Whose Are We?

The question for today is the title of the sermon: whose are we? It is a question that is easily answered by many religions. For instance a Christian might say “we belong to God as revealed through the teachings of Jesus and the Holy Bible”. A member of the Jewish faith would probably say, “we are in Covenant with Yahweh as defined in the Hebrew Bible,” and a devout follower of the Sikh Dharma might well say “We are taught by the Shabad Guru, that human birth is a special chance to merge into the Divine Light of which we are a part.” And I could go on with additional examples, but I think I’ve proven my point: most religions claim a centering power to which the followers belong. That is sort of fundamental theology. But when Unitarian Universalists are asked the question, whose are we? the answer, if there is one, is not simple at all.

Certainly as individuals, many of us can answer the question and there are undoubtedly individuals within our congregations who would claim each of the answers from other faiths that I’ve just used as examples. And more – we have UU’s who are followers of the Buddhist tradition [or should I say ‘traditions’ since all Buddhists, just like all Christians or Unitarian Universalists, cannot be lumped in the same category]. We have followers of earth-centered traditions who would claim, individually, that they belong to the understandings taught in their particular branch of that wide category. We have a vast number of atheists and agnostics who would claim that the question, taken in theological terms, is irrelevant. And so on . . . it’s clearly stating the obvious to even point out that we don’t agree with one another on the subject of theology!

And the question becomes even more complicated by the way it is worded: ‘whose are we’ implies belonging to something or someone in a way that could be interpreted as denying us our freedom – something that is anathema to UU’s. We prize, above all, our freedom to think and believe as we will, to choose our actions or incarnation of those thoughts and beliefs for ourselves, and to use reason and experience in judging the wisdom and truth of anyone’s or any ‘power’s’ authority or teaching. It’s not for naught that leading Unitarian Universalists is often described as “herding cats.” I, personally, would prefer to think of today’s question as “what can we agree upon?” or perhaps “what is fundamental to all Unitarian Universalists?”
suspect that even the most obdurate of ‘cats’ would be willing to allow that there needs to be something that binds us together.

That was one of the basic questions asked by The Commission on Appraisal in their 2005 publication, *Engaging Our Theological Diversity.*” They phrased it this way:

What is, indeed, at the center of our faith? What is it that holds us together? To refuse the challenge and the opportunity afforded by the question, “Is there a unity in our theological diversity?” is to back away from one of the most important issues affecting the UU faith today. As Walter Herz writes, “Theological diversity alone is an entirely inadequate basis for a strongly associated congregation of individuals, or for a truly functional association of congregations.” Not to take up this question risks being “reduced to an agglomeration of liberal religious boutiques, loosely associated and without any real organizing principle.”

Asking and answering the question of what is central to our faith is perhaps one of the most important things we can do if we are making a commitment to this faith. Not to ask it implies that we are on a quest that is separate from and not abetted by Unitarian Universalism and it begs the question of why we continue to associate ourselves with the faith. It may even call into question, as many of our detractors claim, whether we are actually a faith or religion at all. That is something that I absolutely disagree with, but if we cannot name a center that we covenant together to uphold, it becomes very difficult to support my contention – especially with those who believe that a religion, to have legitimacy, must center on a god concept and a divine text or teaching.

So I’m going to explore for a few minutes what I think is at the center of our faith and then talk a little bit about how that relates to the original question: whose are we?

I believe that we are all on a journey – that is what life is – a journey to find meaning, to make sense of it all. It’s a personal journey, because each of us has to take the journey as an individual; we don’t allow simply saying “what s/he said!” as the answer to our quest for meaning. That shouldn’t imply that we can’t study or learn from the wisdom of others, but it does mean that calling it our own can’t be done as a knee-jerk reaction to the task. We must take time, search our innermost being, explore many ways of being and understanding as part of the quest for truth and meaning. Only then is it OK to take someone else’s truth as our own, and even then it should seem like a truth born out of the fire of our own quest. And this becomes lonely and difficult if we must do it alone. We are called to it by our fourth principle – “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning” – and we are not being true to the call of
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Unitarian Universalism [coming to us from UU prophets down the ages] unless we undertake the quest. And the fact that the search is a free one means we are under no obligation to accept the understanding anyone else has come to, just as we are obligated to not try to impose our own understanding on others as the definition of what a UU believes. What makes it responsible is that we put time and effort into it and struggle to make sense of it all [remember we are called upon to both accept the experience of transcending mystery and wonder and to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science in our search]. As one of my own most revered ministers said the day I joined the church he served, “It is difficult to be a Unitarian Universalist. We don’t tell others what to believe, we must each find it for ourselves.” But, and this most important, is that we don’t have to make the journey alone! We covenant with one another to support and accept each other in our search, and to encourage each other to spiritual growth as part of being together in a community. That’s our third principal, somewhat paraphrased. I’ve always thought it was interesting that, in the listing of our principles, the encouragement of each other comes before the entreaty to search for meaning and truth for ourselves. It almost seems counter-intuitive – shouldn’t it be the other way around? First we find meaning for ourselves, then we support others? Well, here’s what I’ve figured out for myself [part of my truth]: our principles are guidelines to how we relate to each other within our congregations [and in the larger society as well] and the act of supporting one another comes before the individual quest. The quest, after all, will last a lifetime, whereas the opportunity to support each other is here, right now – it can’t wait until we’ve finished our own journey. And I like best the way Wayne Arnason, UU minister in Ohio, puts it: “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.” [Taken from the UUMA worship materials Collection, p.238]  

What is at the center of our faith? For me, it is the commitment to be there for one another, non-judgmentally, as we proceed on the journey of life and our quest for understanding. And that, in my mind, is lived theology.

