Aug. 28 WHOSE ARE WE

The UU Ministers Association (UUMA) has invited each district’s minister chapter to consider the theological question, ‘Whose Are We?’ as a means of spiritual deepening as well as intimacy building in sharing our reflections on this question, with our ministerial colleagues. Today, we will explore what this question invites us all to consider, as a means of deepening and connecting. As Unitarian Universalists who have different understandings of what is ultimate, how can we learn to contemplate and to communicate about our beliefs without trying to convince?

Worship Leaders: Rev. Wendy Bartel & Rev. Lynn Gardner
Worship Associate: Lisa Trankley

Whose Are We? shared with the Sierra Foothills Unitarian Universalists in Auburn, CA (permission granted by all authors to post to the UUMA website)

For us the sermon/reflections are just one element in a Sunday morning service. So, to put these words in some context-the story for all ages was The Old Woman Who Named Things by Cynthia Rylant, we shared a meditation which contained All the Hemispheres by Hafiz (trans. D. Ladinsky), and hymns #1040, #318, #402, and #1051.

REFLECTIONS Whose Are We? Lisa Trankley, Rev. Lynn G, Rev. Wendy B

Lisa Trankley: Today we are asked to reflect on the question, “Whose are we?” “Whose am I?” Who are we, who am I, accountable to? In many churches, the answer to that question would be simple: God or Jesus or some Truth-with-a-capital-T. As Unitarian Universalists, however, we look for our own, individual spiritual paths and truth, truth-with- a-little-t. As the Rev. Burton Carley, observed, “We come together to share right relationship rather than right beliefs.” So for many of us, a ready answer to the question of “Whose are we?” is: We belong to each other. It’s our principle of the Interdependent Web. Unitarian Universalists are well known for our reaching out not only to those in our congregations, but to those outside as well. In our own congregation we have a clothing and shoe drive going, assistance with an English Language program, support of the Chalice Lighters Program, and members volunteer at the Food Closet and the Gathering Inn-just to name a few. And each new member is encouraged to find a way to serve the larger community as part of their commitment and part of living their faith. We are givers. I chose my own career, environmental law, and the cases and causes that I argue, because of a desire to make the world a better place.
While we are reaching out to others and supporting others, while we are being accountable to others, I’d like to suggest that we also remember to be accountable to ourselves. We Unitarian Universalists can be so generous of our time and so focused on giving to others, that we can risk forgetting about our own needs. Whose are we? We belong to ourselves as well as to others, and we have to set loving boundaries and limits for ourselves. At times we have to say, in Rev. Lynn’s words, “Not my table!”

So when we contemplate how to be in right relationship with others let us not forget that we also have to be in right relationship with ourselves. This takes self-awareness, being in touch with our feelings and needs, and finding ways to honor those without assuming that everyone else shares them. Unless we nourish our selves as well as we nourish others, we risk being unable to nourish anyone at all.

*the Rev. Lynn Gardner:*

Last fall, at the district minister’s gathering, each of us was asked to find a partner, and spread out throughout the room. We sat, knee to knee with colleagues that we knew, or that we were just meeting. We were taking part in a conversation that was happening all over the United States and Canada… Unitarian Universalist ministers were getting together and asking themselves and one another, “Whose Are We?” To whom are you accountable? Who do you share a history with? To what and to whom are you connected? How do we answer these questions as a congregation or a denomination?

And so we began…. With one partner asking, “whose are you?” When an answer would bubble up and be shared, and the questioner offered a blessing, and then repeated the question… Whose are you? …..and the next answer and a blessing. Whose are you?

Now, our language may get in the way of the deepest meaning of this question. This is not asking about ownership…. which is one of the ways that the word “whose” can be used. It also has a meaning of relationship, of connection. English grammar can imply ownership, even when we are actually speaking of relationship. For instance, I might refer to my daughter… but I certainly don’t own her.

When I heard the question, “whose are you”, I didn’t hear it asking about possession, but about accountability. Like Lisa, one of my answers was, “myself.” And while that is part of the truth, it is not the entire story. “Whose are you?” inspired a web of connections… and at the end of five minutes I was weeping and grateful for the roots that have nurtured me… for family, for friends, teachers, the earth, for four different UU congregations, and for Spirit… I know whose I am. For me that feeling is similar to floating on my back in the Yuba river… looking up at the clear blue sky and the green of the trees. The water is invigorating, refreshing, and supporting. When I remember whose I am I feel very much alive.

