As in Eleanor Lerman’s poem, “Starfish” How easy it is to go through a normal day- go to the store, sit next to a fisherman, walk the dog by the water, have a normal day, go to bed, maybe next to a loved one if you get lucky. But the poet notices, and wonders to herself: is this a message, finally, or just another day?

And somehow this normal day warrants a poem- a time for making meaning- for acknowledging the wonder and the mystery of life- during the walk the reeds whisper and sing of the natural world- the pond is a reminder of the primordial ooze from whence you came- a reminder that we were born into its world connected to all the natural world.

See, says the fisherman, the channel is full of starfish, little creatures that speak of the celestial, the unknown. Finally, an invitation from Life to dream and wonder upon our place in the Universe as they sweep out to the boundless sea. And the poet Eleanor Lerman reminds one that everyday is an opportunity to remember Life’s invitation to wonder, to ponder our relationship with Life itself.

The poet says,
this is what Life does,

life lets

life suggests

life sends

Life lets you know

So the poem insists that Life is always claiming a person- sending out an invitation, a message- and the human has the choice of how to respond to this invitation.

Such a perspective is a different way of framing a person’s sacred values- by articulating what or who lays claim to your being.

Let us spend a few quiet moments together in prayer or reflection.

Ask yourself- what or who lays claim to your being? Whose are you?

"Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather must recognize that it is he who is asked. In a word, each man is questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by answering for his own life; to life he can only respond by being responsible."

Viktor E. Frankl, (1905 - 1997) Psychiatrist & Author
Man's Search for Meaning

Professing no creed or dogma, the Unitarian Universalist faith is not a religion to convince you to believe this or that, but a place where
you might know you are, as Viktor Frankl reminds us, questioned by life.

Unitarian Universalists are not belief-centered. In our congregations, the real magic happens in sharing our personal philosophies in life— in how we relate with one another. There is value in the sharing— an opening of the mind and heart in listening to another— in celebrating the differences.

With no shared dogma or creed, we focus instead on the sacred promises that bind us together— expressed in a covenant.

Liturgical covenant of UUCFM: Love is the spirit

REV. PETER MORALES, President of the Unitarian Universalist Association answers with his opinion that “Religion is not centered around belief but around what we love.” In his essay, Religion Beyond Belief, Morales writes

“True religion is about what we love, not about what we think. … The practice of true religion is faithfulness to what we love. The key religious questions you and I must answer are these: What do we love so much that we are moved to tears? What gives us unspeakable joy? What gives us peace beyond understanding? What do we love so much that it calls us to action? What do we care about so deeply that we willingly, enthusiastically, devote our lives to it?”

Love is life’ claim on you— the legacy of millennia that brings humans to this point in evolution— needing one another, needing love, needing relationship.
At our fall ministers’ retreat, colleagues asked one another the question *Whose Are We* focused us around the question not of what we believed but whose are we? Instead of an entirely individually focused question, *What do you believe?* The question shifted to, *to whom are you accountable?* This type of question highlights the richness of human social character- shifting from an individualistic focus to the real and necessary nexus of relationships that have value and meaning for a person. *Whose are you?* Where in life do you know mutual loyalty and love?

As a part of this retreat, we dove into an exercise in which the colleagues were invited into a spirit of reverence. In pairs, we meditatively shared in a stream of consciousness responses to the question from our partner, *Whose are you?* The partner listened deeply as names of loved ones floated in the air, the Cosmos, God’s, the Universe’s, mother earth’s, father sky’s, the painted deserts, the Gulf of Mexico’s, the ocean’s…all kinds of people, divine expressions, parts of nature, valued friends and lovers…all of these sacred expressions of accountability and promise were forming a
web of relationship, all centered around an individual’s experience of life, of adversity, and of love.

You may be surprised, but throughout seminary and in my early collegial life, it is harder than you think to talk about these deeper stories. We always end up talking about church—what is happening in our churches and not necessarily getting to the old question: How goes it with thy spirit? And usually, the two topics are related. The more that leaders have a sense of vision connected to that Greater Love—the better we can serve our communities—this is why we get time off for study leave and for vacation—without the distance and fresh perspective, we can put false idols at the center of our ministry instead of the noble calling that got us here in the first place.

