Reading: Unitarian Universalist Minister, Victoria Safford, offers this reflection on the question Whose Am I?” She writes:

Douglas Steere, a Quaker teacher, says that the ancient question, “Who am I?” inevitably leads to a deeper one, “Whose am I?”—because there is not identity outside of relationship. You cannot be a person by yourself. To ask “Whose am I?” is to extend the question 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?

Whose am I? Whose Are We?

Sermon: Whose Are We?

I heard a new joke recently.

It asks, if you gave Unitarian Universalists a choice between attending a lecture on heaven and actually going to heaven, what would they choose? Most would choose the lecture.

It is true that this has been a long held stereotype of our faith, that we are more interested in discussing religion, than in experiencing it, more interested in defining and explaining the reasons for religious experience than in cultivating spiritual practices that invite these experiences.

However, it appears that our ministers are ready to change this. Over the past two years the Unitarian Universalist Minister’s Association—the professional organization of UU Ministers, has been intentionally diving into the question “Whose Are We?” Through gatherings of small groups of ministers, through district meetings of ministers, through sermons and essays, UU ministers around the country have been engaging the theological question “Whose are We?”
They have been sitting down together to reflect on the question who needs us? To whom are we accountable? Whose lives are altered by our choices and by what we do in our congregations? With whose lives are we all bound up, inextricably, in obvious or invisible ways?

There has been some resistance to this work--but if you ask me, the reason why the ministers are doing this is because they want to move us beyond that joke about choosing a lecture on heaven over heaven itself.

Historically, Unitarianism and Universalism have been liberating religious traditions. In 1961, the two traditions merged, but prior to that each was a religious tradition that emerged by throwing off orthodoxy and dogma, and teachings which separated people into saved or unsaved, worthy or depraved, good or evil. Instead, each tradition held as central an affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity of all people and a fundamental unity of humanity, and a unity with creation. In a world so divided by religion, these two traditions saw something universal beyond the particulars of belief and dogma. For the Universalists it was the goodness and unconditional love of God that would never show favor for one portion of humanity, while punishing another. For Unitarians is was the belief that within all people, regardless of religious tradition, there resided an understanding of right and wrong--a moral conscience--and the ability to choose what is good.

While both emerged as reform traditions within Christianity, neither of them depended on one religious system--and indeed expressed a universal a way of looking at life beyond the particulars of any religious dogma. This was, and even today, continues to be incredibly liberating. Every week, when we say in our covenant, Love is the doctrine of this congregation, we are expressing that what we live by is not a set of beliefs, not a creed, but a way of being in relationship with one another and the world that is life giving and affirming.

These liberal, or as they were often called, heretical views emerged in different times throughout the Christian tradition. Universalism goes all the way back to the earliest beginnings of Christianity, and Unitarianism is at least as old as the Nicean Creed when Christian orthodoxy was first put in place. There were even then dissenters. These liberal—or liberation—theologies emerged again during the Protestant Reformation, with people drawing on the tradition of those early dissenters as their forebears. And these Unitarian and Universalist ideas emerged again here in the US in the late 1700’s, in reaction to the strict, and often oppressive Calvinist doctrine drawing clear lines between the saved and the unsaved, and which emphasized the depravity of humanity. It was from this reformation, that the Unitarian Universalist Association draws its most immediate roots.
However, in the early 1900’s, a new liberation movement began within Unitarianism specifically. It was the emergence of humanism. Humanism liberated the idea of human equality and human unity from any necessary religious basis. In the 30’s and 40’s, humanism took off and throughout the next generation dominated Unitarianism. It was incredibly powerful, this hard fought place of wrestling a moral code, a sense of right and wrong, of justice and fairness, away from the confines and language of religion. Defining and explaining became the tools of knowing. And our congregations became like universities—places for exercising the mind and thought.

However, over the years, it seems that we lost something deeply important with this strict emphasis on humanism. In far too many cases—we took our liberation too far. By cutting the strings of the bondage of religion, many would argue we began to overemphasize the individual to the neglect of community and covenant—how we live together. We began to overemphasize the mind over the heart—thinking over feeling, and we lost our ability to speak to our full humanity: mind, heart and spirit. And while the language of bondage brings up ideas of oppression, it is also true that we are never fully unattached. As Douglas Steere says, “there is not identity outside of relationship. You cannot be a person by yourself.”

