WHOSE ARE WE?
A sermon preached at
Florida District UU Minister's Retreat
of Mt. Dora, Florida
by
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In thinking about the question whose are we, I want us to go back to our childhood. Some of us grew up with an idea of “God” – a construct given us by society, by other religions, by friends and family, by schoolmates. Usually that construct is the idea of a man, sort of like us but very powerful, who somehow lives in the sky. As we grew, we started having our own ideas, - our own freedom of religion – our own free thoughts. Now that we go to a church like this one – the Unitarian Universalist Church, we have the freedom of our own ideas and thinking about them is encouraged. Sometimes when we think about things, we make our own ideas, sometimes we even make up our own words. All of these ideas that people have about God is what might be called their theology of God. Some other words we use to express the same idea as God might be - the divine, the spirit of life, the force the energy, the consciousness, the holy spirit, the mystery, even nothingness.

In our tradition, we affirm and promote that free and responsible search for truth and meaning for each and every one of us – that sense of finding our own way. We honor how you come to learn and know and express your understanding – your understanding of whose are you - your theology. In looking at the question of Whose Are We – I need to acknowledge that there is not a one-size fits all to this question. However, I think it would be helpful to look at what do in worship? Discussing about an understanding of the mystery of life or God can give insight about what it means for us to do this – worship and possibly give us some clarity about whose are we? So what is worship? I find it helpful looking at words both in original or early languages and the origin of the word in English. It may help us understand the meaning.

For example, the primary Hebrew word for worship. Means "to depress, i.e. prostrate (in homage to royalty or God): bow (self) down, crouch, fall down (flat), humbly beseech, do (make) obeisance, do reverence, make to stoop, worship." There is a physical yielding.

And in Greek, there are 3 words for worship.
One "meaning to kiss, like a dog licking his master's hand), to fawn or crouch to, homage (do reverence to, adore): worship." the idea of subjects falling down to kiss the ground. Once again a physical quality.
A second is "to reverence, hold in awe." And a third is "to render religious service of homage." Relating to the worship of God.

The word worship in the English language literally means to ascribe worth to something. Worship was “worth-ship” – the consideration of what was worthy. In our lives we sometimes worship things on many levels – like money or fame or celebrities or even politicians. There are many things in our lives where we ascribe value or worth. To worship, then, is to consider and celebrate, and not just with our minds but with our hearts, what is worthy, what is important, what is meaningful and what is valuable in our lives.

The worth I ask us to consider is the value or awe or wonder that you ascribe to, the unknown deep within you, with the world. In our reading from Rev Alice Blair Wesley – in Redeeming Time she wrote “...The word spirit points to the interior life, which makes for the quality of our visible, exterior actions. The word spirit points to that with which we must freely cooperate to meet the conditions of our own fulfillment or violate our own integrity.” Redeeming Time, Edited by Walter P. Herz, pg 3, 4

It is that knowing deep within you that is uncovered throughout living. That knowing inside affirms the idea or notion of how you come to understand even in some small way about the deep questions of life. Inside each one of you is a place where you can have peace, reverence, respect awe or wonder or honor – be it to nature, to a transcendent or beauty or mystery or life. However you have come to sense it or know it. It is that knowing within each of us – that is the place we start. From there, the act of worship can proceed.

That’s what we do, Sunday after Sunday in our sanctuaries.

Homily Part #2

The phrase 'Ashes to ashes and dust to dust” derives from the English Burial Service. The text of that service is adapted from the Biblical text, Genesis 3:19 (King James Version): "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return."

In continuing to look at the question of whose are we, I looked at the story in the Golden Compass. The author of this story – Phillip Pullman stated that “dust is the divine – it is co-creation, a mutually dependant, mutually nurturing and a mutually necessary element of life.” He sees dust as a mysterious force, an energy that is a part of the cosmic evolution of creation. He means that dust is something that we can see – that is a symbol for something that cannot be seen.

He shares this understanding in the reading we heard earlier about Lyra’s experience with seeing the Aurora – the northern lights. It was so beautiful. It seemed almost holy. It was as if she could see and experience the whole universe. Have any of
you ever experienced or seen the northern lights? I did a few years ago – and I can remember it as if it were yesterday.

I was traveling in Alaska and driving on a clear night. You know how people talk about “night light pollution” – the man-made light we generate at night that keeps us from fully experiencing the night sky. Well, in Alaska there are so few people that the night sky just bursts open. As a drove on a back road, I looked through my windshield and noticed something that looked like green mist cascading in the sky. Amazed – I knew that it had to be the Aurora. I quickly stopped the car and got outside to take in the view.

As I looked up – I saw swirling, moving, organic clouds of light - green mist flowing throughout the entire sky. Wherever I looked, the sky was full of these shimmering, dancing particles of light. I was stunned – I was in awe – I had never seen anything like this before. I could not take it all in at once – I could not see the whole thing – it was too big – too immense. I could only see the parts of sky that were in my view – and yet I as I turned to look in another direction – the gleaming colors in the night sky continued to burst forth – they were all over me and around me – I was completely engulfed in this cosmic show of light that was sweeping across the sky.

I felt as if I could reach up and almost touch the light – feel the force of the universe swirling around me – and at the same time there was also an internal connection - a deep part of my being, a knowing into my core. There was a feeling beyond myself and at the same time a grounded fullness to my core. It was as if the infinity symbol was turned on its side. The infinite expanding as the transcendent outside me at the same time the infinite vastness opening the knowing in me.

Lyra commented that she wondered if the Aurora might even be Dust itself – and I wonder that if the reflections of light that I saw were actually light rays skimming off little particles of stardust – the cosmic dust of creation. In talking with scientists, the reflections of lights are particles of dust. In the creation myths in both the Bible for Christians and the Quran for Muslims – man was formed from the dust of the ground. The movie – the Golden Compass, illustrates visually that the dust of the cosmos – the dust of the divine is also in each and everyone of us. The author sees us as co-creators in the universe. In fact he states that it is our responsibility and duty to increase the presence of dust in the world. How is that possible? I think he means that we can increase the dust when we are making good things happen in the world – when we are serving others, living out the values of our faith.

Dust is a part of this life-force – this energy – this mystery – this life giving essence that co-creates with us this universe. Is there a connection between us and Dust? Can we see Dust as the spirit of life? For in the words of Phillip Pullman – “without us Dust will dwindle away and without Dust – we will dwindle away.” In responding to whose are we, may we affirm the knowing deep within us and the dust, the sacred, the force, the energy – the spirit of life in all. Amen.