Whose Are We?

CENTERING

In Words

“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 no identity outside of relationship. You can’t 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?”

In Silence

So…whose are we?

What have we done here today?
We have come together welcoming us all home for the start of the Fellowship year.
Ingathering Sunday is a time of renewal and reflection.
We celebrate and plan and make new our promises to each other and our faith community.

As we read our Covenant each week we are reminded of those promises and we point to how we may fulfill them.
We held our New Member Recognition Ceremony of Covenant – a ceremony of welcome and belonging to those who have recently found within us a religious home.
All of these things point us to ‘whose we are…”

We belong to each other…
To this place...
To our tradition…

My interest in the issue of belonging to something/somethings/someones greater than myself is not new.

I’ve pondered what it means to be a person – to know my solitude and aloneness, and to know without a doubt as well that I ‘am not my own.’

I am my sister’s, my brother’s, my nieces’ and nephews’. I am my ancestor’s and I am those to come.

“We are not our own” is a hymn by Brian Wren in our Singing the Journey hymnal.
He writes,

"We are not our own earth forms us, human leaves on nature’s growing vine, fruit of many generations, seeds of life divine,” reminding us that we belong to the earth, each other, and to that which is greater than ourselves – the Spirit of Life, the More-ness, God.

Recently, though, I’ve had occasion to reflect on this with my colleagues in UU ministry. The UU Minister’s Association invited all the district minister’s chapters in the country to spend retreat time exploring the question – “Whose are we?” in relation to our call to ministry, our covenant with each, and with the holy as we understand the holy…

Last September we did just that – we gathered at the Mary and Joseph Retreat Center in Rancho Palos Verde, where we meet two times each year. We spent three days in pairs and then small groups and then the wider group with the goals of the Whose Are We? Project before us…

To be more comfortable and articulate about the theological and spiritual aspect of Unitarian Universalism and to share that with our congregations...
To provide small groups for discernment, practice, and support among colleagues.
To help our congregations spiritual ground the work of building the beloved comm..unity
and creating justice in the wider world, and thus grower deeper as congregations...to talke about who we are as UUs and what larger purposes we serve.

And so we sat, we diverse groups of ministers, and spoke in language sometimes different than that of our colleagues, but no less extending radical hospitality to one another and to each other’s ideas and beliefs...making space for what I call the “More-ness” - that which both contains and transcends...the creative interchange in which the spirit of love is made manifest.

We were invited to talk about our calls to ministry and the covenants to that we hold.
1. the Covenant of our call to ministry
2. the covenant with our congregations
3. the covenant with our colleagues

For three days we explored how we could be with each other, to be safe emotionally in all of who we are...forgiving and forgiven...and opened to the movement of the More-ness, the Spirit, the Mystery, God...

This story, from Rev. Sarah Lamme’s, was recounted as the seed of this project. She wrote:

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.”

(from Rev. Sarah Lammert’s Whose Are We? Sermon, Feb 1, 2009)

“Whose Am I?” I asked myself.

A few years ago, at one of the retreats at the Mary and Joseph Retreat Center in Rancho Palos Verde, I picked up a key chain with these words from Isaiah 43:1

“I have called you by name and you are mine...”

Who has called me by name?
I want to admit that it is difficult for me to come up with the words to name what it is that has called me.

Again...for me...the More-ness...the spirit of live and love, or the Holy Spirit of Universalism...that which is more than me...the lure to beauty, truth, and goodness...

Here...this might help...

You know I love my birds, the ones in my yard, and well, all birds, okay all animals and this might help me to explain.
Worship Associate, Susan Thayer was at my house on Monday we sat outside in my bird-filled back yard. We both noticed a small bird had been sitting in my in the tray of my bird feeder - she was fluffy and puffed up…she was not a baby, she’s too big for that. We speculated about her well-being: Is she sick? She didn’t fly off when the other birds did so in that somewhat skittish way that they have. Rather she sat in the tray, the other birds returned and simply ate around the puffed up bird, paying no attention to her at all. At one point, Susan and I looked up and hadn’t noticed that the subject of our speculation had flown off.

I’ve seen her every day since. She sits on the lawn or in the feeder and I’m sure each time that she will die right in front of me.

Yesterday she sat in the feeder tray puffed up so round with her head tucked under a wing…surely, this is the day I thought, resisting the urge to go out and hold her, believing that it would comfort her, but knowing it would have been for my sake.

Next I saw her, with her feathers all disheveled, pecking on the lawn…maybe not today then. Maybe I won’t know and just miss her tomorrow or the next day.

Make know mistake about it I am that bird’s.
My life is bound up in her life – her well-being matters to me. She lives in me now. No matter her fate, no matter our differences, she has opened a place in my heart and perches there still.

