(This sermon was preceded by a guided meditation that invited participants to engage with the question of “Whose are you?”)

When we did the guided meditation a few moments ago, who/what were the things that surfaced for you as you reflected on the question “whose are we?” Perhaps they had to do with community, either family, or a broader community of your church, city, or the world? How you answer the question “Whose are you?” becomes a focal point, a touchstone for how you then choose to live your life. Last year at our district ministers fall retreat, we explored the very question of “Whose are we?” “To whom do we belong?” This morning, I’d like to share with you three of the answers that came to me pertaining specifically to our Unitarian Universalist faith as I thought about that question; answers that I think give us great hope for the future of our faith tradition and hope for the future of the world.

The first answer is that we belong to the past. Now I know this probably is not the orientation that we as forward thinking Unitarian Universalists normally take. From our liberal faith tradition comes an optimism about the future, a belief in ever-increasing progress, and a general forward movement in the flow of history. This kind of thinking was expressed by James Freeman Clarke, an Unitarian minister of the 19th century when he affirmed “the progress of mankind onward and upward forever.”¹ This is fine, and optimism and hope are what we are all about this morning! But knowing and reflecting on our past, our roots, becomes the ground from which we then proceed forward. The understanding of the past nurtures our present. Beside the personal history and family history that each of us carries with us, we as Unitarian Universalists have a shared past.

OK, pop quiz time: who can name one Unitarian, Universalist, or UU from our past? Raise your hand… *(appropriate response based on the number of hands raised.)* Our history is rich with incredible people and faith communities moving and shaking the world. Theodore Parker who was an avid abolitionist; Clara Barton who organized the American Red Cross; Susan B. Anthony who worked for women’s suffrage; James Reeb who gave his life in the struggle for voting rights for all people as part of the civil rights struggle; and so many more. By learning about our Unitarian Universalist history, we place ourselves in the flowing river of history, looking back from where we have come and carrying the legacy of our foremothers and fathers forward. There is incredible hope in learning about our past because at each turn the groups of men and women who we point to today with pride, were basically just like us. Probably most of them felt very small when faced with the task at hand. Probably felt like David with his little slingshot taking aim at the giant Goliath.

But they did not become immobilized by the seemingly daunting task before them. They gathered their strength and moved forward, adding their voice, their actions, their
leadership to the issues of their day. To know our stories, our Unitarian Universalist heritage, is to stand on the shoulders of great women and men, both those who are “famous” and those who served the greater good in quieter ways. In our Religious Education programs we talk about giving our children and youth both roots and wings. As adults, we too need the roots and the connection to our past to then take flight and to enable us to look toward the future with power and hope.

So that’s one piece in reflecting on the question “Whose are we?” That we belong to the past, and to our history. A second answer is that we belong to each other, right here, right now. The very question of “Whose are We?” “To whom do we belong?” is an ultimately relational question that leads us away from the emphasis on individual toward a sense of community.

Now again, I’m going against the grain of our culture and of our liberal faith in some ways. I can imagine some of you thinking: “What is she talking about? Individual autonomy and freedom lie at the heart of our faith!” Hang with me for a moment here…

Our culture and our faith emphasize the individual and our idea of individual freedom over the idea of community. This idea of the subjectivity of the individual, or placing the individual self at the center and then defining the world around us in relation to it, has had a huge impact on Western culture especially. This concept began to take root during the Protestant Reformation that challenged the authority of the church and instead emphasized the authority of each person relying on their own ability to reason, and to have an autonomy of action.

But the heavy emphasis on the individual, which has expressed itself in the social sector as capitalism and the reducing of wholes to their smallest component parts, has led to a situation that may be threatening freedom itself. We need only to look at current economic dilemma including the huge disparity in the distribution of wealth in our country to see the pernicious effects of this strong individualism run amok. This week’s TIME magazine reports that the richest 20% of households in the U.S. own 85% of the wealth.

