, and knew that it was dangerous to consult the Trickster — that his an-

swers might not be trustworthy.

But I asked him anyway. To my surprise, he answered clearly in ways that helped me understand what I had already decided, but had not yet articulated, even to myself. I was going to pursue the call.

The next morning I awoke and Raven was right there again. He stayed close by as I packed up, and then he followed me as I hiked out the several miles back to the trail head at the end of the road. We talked all the way, and I knew I had been blessed with his presence and wisdom. But why did I imagine that he was also a caring being, one who might have my well-being in mind? Nah, couldn't be. Just a hungry bird following me and my projections, no doubt. But still...

Image: Common Raven (Corvus corax) in the Santa Fe Valley. Photograph by Peter Wallack. Used with permission.