Whose Are We?
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Reading
In this excerpt from The Kindness Handbook (Sounds True, Inc. Kindle edition, 2008, loc. 1004-1018), Buddhist writer, Sharon Salzberg recounts her attempt to get from New York to Tucson to hear the Dalai Lama speak and instead being stuck in an airplane on a runway at La Guardia airport for over four hours:

Looking back on it, I sometimes refer jokingly to those hours as “the breakdown of civilization.” It was hot, and it grew hotter. After a point, people started yelling, “Let me off this plane!” The pilot resorted to getting on the PA system and saying sternly, “No one is getting off this plane.”

I wasn’t feeling all that chipper myself. I couldn’t seem to get in touch with the people who were supposed to pick me up at the airport, and I was concerned about them. I had an apartment to go to in New York City, and kept thinking, to no avail, “I can just go back there, and try again tomorrow.” I was hot. I felt pummeled by the people shouting around me.

Then I recalled an image that Bob Thurman, professor of Buddhist studies at Columbia University, often uses to describe kindness and compassion that comes from seeing the world more truthfully. He says, “Imagine you are on the New York City subway, and these Martians come and zap the subway car so that those of you in the car are going to be together . . . forever.” What do we do? If someone is hungry, we feed them. If someone is freaking out, we try to calm them down. We might not at all like everybody, or approve of them – but we are going to be together forever, and we need to respond with the wisdom of how interrelated our lives are, and will remain.

Sitting on that airplane, I was struck by the recollection of Bob’s story. I looked around the cabin, and thought, “Maybe these are my people.”

Sermon
The smell fills your nostrils; each time you inhale, you can taste it, like ashes on your tongue. You have watched the smoke expand on the horizon, billowing clouds of gray with dark bursts where the fire has consumed a house, a building, a structure that once seemed so substantial, immovable. And now, besides the smoke which fills a greater piece of the sky than the last time you looked, you can see actual flames in the distance and just then the doorbell rings followed shortly by a rapid pounding.

You must leave now, the man at the door says; this neighborhood is being evacuated. Take what you need, but do it quickly and go. Now!

What do you take?
First, you make sure everyone in the house is safe and ready to go; family members, housemates, pets…What then? What do you take with you? You have no time for lists; no time to diagram the trunk of your car and figure out optimal packing methods…It’s time to go!

You may grab a photo album or a box of memorabilia; a container of financial records and papers; your laptop; your cell phone…And the questions resound in your mind: “What will I need? What is irreplaceable?”

And now you have to hurry even more, because the order was to “Go, now!” and you find yourself standing, stunned, in one room after another. You have what you need, as far as you can tell, yet there’s still something nagging at you and you’re picking up things that just happen to be in front of you: a robe hanging on the bathroom door; the umbrella leaning on the wall by the door—yes, if only it would rain!—the globe from the desk (a globe; do you really need a globe?!) . Maybe not, but here it is—oddly, illogically, but undeniably—under your arm and now another question, the deeper question, rises to the surface and drowns out all other questions: What matters?

What matters?

Now that question has already been answered to some extent. The people, the pets, are in the car already. Relationships take clear precedence over things; life over lists. And, still, there is that undeniable trauma of fleeing one’s house; of having to mentally sort through the many things—not in months but in minutes—to mentally sort through the many things that may have gone toward turning this house into a home. The gifts you were given by people you love. The things that were created by hand. The ugly chair that, nevertheless, you have sat in comfortably every day.

What do I take? What will I need? What matters?

As you live through this real-life encounter with impermanence, with the fleeting nature of so much that we take for granted will always be there, the question resounds: What matters?

This, to me, is the ultimate religious question. This is the question that brings us together every Sunday. It’s the question from which this congregation was born and it is the question that we ask in all of our activities together. It is the question that provides the foundation for religious community. It is, if I may use a popular phrase, The Big Question.

Often, when people speak of The Big Question (or The Big Questions, plural) in a religious or philosophical context, they are talking about things like the nature of the universe or the existence of God or the truth of the Bible or life after death…the Big Questions, we are told, have to do with what we think or what we believe regarding certain assertions about the nature of reality and the meaning of life. I seek out, for myself, satisfactory answers to those Big Questions and this is what, purportedly, shapes my understanding of my place in the cosmos and my relationship to all that is. I think about things, come to believe certain things, and then act accordingly. But is this how life actually works?
This idea about The Big Questions places a great emphasis on what we \textit{believe} to be true. We’ve talked many times about the frustration of trying to answer a common question from people who have never heard of Unitarian Universalism: “What do \textit{you} believe?” It stems from a Western—and mainly Christian—idea that religion is about what one \textit{believes}. And the word that is translated as \textit{belief} in the New Testament has gone from meaning \textit{trust, loyalty and commitment} in the ancient world to meaning \textit{intellectual assent to a hypothetical—and often dubious—proposition} in the modern world (Karen Armstrong, The Case for God, LT, pg. 179).