In his book, Faith Without Certainty, UU minister Paul Rasor calls individualism a danger inherent in our faith tradition. We UUs tend to see the “glue” holding our congregations together as “acceptance, respect, and support for each other as individuals.” In a survey of UUs asking “What role has your congregation played most importantly in your life, the answer given by the largest number of respondents is that “it supports my views and upholds my values.” (emphasis added)

No real surprise, highly individualistic responses. This individualism also lies at the core of our American culture with its “up by the bootstraps” every person for her or himself mentality. But this highly individualized understanding of the self doesn’t take into account that we are ultimately social and relational creatures. Our identity, our very being, is formed in relationship, and our hope for the future of humanity, of all species, and of the Earth itself lies squarely with the recognition that we are individual beings in
community, in the interdependent web of existence. Our seventh Unitarian Universalist Principle, adopted in 1985, says that we affirm and promote “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” This begins to speak to a sense of community and connectedness which moves us from understanding ourselves as individuals toward understanding ourselves as part of a group, part of a community, part of a whole.

We live in a time of disconnection, alienation and brokenness. With the strong emphasis on individualism, as a culture we buy into the myth that “more is better”, that all have equal access to the good life, that any way one gets to the top is the right way. But the cost of this strong individualism is enormous. So what is the way out? Counter to this individualistic culture of ours is the reality that throughout most of human history, collective cultures have been the norm. Even today, many communities “of color” have much to teach the dominant culture as they still function as real communities and realize that our individual identities and realities are always formed in relation to. This doesn’t diminish the importance of the individual because in such cultures and communities, the individual must be still strong for the community to flourish. It is not a shift from the “I” to the “We”. It is a move toward seeing ourselves as ultimately connected, balancing between the needs of the individual and the good of the community.

Indeed, such a move would be a homecoming of sorts, a returning to a connected, holistic mode of caring for each other, the species we share the planet with, and the Earth itself. Albert Einstein saw this clearly and once remarked that our sense of separateness was “a kind of optical illusion.”

We need to learn to balance individualism with a true move toward the collective, the community. Community helps us to make meaning in our lives. It is in community and a deeply internalized understanding of our seventh Unitarian Universalist principle affirming our important role in the interdependent web of life, that our hope for the future, and the very salvation of the world, lies. The second answer to the question “Whose are we?” then becomes: we belong to each other, in relationship, and to the larger ecosystem of our world around us. All are connected, all are interdependent.

We turn now to the third proposed answer to the question “Whose are we?” and the answer is that we belong to the future. Remember the story I told while the children and youth were with us this morning about the old man and the turnip? Through collective action, the turnip was pulled and all were able to eat. As simple as the concept may be, we belong to the future in the sense that it is our energy and collective action that will actually create the future. The future is literally in our hands, and our feet, and our voices. Process theologian John Cobb argues that energy and the movement of energy is a more fundamental way to think about our world than in terms of a world of matter. Until recently, physicists thought the world was made up of matter and if something moved, there was something that acted on it from the outside. Now energy has become the vocabulary, looking at all things as energy affected by and affecting other units of energy.
This is the Process way of understanding the world, in which everything is connected and active and in motion. It is also part of a Unitarian Universalist vision for the future. If we belong to the future, then we must devote our time and attention toward the active process of building that future. Being here today, in this UU congregation, is part of that process. Working together, engaging in the healing of our community and our Earth is also part of that process.

Unitarian Universalism is not a creedal faith. We don’t say that to be a part of this community you must believe this way or that. We are an ultimately relational faith, based in the concept of covenant and we move in relationship with ourselves, with our community, with the world.

So whose are we? To whom do we belong?
We belong to the past as we stand in the flowing river of Unitarian Universalism, remembering the inspirational people and groups of our past and looking toward the possibilities of our future. We belong to each other, right here, right now, in community. We belong to life and love and the conviction and the hope that together we can work toward a brighter future. And we keep hope alive by moving through our lives with a sense of connectedness: to each other, to our world, and to our faith: past, present and future.

Blessed be and amen.

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2 Rasor, p. 88.
3 Rasor, p. 87.