If we lived in Southern Africa, we might begin by answering this question from a different angle. Rather than starting with the individual, we might have begun with the community… whose are we? One of the words and humanist philosophies expressed in the Bantu languages is Ubuntu… the essence of being human. Ubuntu is translated as “I am what I am because of who we all are.” ArchBishop Desmond Tutu wrote that a person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for (they) have a proper
self-assurance that comes from knowing that (they) belong in a greater whole and are diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed.

Ubuntu speaks particularly about the fact that you can't exist as a human being in isolation. It speaks about our interconnectedness. You can't be human all by yourself. Nelson Mandela addressed the relationship between the individual and community. He said, Ubuntu does not mean that people should not enrich themselves. The question therefore is: Are you going to do so in order to enable the community around you to be able to improve?

What if we each asked ourselves that regularly? What if corporations regularly asked, “will this investment or product enable the community around us to improve?” Wendy and I have been witnessing an increasing awareness of connections within and beyond this congregation as decisions are being made here…. a greater sense of accountability to one another, and greater understanding that we are not isolated… our choices and activities do in fact create ripples… ripples that can be gentle and flowing or crash into one another in destructive ways. We can never be sure who will be touched by our words and actions. Each time we hike in the canyon I think of those who, over two centuries, have created and walk those trails. I don’t know all of their names, but their efforts have an impact on my life. Likewise, I don’t know who will be walking along behind me…

So whose are you? The old woman in the story knew that it is a risk to articulate our relationships. She wanted to protect herself from more loss and grief. Acknowledging our connections can also be a risk… because we open ourselves up to imperfections and expectations… we see, even for just a moment, our own sweet, tender human longings.

We have heard from many of you that it is a goal of this congregation to move to called ministry. To whomever that call is extended, it is important to acknowledge the shift in relationship for the congregation. There is a deeper level of commitment for all parties in a called ministry, than in a signed contract. In some ways, you will be offering someone a new name. You will be opening the door for the congregation to explore the “whose are we” question in a much deeper way.

For now, I invite you to risk a little inquiry…. Whose are you? What are the names that are written on your heart? To whom or what are you accountable? Either keeping the answers within you, or allowing them to come out with the softest whisper, I ask, Whose are you? ………………. Whose are you? Whose are you? With gratitude for all that we hold, and for all that holds us, for who we are, and for whose we are.

*the Rev. Wendy Bartel* [spoken word format-some spoken, some rhythmic, some sung]

Whose am I?
Whose are we?
Sensing, deeply knowing
there’s more to life than capital M-me

Whose am I?
I am not the walrus
but I am you and you are me
and we are all together

Inhaling in, exhaling out
Air that we breathe
held in the hummingbird
shared by the trees

Seriously, now
Whose am I?
This thea/ological quest
I must now try, then fly,

with a sigh that goes back to that shared air
hold up, wait, stand by… [pause listening]

The Great Spirit of Life is asking
or is the divine answering?
I’m not sure what to say
yet I know what to bring

My whole self comes to this pulpit
Asking you for your whole self too
And though we are all broken, not whole
We [gesture to all] still can seek pieces of truth

Together we search
try to speak the ineffable
Can you feel it in here?
This web it is palpable.

Whose are you? who who? who whose? [sing from The WHO]

Each one of you can answer this question.
Whose am I? and then Whose are we?
Unitarian Universalism, at its best,
does not require our conformity.

Jesus and Buddha and
Muhammad taught peace
So did Mother Theresa,
Martin King and Gandhi

reminding us that the means
best not be mean
for the way to peace
is through peaceful means
you know what I mean?

When we ask Whose?
It isn’t about possession.
Belonging to another?
-I’m not talking about obsession.
or the strangle hold of fear-filled oppression
What we might need is a collective confession or to engage one another in a long-lasting profession of ... Love

[read in conversational style tone]
The kind of capital L Love that I know... is holding me, is holding you, right now, right here. You can call it whatever you want—or let it be beyond naming—or not be sure there is an ‘it’ to name. Cultivating healthy boundaries is part of this Love. Caring for your self is part of this Love. Compassionately engaging in honest conversations with one another is too. Spiritual practices such as meditation, prayer, mindfulness, and activities which bring us together in meaningful ways—such as this gathering here this morning, are some of the ways to be grounded in this love.