The little bird has laid claim on me as surely as if she had called my name.
I am also my sister’s and brother’s, my niece’s and nephew’s, my ancestors, and I belong to those who will come after me.

And you…you – I am yours, called by you – called by name by you. I am bound up with you as individuals and as an institution…I am accountable to you and with you as we strive together to be “more than we would ever be alone.”

I belong to this faith, to Unitarian Universalism.
At my ordination these words were spoken:
“We, the members of Orange Coast Unitarian Universalist Church, do hereby ordain you Beth Ann Johnson, to the Unitarian Universalist ministry. Among us, where you may be called to serve, may you teach by your example as well as your words. May you be faithful in your witness to love, courageous in your prophetic voice, and ever constant in your commitment to the web of life.”

From that point on understood myself as belonging to this tradition in a new way, and I am accountable to it – to those who have gone before –those saints whose brave lives have shaped me: Theodore Parker, Henry Bergh, and countless others - those know and unknown whose dedication has shaped our movement, and hence me.

I am accountable to those who are yet to come…to be a good steward of this faith and to be a shaper as well…to be the longed for home of the “seekers of truth and keepers of faith, makers of peace, and wisdom of ages.”

To ask “whose are you?” belies the underlying assumption that we are not our own…

For all of our aloneness and the solitude that we sometimes crave or that which is thrust upon us, we still belong – to something, to someones…

We exist in a web of connections, each to each, person to person, species to species, us to earth and the very cosmos that pulses through us...

WHOSE ARE YOU?
To whom do you belong?
Who calls you by name?
If not literally by name, whose claim on you is unmistakable, unavoidable…
Whom do you answer to?
Whose new and plump or aged and crooked hand reaches for you?
Who calls to you in the middle of the night or in your dreams?
Who claims you?
Is it the homeless person on the side of the road in their lonely poverty?
Is it the immigrant, whose humanity defiled, you are compelled to defend?
Is it the animal afraid and lonely languishing in a shelter or terrified on a factory farm?

PLEASE TAKE A MOMENT, ENTER INTO SILENCE AND ASK YOURSELF
WHOSE ARE YOU?
WHEN THE BELL SOUNDS, WRITE YOUR RESPONSE ON THE INSERT IN YOUR
BULLETIN
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(I allowed some time while music was played for folks to write their responses. I used really nice
dpaper that folks would want to hold on to.)

I invite you take that home with you – put it your wallet, your altar, your desk…
The question whose am I does lead us to ask, Whose are We? as a religious community…
We are a covenanted body that exists not just for our own purposes.
I believe answering the questions “Whose Am I?” and “Whose Are We?” are the
essential questions of our religious community…
We are not simply a collection of individuals - we form a community and we belong to
each other and we belong to more than each other. We affirm that each week when we give
beyond our community.

This year we will spend time discovering whose we are? in our community as we explore
spiritual themes each month. We will do that in our religious exploration classes, in Covenant
Circles, as well as a monthly spiritual theme group I will hold a gathering to explore and reflect
on that month’s theme.

We will do Building Your Own Theology in a day-long retreat format on Nov. 5 and
there are other small group ministries in which we will offer opportunities to deepen spiritually,
to discern and hear Whose Are We?

Our Social Justice committee will be grounding its work spiritually through reflection…
The overall theme of our church year, “Living Our Covenant, invites us all into
deeper communion with each other and with the sacred.
I invite you to regularly read the congregational covenant in its entirety on the back of
your order of service even as each week we read the last part of it, and let these words remind us
of whose we are and how we will be with one another.

In mutual love and grace, we journey together grounded in profound respect for a diversity of
beliefs and ideas, sustained by service and shared ministry, enriched through collective spiritual
deepening and a safe environment for all generations to thrive. Together we are more than we
would ever be alone.

Therefore we promise:
To Practice Radical Hospitality:
  We honor respect and celebrate the inherent worth and dignity of all beings.
  We embrace diversity of culture, race, sexual identity, gender, differing abilities, and ages and stages of life.
  We welcome all in love, warmth and generosity as we nurture each other into our authentic selves.

To Practice Mindful Communication:
  We foster healthy relationships through honest, responsible, and direct communication, valuing humor and joy.
  We express ourselves and set our boundaries with love and kindness while presuming one another’s good intentions.
  We listen attentively, speak our truth with compassion, convey appreciation, practice forgiveness, and welcome ourselves and others back into covenant.

To Practice Active Stewardship:
  We assume individual & shared responsibility by generously supporting the congregation with our time, talents, and treasures.
  We deepen and grow spiritually through involvement with the congregation and the wider community.
  We stand on the side of love, engaged in the world through acts of witness, service, justice, and peacemaking.

Thus do covenant with each other.

May it be so…