There is a story being told among members of the Unitarian Universalist Ministers’ Association (UUMA) about a Catholic priest: “It seems that in Seattle the interfaith clergy organization has a tradition of asking senior colleagues to share their life odysseys. On this particular occasion, a Roman Catholic Priest was telling his story, and he said that his life had been in large measure a failure. He remembered the heady days of Vatican II and how hopeful he and his generation of liberal priests had been that real change was coming to the church he loved so dearly. And yet; these many years later he felt that the church had if anything become hardened and deeply conservative, and his dreams had not been realized. Now, this priest was someone who was valued among his interfaith colleagues, and they were somewhat hurt and stunned by his revelation. And yet; one colleague noted, despite the severity of his words, his demeanor seemed quite peaceful and content. ‘How can you claim that your life was a failure, and yet appear so calm and serene?’ ‘I know whose I am,’ replied the priest. ‘I know whose I am.’” (Whose Are We Facilitator Program Page 4, UUA).

This story is told to members of the UUMA attending a retreat or workshop, there is a very long pause and then we are asked “Whose are we?” “Whose are you?” “Whose am I?”

I was first asked this question last year attending the Mountain Desert District Retreat. I had just left my family and community behind in Dallas to set off on my first year in ministry alone. I had been gone for three weeks. It was two days after I had celebrated my birthday with total strangers. It was a good question to ask a new minister who had just been launched into mystery. “Whose am I?”

The Reverend Gordon McKeeman is minister emeritus of the Unitarian Universalist
Church of Akron, Ohio, where he served for twenty-two years, and a former president of Starr King School for the Ministry until his retirement in 1988. He served for many years on the UUA board of trustees and several committees, and has written widely on ministry, theology, spiritual discipline and education. McKeeman wrote that “Ministry is a quality of relationship between and among human beings that beckons forth hidden possibilities. It is inviting people into deeper, more constant, more reverent relationship with the world and with one another.” Gordon McKeeman mentored many students during his time as the president of Starr King School for the Ministry. The Reverend Dennis Hamilton was one of those students. Dennis Hamilton mentored me during my ministerial internship. Whose am I? I am Gordon McKeeman’s. I am Dennis Hamilton’s. I belong to the ministers of First Unitarian Church of Dallas, the Rev. Dr. Laurel Hallman and the Rev. Dr. Daniel Kanter, ministers who inspire me to excellence. I belong to a long tradition that “invites people into deeper, more constant, more reverent relationship with the world and with one another.”

Whose am I? I am also yours.

The story of the “perfect minister” is another story that circulates among my colleagues. Both Unitarian Universalists and non-UUs like to include this laugh out loud list of attributes in newsletter articles and sermons as a light-hearted reminder to congregations searching for new ministers and in other times of transition. It is a humorous reminder that the minister you call is human. I happen to like this description of the perfect minister: “He works from 8:00 AM until midnight and is also a janitor. He makes $50 a week, wears good clothes, buys good books, drives a good car, and gives about $50 weekly to the poor. He is 28 years old and has preached 30 years.” I like this description of the perfect minister because the perfect minister is obviously a man. That lets me off the hook.
It lets me “off the hook” of that list but there is another list that binds me, that tells me whose I am. This list was created by your ministerial search committee last year and I think it’s worth reading to you as we start our new ministry together.

The Conejo Unitarian Universalist Fellowship is looking for

- A talented and inspired preacher who will consistently deliver provocative and moving worship programs and sermons.
- A visionary leader who will articulate a compelling, motivating mission to attract new people, inspire deeper commitment in our existing members, and illuminate our congregation’s voice and identity.
- An empathetic shepherd with strong people skills, who is warm, who connects with others and truly enjoys people individually, and who will foster in us all a sense of community and healthy relationships.
- A strategic thinker who will support and guide our lay leaders, members, and staff, steering us always toward improving our management, communication, and stewardship skills and practices in ways that are collaborative and empowering.
- A minister who is dedicated to our growth, in every sense of that word.
- A minister who will bring to our service a profound and sacred respect for the diverse spiritual paths, beliefs, and interests among our members.
- A minister who will appreciate, share and nurture our congregation’s love of music, drama, art and creativity.
- A minister who will embrace the children in our congregation, and who will be a champion for them, their religious education, and their families.
- A minister who is passionate about social justice and about engaging with others to provide visible public witness in the larger community.
- An individual of strong personal character and integrity whose behavior models Unitarian Universalist values and principles.

Whose am I? I am the servant of this clearly articulated vision. I am the servant of an idea that leads us all into what this Fellowship is becoming. Whose am I? I am yours. And if this list calls us all into rigid perfection, then I am also the student of a man who likes to say he gets paid for being human. This is the minister’s role put succinctly by my mentor, the Rev. Dennis Hamilton: “A minister is someone who gets paid for being human.”