As I am fleeing from my house, I doubt that my intellectual assent to any hypothetical propositions, dubious or otherwise, will serve me very well. But the questions about who and what I love; where I place my loyalty and commitment; what gives me hope in dark and dangerous times—the many forms of and answers to the single question: \textit{What matters?}—that is what will guide my actions.

If belief is understood as the opinions I hold—its importance disappears. If belief is understood as that to which I give my heart—it is of utmost importance.

Whose are we? That grammatically-clunky phrase that is the title for this sermon and that provides the name for the workshops developed for the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association and that will also be available for congregational use sometime next year – “whose are we?” is intended to move us beyond thinking of religious community as a place where we come together to talk about what we \textit{think}; to offer opinions on the traditional big questions; to argue relative merits of differing constructs of reality. The most important questions are not “what do I believe?” or “what religion or philosophy or ethical tradition do I follow?” or even “who am I?” as that sometimes implies that I can describe myself individually and isolated from the whole beautiful mess of relationships and commitments and entanglements that make up my life. The question that I need to keep before me; to answer in relationship and in combined effort in fulfilling our mission together; the question that will be with me when I travel life’s circumstances out to its very edges where my commitments, my loyalties, my love are all that I have…the more important question is “What matters?” (And that includes, of course, \textit{who} matters? Whose are we?)

How do we go about answering that question?

Let’s take a few moments to reflect. You can close your eyes if you like. Take a deep breath. Listen: “I will be there for you.” Think of when you may have said that, or thought it. Imagine when you will say it or feel it in the future. And answer this, to yourselves. Who is the “you” in that sentence? You may have multiple answers. They may change over time, of course. “I will be there for you.”

Now turn that around. “You will be there for me.” You will be there for me. Again, who is the “you” in that sentence? You will be there for me.

We start to get a sense of \textit{whose we are}. Who we are bound to in loyalty and love. Who has a claim on our hearts. Who is joined with us in shared commitment.
And an emergency—one that puts people’s lives at risk, like the fires we are experiencing—has the power to broaden our understanding of “whose we are.” We say, “I will be there for you,” and the “you” expands beyond family, beyond friends, to include community, to include people we have never met and may not choose as friends, and yet we suddenly experience our connection to them. We have been stopped in the midst of our day-to-day existence, we have glimpsed the transitory nature of all that we considered so solid, we have faced the trivialities of so much that we considered important only yesterday, and we have bumped unceremoniously up against that most fundamental of questions, “What matters? What truly matters?”

Bob Thurman imagines Martians zapping a subway car; Sharon Salzberg imagines an emergency that confines her to the airplane for an indefinite period and suddenly she is able to see the people around her, not as irritating obstacles in her single-minded purpose, but as fellow human beings deserving, not contempt, but concern. “If someone is hungry, we feed them,” she writes. “If someone is freaking out, we try to calm them down. We might not at all like everybody, or approve of them—but we are going to be together…and we need to respond with the wisdom of how interrelated our lives are, and will remain.” Both imagine an emergency situation; something that rocks the normal course of daily life; an event that raises the questions that are not asked often enough: What matters? And whose are we? In the wake of tragedy, we are sometimes able to look around with a new vision of our relationship to one another. “Maybe,” we say along with Sharon Salzberg, “maybe these are my people.”

Whose are we? To whom do we belong? To the people that are here…yes. And to the people who came before, who started this congregation, who laid the groundwork for us to build upon. And how about to the people who are yet to come? Are we not theirs, too? And don’t we also belong to the people who may never join us, but who have benefited—or will benefit—from our work in the community? Whose are we? Alberto Blanco writes in his poem, “My Tribe,” (Mi Tribu/My Tribe, tr. by James Nolan)

If I have to belong to some tribe—
I tell myself—
Make it a large tribe,
Make it a strong tribe,
One in which nobody is left out,
In which everybody, for once and for all has a God-given place…
I’m talking about a tribe you can’t talk about.
A tribe that’s always been but whose existence must yet be proven.
A tribe that’s always been
But whose existence
We can prove right now.

**Closing Blessing** (#698, Wayne B. Arnason)
Take courage, friends. The way is often hard, the path is never clear, and the stakes are very high. Take courage. For deep down, there is another truth: you are not alone.