It is not unlike that ancient liberation story of the Hebrew people, who after they throw off the yoke of their oppression, after they escape the bondage of slavery in Egypt, they end up wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. They are liberated only to be lost—wandering for an entire generation before they enter the promise land.

The wilderness often follows liberation. It is not uncommon to wander and struggle to find one’s way after making a big change in one’s life—in getting free of a burden. In our tradition, we might say, we threw off everything, and in so doing, we began valuing the mind over the heart, ideas over relationship, defining truth over experiencing it.

I am reminded of the 17th century Western Philosopher, Renee Descartes, who wrote, “I think therefore I am.” In our excitement to throw off the bonds—and let’s be quite honest, sometimes frightfully oppressive bonds of religion—we put our trust, not in something beyond ourselves, but in our own minds, in human thought and human reason. Just as, some expressions of religion have come to overemphasize the limitations and imperfections of humanity, perhaps we came to overemphasize its promise. And today, we are wrestling with those limits. Unlike Descartes, the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber writes. “All true living is encounter.” Again, expressing the primacy of relationship.
Let’s try out what Douglas Steere suggests. Take a moment; ask yourself, “Who Am I?” What comes to mind first? Was it father, mother, parent, child, lover, partner, spouse? Steere says, the question “Who Am I?” ultimately leads to a deeper question “Whose Am I?” What came to mind first? Was it teacher, doctor, lawyer, police officer, leader, helper, giver—all define us in relationship to others, to what we give, offer or share with others. Was it your name? Something given to you by a parent, maybe even a family name passed down from generations, or maybe unique just to you? Even our name speaks to the relationship of who names us, who loves us. It is not our thought that defines us, but our relationships.

Humanism remains central to our tradition, and that is good—for it grows out of the spirit of unity and equality at the heart of Unitarian Universalism. It puts the golden rule—how we treat one another at the center of what it means to live our faith. But now the ministers are leading our faith in asking not just what is right, and what is good, but to whom and what are we ultimately related. It is an effort to pull us back from an overemphasis on individualism, toward a renewed appreciation for connection and relationship, both in human terms community, and also in spiritual terms, delving into the ways we are bound to this earth, to creation, to those who came before, and to those who will come after us.

Exploring the question, “Whose Are We?” is about leading us from individualism, into great community. It’s about making room in our lives and our congregation to speak about religious experience—even as those experiences are different between us. It’s about moving beyond defining truth, to evoking it—with the essence of that truth being found in how we are connected to each other and to the mystery in which we live our lives.

I asked a few people from our congregation to think about “Whose Are We?” I received answers as varied as—we belong to the stars, we belong to all that is good, we belong to the divine, we belong to the future, we belong to our families, and we belong to life itself. It is exploring this territory that we hope as a tradition will more fully speak to what it means to be human and to do the work of growing our humanity. It acknowledges that beyond any particular belief, there is a need in humanity to be heard, to be loved, to belong—and that we all have room to grow in how we live in covenant, whether those covenants are ones of marriage, parenthood, family, community, or how we nurture our connection to something greater than our selves.

In the end, this exploration by the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association is an effort to strengthen the theological and spiritual foundation of our faith. It reflects a desire
to strengthen our capacity to speak to the mystery of our lives, to the full depth of what it means to be human, emotionally and spiritually.

Unitarian Universalist minister Rev. Kendyl Gibbons says, “The religious imagination is what sustains us individually in moments of personal distress and public tragedy, as well as through the discouragements and challenges of working to make real the world we envision together.”¹

This work of seeing ourselves not just through the lens of what we think, or the lens of what we need, or want, but rather through our relationships is about creating a community of faith that can sustain us and give us strength through the challenges and discouragements of living. We need places to understand through metaphor and imagination the ways our lives reach beyond the mundane, the sources of compassion and wisdom that lie among us. For it is in diving into these questions of how we are connected in this world and to whom and what—to humanity, to one another, to the stars, to being itself, that we are reminded of our capacity to be human, and humane in an often inhumane world, our capacity to be generous in an often competitive and harsh world, our capacity to be connected in an increasingly divided and isolating world, our capacity for compassion in an increasingly dehumanizing world, our capacity to love in a world that teaches us too much to fear.

“…Our real journey in life...is a matter of growth, deepening, and of an ever greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts. Never was it more necessary for us to respond to that action. I pray that we may all do so.”²

¹ From Sarah Lammert’s sermon “Whose Are We?”

² Thomas Merton