Most of us, perhaps all of us in this room have either been given or have given ourselves messages that contradict what I know to be true, that my faith knows beyond a shadow of a doubt, that my religious identity as a Unitarian Universalist calls me to live every single day—that in our brokenness, we can become whole through our personal, communal, and spiritual work. That while our choices and behaviors may not always be aligned with our highest selves, we are still inherently worthy and invited back into right relationship if we are ourselves, willing to begin again in love. We can dare to reconnect to what was true the day you were born and has been true every day since...[sing] How could anyone ever tell you, you are anything less than beautiful? How could anyone ever tell you, you are less than whole? How could anyone fail to notice that your loving is a miracle? How deeply you’re connected to my soul. (Libby Roderick)

How deeply we’re all connected to one another, to every other living being, to the stars, the planets, the dust that was once dinosaur bones, the air that Shiva breathed, we impact one another, often more than we realize. As what we know, changes, it can be disorienting, even scary—learning a new way to speak and to listen without arguing or convincing when that is what we have known how to do... losing a job, ending a relationship, moving into a new home, losing a loved one to illness or death. Sometimes, changes can be exhilarating-like the first time you learned to read or to ride a bicycle, the first time you made a free-throw or threw a great party. A new job or retirement. A new degree or hobby. A new relationship or one that has received a little TLC... Change is a necessary part of life, of evolution. Rev. Lynn spoke about Faith, Doubt, and Certainty a few weeks ago. Today, we invite you to the interstitial places on the threshold between what we think we know and what might actually be.

Whose are we when we don’t all share the same belief in God, capital G, when we don’t all agree on what is ultimate? One move along the path, is to listen, now not the listen until you hear something you agree or disagree with and then start thinking about what you want to say in support or rebuttal. No, rather I mean to really listen and be able to hold multiple truths and complex notions that may seem to be in opposition. Or in the words of author and poet Mark Nepo who ‘devotes his writing and teaching to the journey of inner transformation and the life of relationship’...(thank you Val Bowman for introducing this person to me...)

He says, “To listen is to continually give up all expectation and to give our attention, completely and freshly, to what is before us, not really knowing what we will hear or what that will mean. In
the practice of our days, to listen is to lean in, softly, with a willingness to be changed by what we hear.”

Whose are we? To whom are we accountable? With whom are we inextricably bound through history and experience?

We are all connected…belonging, accountable, joined, linked, related, partnered, together in the chorus of life-‘we would be one as now we join in singing our hymn of love, to pledge ourselves anew to that high cause of greater understanding of who we are, and what in us is true. We would be one in living for each other to show to all a new community.’

Hispanic Heritage month is not just for Hispanics/Latinos/Latinas/Chicanos/Chicanas-it is about honoring the many contributions of Hispanics the whole world has benefited from despite colonization and forced immigrations—it’s about all of us. African American history month is not just about Black history—it’s about remembering one another’s humanity despite slavery, segregation, miscegenation, incarceration and the ongoing marginalization of people—it’s about all our history and how we might find a way to recognize that none of us is free if any single one of us is oppressed. Pride parades are not just about LGBTQ identity—despite the beatings and murders, the bullying and lack of equal rights, it’s about all of us affirming and celebrating this gift of love and pleasure and relationship that comes in many healthy forms and sings to the universe who we are, whose we are.

Moving from the self-oriented question of Who am I? and to the deeper question of Whose am I? ‘I greet myself in my thousand other forms.’ as Hafiz said and the answer becomes clear…

Whose am I not?

The answer to ‘Whose are we?’ becomes that much more meaningful when we fully live into the consciousness of what the word ‘We’ actually means.

[spoken word again to echo the earlier phrase of this]

Together we search
try to speak the ineffable
Can you feel it in here?
This web it is palpable.

OFFERING
Lisa: Whose are we? To whom do we belong? One answer to that question is that we belong to each other. One of the ways we can support each other in this church is through our financial generosity. We will now accept the morning offering to support the ongoing work of this congregation, and its shared ministries, nourishing the lives of all of us.

(After the offertory) Thank you for your generous gifts.