And as a flawed, vulnerable human I am grateful to stand every Sunday in the place I had been hoping to stand for so long. Literally I am standing, leading worship. Figuratively I am standing in such a way so that Love can move through me. What I feel in many moments of
ministry is the love for another human being that is not the personal attachment love of friendship but the greater Love that isn’t mine to give in the first place, but somehow needs me (and you) to be manifest. This is the me/not me of ministry that reminds me of my humanity and my humility. Ministry is done through me not by me, and it absolutely knocks me down to my knees in awe every time.

Whose am I? I belong to the Spirit of Love and Life, this God of many names and mystery beyond all our naming, this word we cannot agree on this thing that is beyond us, within us and among us, this elephant in the room that we cannot name because we dare not exclude anyone who enters our doors. Whose am I? I belong to Unitarian Universalism and I serve something larger than our faith. Whose am I? I belong to those who have come before me who have served in the role of priest and prophet, I belong to this whole human dilemma and I belong to God.

There, I said it. And now the conversation begins. I think a good place to start a conversation about God is with a quote from a Buddhist. American Buddhist nun, author and teacher Pema Chodron writes:

The difference between theism and nontheism is not whether one does or does not believe in God. It is an issue that applies to everyone, including both Buddhists and non-Buddhists. Theism is a deep-seated conviction that there’s some hand to hold: if we just do the right things, someone will appreciate us and take care of us. …Nontheism is relaxing with the ambiguity and uncertainty of the present moment without reaching for anything to protect ourselves. (When Things Fall Apart p. 40)

If I just fix this one problem at work everything will be okay. If I just make more money everything will be okay. If I do what the congregation tells me to do then everything will be okay. Preaching, leading, empathizing, strategizing, growing the congregation, sacred respect, love of the arts, encouraging children, engaging in social justice, character and integrity – the ten
characteristics you wanted your new minister to have - are not gifts from a God who reaches down from the sky and makes everything okay. The God I serve is the God of the still, small voice inside both you and me. The divine I serve unfolds in my unfolding, emerges from my emerging self, and is revealed in sacred relationship. Whose am I? I belong to those who come before me, I am yours and I belong to the ongoing act of creation itself.

A story is told. A Catholic priest proclaims, “I know whose I am” and Unitarian Universalist ministers ask each other the question, “Whose Are We?” “Whose Are We” is a curriculum developed for UU ministers, funded by the Fund for Unitarian Universalism and The UUA Panel on Theological Education. It is the type of program funded by our annual Association Sunday that this year is a celebration of all our ministries: parish ministry, community ministry, music ministry and religious education. “Whose Are We” is a probing curriculum that asks ministers who may be more comfortable with the language of psychology, philosophy and sociology to ground their ministry in the language of theology. As a part of this program, UUMA chapters are providing small groups for spiritual discernment, practice and support. One of the goals is that UU congregations will benefit from a clearer theological and spiritual grounding for the work of building the beloved community and creating justice in the larger world. What is our “saving message” and how do we tell our communities who we are and what larger purpose we serve? Who are we? What are we?

Douglas Steere, a Quaker teacher, says that the ancient question, “What am I?” inevitably leads to a deeper one, “Whose am I?” – because there is no identity outside of relationships. (from the UUMA curriculum, “Whose Are We?”)

All of us who serve in our many professional ministries are asked to answer the question, “Whose are we?” And so are you.
What calls you here today? What calls you to a religious community? What calls you out of yourself and into relationship with the transcendent? Whose are you?

I invite you into a conversation that begins today. I invite you into a conversation that does not end with my time here or your time here because who we serve is the past, present and the future. I invite you into the language of metaphor, the language of the Spirit. God is not God’s name. God is a metaphor. The holy, the divine, the transcendent, all of these are metaphors for the deeper human experience that calls us out of our small selves into our better selves. Whose are you?

When I first met you in April I shared my spiritual practice of exploring deeper meaning through the language of metaphor as used in poetry and other inspired writing. I shared Gordon McKeeman’s meditation on the meaning of ministry with some of you and then talked about how everything we do here is ministry. How, as Unitarian Universalists, ours is a shared ministry. The group I shared this with expressed relief at this concept of shared ministry, wondering how one person could do all that is described by McKeeman. Yet there is this daunting list of 10 characteristics that I am expected to embody as the professional minister called to serve this congregation. I do not live into this list alone. “Whose are we” is not a question asked only to celebrate excellence in our professional ministry. It is a question we can ask each other. When we know whose we are we can relax into the uncertainty of the present moment. When we know whose we are. We can celebrate who we are.