But there’s more! For many of us we have agreed to live with uncertainty, with mystery, with not being able to know for sure! Blogger Tom Wilson says

Inherent to liberal religion is humility with respect to the certainty of our beliefs, our experience, and our conclusions. Whether willingly or not, we left the comfort of certainty behind in the

I believe that this willingness to live without certainty and endure the difficulties involved in this choice is an incredible act of faith. I’ve often said that if I could believe that I had the right answer, I would: it would make life so much easier and more comfortable. But I can’t and I accept as part of my commitment to Unitarian Universalism that I need to seek truth in spite of that uncertainty. I need to be able to say it’s ok for me not to ‘know’ and still understand that I must continue the quest, coming as close as I can to my own enlightenment. The English teacher in me is convinced that all ‘religious beliefs’ are basically metaphors – they have some truth in them, but they still miss the mark. It’s the best we can hope for, and the willingness to search and then commit to the best I can find – while always remaining open to new truth [James Luther Adams claimed that “the canon is not closed; revelation is ongoing] – is at the heart of what Unitarian Universalism requires of us – all of us – regardless of what that truth turns out to be or how different it is for each of us.

And then we claim our ‘living tradition.’ Religion for us as UU’s is not about a dry, theological, philosophical, or analytical study – it is lived. We are called to make the world we live in a better place than it was before – to leave the campsite cleaner than we found it. To be a Unitarian Universalist means for us to live it in this moment; to stand with and for those things we hold dear; to work for freedom, equity, peace, and justice in our society and in our world; and to do so with compassion. We are called not to tell a good story, but to incarnate it in our daily lives. That, too, is part of our grounding theology.

So now I’m ready to turn back to the initial question: whose are we? Taken altogether, I believe our core, agreed upon understandings invite us to two conclusions we might all agree with. First we belong to ourselves. We must find our own center and then live our lives with the integrity that comes from knowing what it is we hold dear, what we understand our purpose to be, what we can offer to the world we inhabit while always remembering the interdependent web of which we are a part. We don’t have one sacred text – we take wisdom from many. As I am writing this part of today’s sermon I’m reminded of a great sage who frequently offers me
insight: William Shakespeare. In one of his most famous plays he creates a character that in many ways is a buffoon – a puffed up windbag who blathers on incessantly to all who will listen, boring them to tears with what seems unending and often ridiculous rhetoric. But Shakespeare gives him one speech that is equal to any other piece of advice we might call upon. Sending his son out into the world he offers him advice on how to conduct himself that includes the following wise counsel:

This above all: to thine own self be true, And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man.  
*Hamlet Act 1, scene 3, 78–82*

What greater wisdom might we ask for? Ultimately we must be true to ourselves – that is part of our Unitarian Universalist understanding of how we might live life well. It is a belief in the individual, it is a tenet of freedom, and it is what allows us to experience our humanity. For some of us, being true to ourselves is cloaked in an understanding of a transcending reality of which we are a part, while to others it is enough that we are part of this amazing cosmos we inhabit – it is enough without a transcending reality beyond. But in either case it is our personal integrity that is essential to that humanity and in order to have that as part of who we are, we must first belong to ourselves.

That, by itself, is not enough. It is necessary, but not sufficient! Go back to Polonious’ speech and note that the result of being true to oneself is that one then will be true to others. The Rev. Burton Carley affirms that Unitarian Universalist communities are centered not around belief but covenant. “We come together to share right relationship rather than right beliefs,” From our very beginnings, we have been a covenantal faith tradition, agreeing to join together to support one another and to find our way through life’s struggles and life’s joys in community. This is fundamental to what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist. From the “Whose Are We Manual” I found the following insight from Douglas Steere, a Quaker teacher. He claims the deep question we must each ask is

“Whose am I?” – because there is no identity outside of relationships. You can’t be a person by yourself. To ask “Whose Am I?” is to extend the questions far beyond the little self-absorbed self, and wonder: Who needs you? Who loves you? To whom are you accountable?

And UU minister, Victoria Safford, enlarges upon this saying, “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?” [from the *Whose Are We Manual*] These questions are life affirming ones that are inherent in our understanding of what it means to commit to Unitarian Universalism. They are questions that we must answer and that call us first into community and then to covenant. The covenant may be explicit or implicit, but it is integral to what it means to be part of a UU community. Whose are we? We are each other’s.

So, does it matter if we can’t agree upon a transcendent power or the lack of one? Does the theological diversity that makes up almost every [probably every] UU community serve as a weakness in our faith? In a 2007 Prairie Group Paper, entitled *We Covenant*, Burton Carley neatly ties it up for me.

The church is at the intersection of the covenant where the sacred and the human meet, where the eternal and the temporal make contact. In that crossing place the people turn aside and respond to the call of the Holy. There are many names for that reality that calls us into relationship, and many practices or paths to it. This source that is greater than us and not of our making, this gift and power that makes possible covenant, can be called universal love, the Spirit of Life, the Oversoul, God, Goddess, Ultimate Reality, the Holy, the Ground of Being, Creative Power, Mystery. [taken from the *Whose Are We Manual*.]

What is important is not whether we all believe there is a god/goddess or we don’t, or even what the nature of that god might be, but rather that we know who we are, that we covenant to be in interdependent community with each other and all life, and that we live out that covenant faithfully. That is the essence of what it means to be Unitarian Universalist.