

Another Strike for the Tribe

by Karl Donaldsson

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I was flipping through my mail, which typically includes many messages from an Ásatrú listserv (mailing list on the internet). One topic popped up, which I feel must be addressed. What exactly is Ásatrú as far as a common identity is concerned? We frequently call ourselves a tribal religion, but what tribe? And what is the religion?

A long time ago, wandering the earth, were a bunch of people who were one hair shy of brachiating through the forest canopy. These people assembled in clusters for survival and companionship. There were no set rules, but generally each of them respected the others' territory, space, and possessions. After a few families lived together for a few generations, they became a clan, and many clans formed a tribe. Each family had the head or heads of the house, and the same for the clans, and the same for the tribe. All of this structure was accomplished with a minimal speaking language amongst a bunch of hunter-gatherers, with no written language, no concept of democracy, and no basis for comparison other than "this is what my ancestors did."

More recently, these tribes began giving way to nations. Family was family, but clans were neighborhoods, or provinces, or geographical locations because we did more farming and less nomadic herding. We were attached to the land. So, borders at this river and that mountain and this ocean and that cliff were formed, along with kings and queens for tribal leaders, counts and viscounts for clan leaders, and barons for family leaders. Families were all the people of blood and all their servants and helpers and warriors, clans were in the hundreds of people, and nations in the thousands.

Today, the kings and queens are gone, and prime ministers and presidents and governors and mayors are in. We have congresses and parliaments and colleges and electorates for the counts and viscounts. But now, families are back to the blood, and are mobile, independent units operating in a governmental framework. The clan chiefs change when you move, but the tribal leader remains the same, because they're all anchored well by geography (farming) by now. Because of this, each family has problems identifying with a clan, and the members of the family are aware of this.

When you hear about a murder in your home town on the news, what do you do? You watch the police report, maybe tell a friend, and that's it. 1000 years ago, you'd be grabbing your axe and out the door, screaming at all the local families that you all must get a posse together, fast, and hunt down this vicious bastard. The victim was your buddy from wherever, or you heard of him through another friend, and you must all avenge his death. 3000 years ago, if you knew of someone getting killed, chances are you shared a common ancestor within 5 generations, and he was definitely to be avenged. 5000 years ago, he was the guy who helped build your hut, and you his, and you grew up together, and hunted and warred together. It was losing a brother.

It was pointed out to me that what makes the people in Ásatrú like the term "tribe" is the closeness it implies. However, the individualism within Ásatrú is characteristic of a nation, not a tribe. So what do we call ourselves? How can Ásatrú be tribal when there can be no tribe?

I respond with the notion that the concept of tribe, according to the ancient definition, is completely obliterated, but the modern version is alive and healthy, and can imply and convey the same closeness as those tribes used to. The concept of social arrangement has been changed. We're all the same, people all over, but some lead and others follow. Some elect, and some run for election. Those elected are just normal Joes like the rest of us, and our opinion of them is just as crucial to them holding that office as was a tribal chieftain. But, we now have a different amount of management levels, and the tribe is massive, comparatively. We have families in

neighborhoods, neighborhoods in townships, townships in cities, cities in counties, counties in states, states (or provinces) in countries (nations), countries in continents, and continents in the world. The problem is that we're trying to equivocate tribe to country or nation, where we should be better off equivocating them to townships. Think of *that* as your tribe! Kinda puts the influence you have in perspective -- If you like in my neighborhood, I can walk to your house, and talk, make friends, whatever. After all these families live together for a decade or two, that neighborhood is stronger, because your kids are playing with my kids at the same playground we were playing at. That's the closeness we seek for comfort, companionship, safe streets, all that stuff. Then when neighborhoods get together in the town, we can control all the stuff we need to live and work -- groceries, gas stations, good streets, stoplights, schools, playgrounds, fire stations, and the like. There should be no need for any other levels of government, unless you want that.

And, we do. We love being this huge nation. I like Coke, I like McDonald's, Levi's, Excedrin, Honda Accords, OreIda frozen foods, and Sony Playstations. I couldn't have that neat stuff if all those other levels of government above it didn't exist. But remember, it's all superficial -- it means nothing, and we don't need it to survive, but it *is* really nice to have. It's what separates us from our ancestors -- we aren't more developed, just our concept of government.

So, where does that leave us? Well, I suggest we follow the ox to the plow field. If we want to make our community better, we need to be a part of it. Get to know your neighbors. Know your township. Sounds pretty easy, but with all the moving we do, it's hard to build those ties. And that's why we are in the boat we are today, if you consider the nation somewhat deteriorating. We don't move with the tribe, because it's no longer nomadic, and we migrate by families, while the clans and tribes stay put, locked into a location. The tribe deteriorates because the clan keeps losing bits and pieces, because families move away and new ones move in and choose not to participate locally. The castle crumbles because the bricks are disappearing from the walls.

What can we do to save the tribe? Well, until we put the power of the people back in our hands, we can do nothing. Most people move from one place to another because they go to college, then maybe get a job in a place different from where they grew up, far enough away they aren't part of that community anymore. Others move away because the massive corporation they want to work for has it's home away from yours, so you have to make a new home. And when they discard you, you have to make a new home again. Making new homes like that is very exhausting, just ask a guy who moved twelve times in three years. Finally, people move because they don't like the place where their parents grew up or they themselves grew up. This is commonly referred to a "moving up in the world," and is commonly done because there is no keep the family lives in, no countryside they inhabit, but a single, small house. If parents want their kids to live with them when they grow up, they better get a keep or a stronghold, because sharing adjoining walls with parents is generally a bad plan. And then, when the grandkids grow up, they'll have room too. But, it doesn't work that way, because generally the job you have or the job you want moves you away, making the need for anything other than a simple house unnecessary.

If we can't build stationary families to improve the community, the only last resort is to build better people. Some might point out this catch-22 saying good people come of good families and good communities. Well let me tell you what -- since it seems this building a better family is the key to better communities, the key to better people, and the key to a better tribe, it's probably the key to a better nation. I was lucky enough to come from a good family in a good community, so what I can bring with me to a new community should be that good stuff to share around. So, while we may not have stationary families, we can have good families that will only add to the benefit of the community we move into. And that's something we have better influence over than the state of the nation. A ground-up approach to a better world has to begin with each person.

So, while there are no tribes left to speak of, we can still foster closeness and community within our culture and society in many ways. As Ásatrúar, we can begin that linking of families to a clan by linking hearths to a kindred. Kindreds in a region can form the basis of a tribe. Each hearth can bring goodness to its neighborhood, each kindred to a city, and a tribe to a state or states. Of course, this isn't the sort of thing that can happen overnight, but this is the method we must use to ensure that there is Ásatrú to be found for generations to come. Previous movements to revive the Norse heathen faith have failed, and I believe they failed because they lacked the fundamental unit of Ásatrú: the family. While my wife may be Christian and I am Ásatrú, any children we may have will be aware of both, and will choose the path they feel is right for them. They can make an educated decision, not grow up like I did thinking there were no other faiths and religions. As the word of Ásatrú spreads, hopefully in a good fashion by the doing of good deeds in the community, its name will not die out again. Although Ásatrú is not right for everyone, there will always be the gods of my ancestors for them to celebrate if they so choose.

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