I do not have a Personal Relationship with God.
I’ve lost his phone number;
he never answers his mail.
We did not, as young men,
hang out on Wednesday nights,
cigarettes dripping from our lips,
at pool halls.
He is not there like an old neighbor
to fix my broken lawn mower
and hand me a soda
on a blazing hot day.
When I rip my shin on a jutting shelf
and cry out his name,
he does not rush to me
with Band-Aids and peroxide.
He does not, at times of vexation,
when my world lies shattered,
my relationships ruptured,
my children insolent,
my finances hopeless,
come with soothing counsel to my side.
He does not take my requests
like a long-distance dedication
on America’s Top Forty,
or deliver within five business days
or my money back on my catalogue order—my business is not important to him.
I do not have a personal relationship with God.
But in quiet moments
in the familiar whistle
of a red-winged blackbird on a cattail,
or in spider webs glinting with dew
in the grass of a clear sunrise,
or the passing attention of an old cat
He/She/It/Whatever does not speak
or do
or answer
but admits me to fleeting union
with the Greater.

Sermon
It’s been quite a week, a real roller-coaster ride. It started with that devastating crash at the Reno Air show. Then right after that came the long-awaited repeal of our military’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy. The very next day came the news of two state-sponsored executions, right on the heels of footage of the release of two young Americans from the Iranian prison they had been held in for two years. And then came the news of two deaths in our congregation. It’s hard to hold all of it. It’s good to be with you today, to feel held by this community.

There was something else interesting in the news this week, and that was God. I’m always a little surprised when God gets on CNN. God was reported to have saved at least one person from being struck and killed by debris from the crash at the air show in Reno. This woman, who was being interviewed, was understandably grateful to God for saving her life. I felt sorry for those whom God had decided to kill instead of her. This got me thinking that if God lived in Texas or Georgia he would be eligible for the death penalty.

Then on the same morning God came up again, in a survey that was just published by Baylor University, called “The Values and Beliefs of the American Public.” The survey revealed that most Americans, about 70%, agree or strongly agree with the statement that “God has a personal plan for their life,” AND, that "the invisible hand of the free market is really God at work," this according to sociologist Paul Froese, one of the authors of the survey. That being the case, I guess I’m surprised that God isn’t in the news more these days, given that his plan
was for a whole lot of people to lose their jobs, their homes, and their health insurance.

You may have guessed by now that I do not have a personal relationship with God, as the poem goes. He does not take my requests. I do not believe in a God that controls my destiny, or chooses who dies when, or blesses some special people with wealth while saddling others with poverty. It would be nice to believe it, but I just can’t find it in me.

It’s a little awkward to be a minister who does not believe in God. I’m asked, incredulously, “Why do you even go to church?” “What do you do there if you aren’t worshipping God?” “What DO you believe in?” These are theological questions of course, questions about our shared understanding of what is of ultimate meaning to us. And it can be a challenge to answer them.

This past year, Unitarian Universalists ministers across the country have been involved in a conversation about our theology. At our fall retreat last year the ministers from this district participated in a workshop called “Whose Are We?” Whose are we? What kind of a question is that?

By way of explanation, let me tell you a story that came from a sermon preached by the Rev. Sarah Lammert, now the Director of Ministries and Faith Development for the UUA. (“Whose Are We?” sermon preached February 1, 2009 at the Unitarian Society of Ridgewood, New Jersey.) She attributes it to the Rev. Jon Luopo, minister of the University Unitarian Church of Seattle.
“It seems that in Seattle the interfaith clergy organization has a tradition of asking senior colleagues to share their life odysseys. On this particular occasion, a Roman Catholic Priest was telling his story, and he said that his life had been in large measure a failure.

He remembered the heady days of Vatican II and how hopeful he and his generation of liberal priests had been that real change was coming to the church he loved so dearly. And yet; these many years later he felt that the church had if anything become hardened and deeply conservative, and his dreams had not been realized.

Now, this priest was someone who was valued among his interfaith colleagues, and they were somewhat hurt and stunned by his revelation. And yet, one colleague noted, despite the severity of his words, his demeanor seemed quite peaceful and content. “How can you claim that your life was a failure, and yet appear so calm and serene?” “I know whose I am,” replied the priest. “I know whose I am.”

This is the faith of a catholic priest, a faith in “God the Father” that kept him strong and steady even in the face of personal disillusionment and failure. I have seen faith do amazing things. When I was doing my Clinical Pastoral Education at San Francisco General Hospital I saw it time after time; you can take a person’s home, their family, their health, even their dignity, but if they still have faith, they can find the will to go on. At the time, it seemed miraculous.