Fortunately, In this retreat we ministers got to go there—we shared the stories of our call to ministry, of our relationship with the Ultimate or that of ultimate concern, and of our fidelity to these sacred promises we have made to our call to ministry, to our congregations and communities, and to our colleagues. In short, we asked ourselves Whose Are We? And there was certainly no easy answer. The process itself allowed us to engage our differences and tested
our faithfulness to our covenant to walk together in the spirit of love.

And it was not easy.

And if it is hard for minister-types to do this—as the leaders in this Association of congregations—how much do you think this story-telling happens in our congregations and fellowships? It does—in our Connection Circle small group ministries and in small ways…but I think this congregation has opportunities ahead to spend more time talking about what we love and less time just on what we think.

Somewhere in current Unitarian Universalist culture, there is tremendous pressure to think alike. Ironically, I have noticed—as a lifelong Unitarian Universalist—a tremendous pressure to conform to one another.

Everyone wants a place to belong—some seek likeminded people as safe haven. But, as Gini Courter, the Unitarian Universalist Association Moderator reminds, 

*don’t come to church to find the people you love, you come to church to love the people you find.*

Does a sense of belonging require conformity?

*No!* And that is good news!
In the same column, *Religion Beyond Belief*, Morales makes a distinction between loving alike and thinking alike, harkening back to Francis David’s famous quote: *We need not think alike to love alike.*

The noblest values of this church invite people to contemplate what they love— not always just what they think. To have a sense of belonging does not require like-minded people. Belonging in this congregation is to pledge to love one another— to love the earth and her people— and to love life; for— even in the midst of pain and struggle— love prevails.

Belonging is so important— in thinking of *Whose Are We?* The question asks— *to whom and to what do I belong?*, considering our most sacred values in the context of a relationship. And humans are social creatures. This makes sense.

We truly need to belong… in today’s US culture Americans are frighteningly isolated:

John T. Cacioppo teaches Psych at University of Chicago and directs the Center for Cognitive and Social Neuroscience. In his book *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection* he writes that
People "rate love, intimacy, and social affiliation above wealth or fame, even above physical health. Given the importance of social connection in our species, it is all the more troubling that, at any given time, roughly twenty percent of individuals—that would give sixty million people in the U.S. alone—feel sufficiently isolated for it to be a major source of unhappiness in their lives."

How desolate— that 20% at any given time feel no sense of belonging? How vulnerable are these lonely people to easy answers and quick fixes to the pain and isolation? What does this say about United States culture and the dangers that lie ahead for the health of society in the present or in the future?

This congregation has an obligation to this alarming cultural statistic—within these walls and outside of them. We truly need one another as humans, to remind one another that we are born into relationship and remind one another of the scientific gift of knowing our relationship to the cosmos— that we are made of the same elements put forth at the birth of time,
And there are those who come here feel like finally they have the freedom to say what they want about god and the sacred and feel accepted in this freedom. And this freedom is in the context of a larger belonging- belonging to a community, belonging to the larger story of Life itself, linked and responsible to this world and all of humanity.

Whose Are We. This fellowship, this gathering has an opportunity to be more than just a group of like-minded people. You have an opportunity to serve people who want not only the belonging of fellowship, but the freedom to express a belonging to the Spirit of Life itself. And they can use the words faith, agnosticism, humanism, following the path of the Buddha, Jesus, sitting practice, mindfulness….but the greater belonging is to the noble covenant of free religion.

Unitarian Universalisms makes a claim on you- you belong here into this free religion where all who come with open minds and open hearts are welcome.

Let us say to one another, we who all think differently, but pledge to love alike,
"You are not alone."

Turn to your neighbor:

"You are not alone."

Notes: poem used from beginning is "Starfish" by Eleanor Lerman

Closing benediction is Arnason’s #698 "Take Courage, Friends"