Because she wanted everyone to feel included in her prayer, she said right at the beginning several names for the Holy: Spirit, she said, Holy One, Mystery, God

But then thinking these weren’t enough ways of addressing that which cannot fully be addressed, she added particularities, saying, Spirit of Life, Spirit of Love, Ancient Holy One, Mystery We Will Not Ever Fully Know, Gracious God, and also Spirit of this Earth, God of Sarah, Gaia, Thou

And then, tongue loosened, she fell to naming superlatives as well: Most Creative One, Greatest Source, Closest Hope – even though superlatives for the Sacred seemed to her probably redundant, but then she couldn’t stop:

One who Made the Stars, she said, although she knew technically a number of those present didn’t believe the stars had been made by anyone or thing but just luckily happened.

One Who Is an Entire Ocean of Compassion, she said, and no one laughed.

That Which Has Been Present Since Before the Beginning, she said, and the room was silent.

Then, although she hadn’t imagined it this way, others began to offer names.

Peace, said one.
One My Mother Knew, said another.
Ancestor, said a third.
Wind.
Rain.
Breath, said one near the back.
Refuge.
That Which Holds All.
A child said, Water.
Someone said, Kuan Yin.
Then: Womb.
Witness.
Great Kindness.
Great Eagle.
Eternal Stillness.

And then, there wasn’t any need to say the things she’d thought would be important to say, and everyone sat hushed, until someone said

Amen.

Sermon Whose Are We? c. Rev. Vail Weller
Sunday, March 6, 2011 ~ Unitarian Universalists of San Mateo, CA

A number of our services lately have invited you into a deeper discernment about who you are, and who you may be called to become. We are thinking a lot about this in terms of who we are as a congregation, as well, and who we may be called to become, in these times of evolution and change. It is an important role of a religious community, I believe, to provide people with a chance to listen for the calling of their own lives, and for the calling of the future church. However, that’s only part of the equation. If the only question we ask is “who am I?” we run the risk of believing that we are at the center of the universe.

As Unitarian Universalists, we affirm in our stated principles not only the inherent worth and dignity of every person, but also respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. The one, and the all.

My colleague, Victoria Safford, reminds us:

[that] 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?

In December of 2009, I participated in a summit pulled together by the Unitarian Universalist Association focusing on Excellence in Ministry. A group of sixty five people came together to worship, discuss, and dream about the future of ministerial formation, both for clergy and laity. Rev. Sarah Lammert, now the Director of Ministries and Faith Development for the UUA, was also there. She wrote of the summit in a sermon in which she reminded me of this story.

We started with a worship service, and the very first words uttered were those of Rev. Jon Luopo, the minister of the University Unitarian Church of Seattle. He told us:

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.”

He knows whose he is. Therefore, even a sense of professional failure cannot affect his sense of peace. He is able to rest in an identity that is larger than his own individual existence. “That’s all well and good,” you might be thinking. “He’s a priest. Of course he knows whose he is; he belongs to ‘God’ – you know, the guy with a beard on a throne. That God I don’t believe in.”

But what about “That Which Holds All”? In our tradition, we are religiously free. We have many images of the divine, and we welcome those who do not believe in any version of the divine. We are non-creedal, but we are covenantal – that is, we agree that we will walk together in love. It is not always what we believe that matters, but rather, how our beliefs get lived out in our lives. That is the true test.

The ministers in our movement have been participating in a conversation about Whose We Are. We focused on this topic at a retreat that I attended this past fall. We were put into pairs and we told one another our stories of our calling to the ministry. Then we went through a spiritual direction exercise, designed to take us to a more reflective place. One in the pair would ask: Whose are you? And the other would answer, saying whatever came to awareness. After a few moments, the questioner would say: Thanks be to god. And then would ask again, Whose are you? And this questioning and answering went on for a generous period of time. The answers to the question got deeper.

Through the exercise, I named my connection to my family, my children, my partner, my parents, my sisters. Then I spoke of my calling, that I belong to the ministry of Unitarian Universalism. I belong to my colleagues: my tribe of people who understand my life in a way that no one else can, and with whom I have a covenantal agreement of mutual support, challenge, and care. I belong to those who came before. I spoke of my ancestors both biological and otherwise. I belong to the long line of activists and regular citizens who have worked to make our society more open to the gifts of women.

I belong to those who will come after, living in the world we are affecting today. I belong to the body of the earth. I belong to the whales, the dolphins, and the countless creatures whose lives I affect by my consumer choices. I belong to the San Mateo Creek Watershed. I belong to my neighbors. I belong to the community of parents who nurture their children, who support each other every day in the difficult and joyous path of parenting. I belong to that tribe of people whose spirits are nourished, fed, and healed, through music. I belong to god – and by god, I mean a larger love that holds us all, a creative force that needs our gifts in order to continue to evolve.

1 Rev Sarah Lammert, “Whose Are We?” sermon preached February 1, 2009 at the Unitarian Society of Ridgewood, New Jersey.
In Anthony DeMello’s collection of meditations, *Taking Flight*, he writes of a woman who was in a coma, dying.

She suddenly had a feeling that she was taken up to heaven and stood before the judgment seat. “Who are you?” a Voice said to her.

“I’m the wife of the mayor,” she replied.

“I did not ask you whose wife you were but who you are.”

“I’m the mother of four children.”

“I did not ask you whose mother you are, but who you are.”

“I’m a schoolteacher.”

“I did not ask what your profession is but who you are.”

And so it went. No matter what she replied, she did not seem to give a satisfactory answer to the question, “Who are you?”

“I’m a Christian.”

“I did not ask what your religion is but who you are.”

“I’m the one who went to church every day and always helped the poor and needy.”

“I did not ask what you did but who you are.”

She evidently failed the examination, for she was sent back to earth. When she recovered from her illness, she was determined to find out who she was. And that made all the difference.²

It is important that we discover who we are. But I believe we need to also be aware of the web of connection into which that question gets asked. We cannot only ask who we are, but whose we are.

I close with the words of Mary Oliver.

“What Is There Beyond Knowing” by Mary Oliver

What is there beyond knowing that keeps
calling to me? I can’t

turn in any direction
but it’s there. I don’t mean

the leaves; grip and shine or even the thrush’s
silk song, but the far-off

fires, for example,
of the stars, heaven’s slowly turning

theater of light, or the wind
playful with its breath;

² Reverend Susan Veronica Rak in her sermon “Whose Are We?” preached on 16 September 2007 at the Unitarian society of East Brunswick, NJ.
or time that’s always rushing forward,
or standing still

In the same – what shall I say –

time.

What I know
I could put into a pack

as if it were bread and cheese, and carry it
on one shoulder,

important and honorable, but so small!
While everything else continues, unexplained

and unexplainable. How wonderful it is
to follow a thought quietly

to its logical end.
I have done this a few times.

But mostly I just stand in the dark field,
in the middle of the world, breathing

in and out. Life so far doesn’t have any other name
but breath and light, wind and rain.

If there’s a temple, I haven’t found it yet.
I simply go on drifting, in the heaven of the grass
and the weeds.

Spirit of Life and Love,

Web of Connection,

Great Mystery,

Most Creative One,

Simplest Weed and Most Intricate Flower,

First Ancestor and Great-Great-Great-Great Grandchild,

Closest Hope,

Farthest Star,
Help us to ever more strongly feel our connection

To that which is all,

That we may know Who We Are.

That we may know Whose We Are.

Amen.