Whose are we? Whose am I? It struck me as an easy question. I am my own. I don’t belong to anyone. But the Rev. Victoria Safford offers us another way to
think about that question, in the sermon that she preached in June 2008 at the Service of the Living Tradition. She said, “Douglas Steere, a Quaker teacher, says that the ancient question, “What am I?” inevitably leads to a deeper one, “Whose am I?” – because there is no identity outside of relationships. You can’t be a person by yourself. To ask “Whose Am I?” is to extend the questions far beyond the little self-absorbed self, and wonder: Who needs you? Who loves you? To whom are you accountable? To whom do you answer? Whose life is altered by your choices? With whose life, whose lives, is your own all bound up, inextricably, in obvious or invisible ways?” And these were the questions we were asked to consider at our Fall minister’s retreat.

We began the workshop in pairs. We first told each other the stories of how we had been called into the ministry. Who called you, or what, we asked each other? Some were called by love, some by God, some by Mystery. For some the call came like a clanging bell, and others heard a still small voice.

Then we did a very interesting exercise. One person in the pair asked: “Whose are you?” The other was to answer, saying whatever came to mind. Regardless of what was said, the first person would respond with the words, “God be merciful”, and then would ask again, “Whose are you?” And this questioning and answering went on for about five minutes.

I’m not going to ask you to do this exercise right now, but I do want to give you a moment to reflect on this question as if I were about to ask it. Whose are
you? Who are you accountable to? With whose life, whose lives, is your own all bound up with, inextricably, in obvious or invisible ways? Think of as many answers as you can.

How was that? Any surprises? I’ll tell you how it went for me. It was easy at first. “My husband’s” I said. My partner responded, “God be merciful, whose are you?” “My children’s” “God be merciful. Whose are you? “My Parents’” God be merciful, whose are you? My dearest friends, God be merciful, whose are you?

The answers to the question began to come more slowly, and from a deeper place. Who or what am I bound to? My home church in Walnut Creek. My seminary classmates and colleagues. My spiritual ancestors and teachers; Ralph Waldo Emerson, William Ellery Channing, Margaret Fuller, and Theodore Parker. The sources and principles of Unitarian Universalism.

As I reached deeper I found even more, something essential, something beyond blood and or belief. I understand that I came from, and am utterly dependant upon other lives, human and non-human. My life is woven into the interconnected web. I am the product of millions of years of evolution. I am, in the words of Kahil Gabran, “the daughter of life’s longing for itself.” (The Prophet, pg. 18) At the core of my theology is the understanding that the earth does not belong to me: rather, I belong to the earth. Every living thing comes from her, and must relinquish its body back to her in the end. And so I am connected through history and biology to every other living thing. And here is where MY faith comes in: despite our inevitable suffering and death, I believe that life is good.
I have a sense of what lies at the heart of my theology, but I can’t assume I know what lies at the heart of yours. Unitarian Universalists are theists, buddhists, atheists, agnostics, humanists, Jews, pagans, Christians, mystics, activists, transcendentalists and new-agers. We’re all over the map. So what DO we share? Of course, we share our agreement with our principles and sources, but we could do that without coming to church. And as much as I am devoted to them, they can’t hold me accountable. They can’t really help me with my roller coaster life. I don’t pull them out to read when I’m mourning a death. And I won’t be reading them on my own deathbed for comfort. I doubt that they could inspire me enough to keep me going even if I lost everything. They couldn’t; but YOU could. We are not bound together by what we believe. We are bound together by our agreement to be together community, to hold each other with loving respect. Our principles may be our map, but you are the ones who will be with me on the journey. That is the covenant that we share.

Listen to the words of Burton Carley, from *We Covenant*, (November 2007 Prairie Group Paper) “The church is at the intersection of the covenant where the sacred and the human meet, where the eternal and the temporal make contact. In that crossing place the people turn aside and respond to the call of the Holy. There are many names for that reality that calls us into relationship, and many practices or paths to it. This source that is greater than us and not of our making, this gift and power that makes possible covenant, can be called universal love, the Spirit of Life, the Oversoul, God, Goddess, Ultimate Reality, the Holy, the Ground of
Being, Creative Power, Mystery.” As we gather each week, we call each other into that covenant “Where the sacred and the human meet.” So in addition to belonging to the earth, I belong to, am connected to, and hope to be held accountable by you and by each Unitarian Universalist I encounter, past, present and future.

Although I have started untangling the question of “Whose am I?” I can tell you that there is not one correct answer. These workshops, which were created by the UU Minister’s Association, were designed to get us talking about ultimate meaning. The whole point is to ask each other the questions, whose are we? Who needs us? To whom do we belong? To whom are we accountable? How are we connected? And so I hope you will do so in the days to come.

I will end with the words of my colleague, the Rev. Douglas Taylor, from his sermon titled “Whose are we?” “May God be merciful, because there are real consequences to our connections; consequences concerning what we are to do as a community and how we are to be in this world. We are not only our own. We are not isolated beings, but connected. There are multiple answers but the demand and the consequences are as real as if we were the sort of congregation that produced one answer only. So let us seek to uncover whose we are together.”

Blessed be, and may God be Merciful.