Whose Are We
Rev. Tim House, Channing Church UU, Rockland MA

Reading:

From Today’s Children and Yesterday’s Heritage
By Sophia Lyon Fahs

The religious way is the deep way, the way with a growing perspective and an expanding view. It is the way that dips into the heart of things, into personal feelings, yearnings and hostilities that so often must be buried and despised and left misunderstood. The religious way is the way that sees what physical eyes alone fail to see, the intangibles at the heart of every phenomenon. The religious way is the way that touches universal relationships; that goes high, wide and deep, that expands the feelings of kinship. And if God symbolizes or means these larger relationships, the religious way means finding God; but the word in itself is not too important. It is the enlarged and deepening experiences that bring the growing insights and that create the sustaining ambition "to find life and to find it abundantly" that really count most. When such a religious quality of exploration is the goal, any subject, any phenomenon, any thing, animate or inanimate, human or animal, may be the starting point.

Whose are we? Whose are you? To whom or to what do we belong? To whom or to what are we accountable?

That question got asked a lot when I was in seminary. My Christian colleagues know the answer to that question. They belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God, and so, by inference, they belong to God. There is no question about accountability. They are accountable to God. Their source of religious authority is the word of God as revealed in scripture

In the Unitarian Universalist Pocket Guide, we are told that "for Unitarian Universalists the individual is the ultimate source of religious authority." Now, I know what this means. We are not required to believe any particular doctrine about the nature of ultimate reality, We are free to find our own “theological” truths as revealed in our individual lives and experiences. We are free to find our own metaphors and images and names to describe that ultimately reality. We have freedom of religious belief. And that makes sense to me. But, “religious belief” and Spiritual wholeness” are not the same thing. And we need to be careful that our sense of our 'individual authority' doesn't lead us to a
kind of spiritual and cultural isolationism – both as individuals and as a religious movement.

In the midst of our religious diversity and our individual spiritual journeys, do we Unitarian Universalists belong to anything greater than ourselves? Something that connects us to everything else? Is there a wholeness of which we are an integral part? If so, what is it? How do we relate to it? If we can’t say we belong to “God,” what can we say? Whose are we?

A metaphor for the creation of the cosmos that I like very much is found in the writings of the Jewish Kabbalah. It goes like this: In order for there to be room enough for the cosmos to come into existence, the infinite divine light – the Ein Sof – needed to give up some of itself to create a space. As the portion of the Ein Sof that was given up was being moved, the vessel in which it had been placed was accidentally dropped and it shattered. Sparks of divine light were scattered to all corners of the cosmos. All of creation, everything and everyone in the cosmos, is a spark of that divine light. Everything and everyone in the cosmos comes from the same source. We are all made of the same stuff. Divine light. Whose are we? To what do we belong? We belong to the Divine Light. That’s one metaphor – one expression of religious belief.

Interestingly, contemporary quantum mechanics has come up with about the same story: everything in our universe is made of the same stuff. Stardust. Stars exploded, and the shattered remains – with the help of gravity – created new worlds. One of them our planet. At the atomic level, we are all made of the same matter and the same energy in constant flux. The continuing interchange between those two manifestations of life, connect everyone and everything to everything else. We are interdependent. Whose are we? To what do we belong? We belong to the cosmic dance of matter and energy.

The Kabbalah tells us that it is our mission in life to seek to uncover the fragments of divine light in others, and in doing so, participate in the process of Tikkun Olam – healing the fragmented world; helping to reveal all the sparks and bring them back together,
reintegrated in their source. The word religion comes from the Latin: “re-ligare” - to reconnect. “The central task of a religious community,” Mark Morrison-Reed tells us, “is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all.”

In the reading by Sophia Fahs, she said that “The religious way is the way that sees what physical eyes alone fail to see, the intangibles at the heart of every phenomenon.” And, the intangible that lies at the heart of both these ways of seeing – the Kabbalah and Quantum Mechanics - is the ultimate connectedness of everything and everyone. The one thing we cannot be in this life is separate. We human beings have always had a hard time accepting this. But, like it or not, we cannot be “independent” existentially. What goes around, comes around, as the popular saying goes. We are all part of the interdependent web of all existence, as our Seventh Unitarian Universalist Principle states. Whose are we? To what do we belong? We belong to the Interdependent Web.

As Unitarian Universalists we are free to describe this ultimate reality however we will: Divine Light...Stardust...nature...God...The Web...Spirit of Life. But however we choose to describe it, the “Ultimate connectedness of existence” remains essential. We are interdependent. We are all aspects of the same Whole. Unique and individual, yes. But our uniqueness and individuality are no more - or less – than different iterations of the One ongoing creative event of existence. We can be “independent” in our thoughts, and beliefs, but we are interdependent in our existential condition as living, social beings. We are, in fact, One.

Whose are we? To whom do we belong? We belong to each other.

Okay, that’s nice. We know that. God is one. We are one. We affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person. And we tolerate a lot of diversity of belief. But here’s the rub. Tolerance and interconnectedness are not the same thing. In fact tolerance can be a tactic to keep from being interconnected. Tolerance is me being me over here, agreeing to let you be you over there. Tolerance can be a way to avoid the kind of transforming experiences that are at the heart of what Sophia Fahs calls the religious way. “the deep way, the way with a growing perspective and an expanding view.”

Tolerance doesn’t lead to “A growing perspective and an expanding view.” In fact, it
often allows us to ignore what she calls the “personal feelings, yearnings and hostilities that [are often] buried and despised and left misunderstood.” Ignoring these essential elements of our spiritual beings just contributes to our brokenness. We are all dealing with spiritual brokenness in this world of ours, and we aren't going to be healed through tolerance. Tolerance just becomes a way of avoiding the conflicts and difficulties of real spiritual growth and transformation. Affirming everyone’s worth and dignity is a good thing. But, if it’s only at a safe distance, it remains a “concept” rather than a spiritual practice. Concepts won't heal the broken world.

To me, the heart of our religion is not tolerance. The heart of our religion is engagement. Creative, curious, respectful engagement with one another and with the world. Theologian Henry Nelson Wieman called such engagement “creative interchange.” In his book The Source of Human Good, he asks that we intentionally engage others who have different ways of making meaning – different values and truths. Not tolerate them. Engage them, with the intention of enlarging our understanding of what is valuable and true. In creative interchange, he says, “the needs and interests of others get across to me, transform my own mind, my own desires and felt needs, so as to include theirs.” Real value – what Wieman calls “the Good” - is not in what any of us as individuals has created, but in the process of ongoing creation that takes place when we honestly open ourselves to one another. Value is created in what happens between us. Creative interchange is a process of engaging our interdependence in a spiritually transformative way.

What is involved is open and honest communication with others – sharing our stories and our different understandings of what is true and good, and trying to sense the underlying connections in our different ways of making meaning in our lives. What we seek is an expanded understanding of truth that resonates beyond the limitations of our individual truths. As Sophia Fahs puts it, we seek ”the enlarged and deepening experiences that bring the growing insights and that create the sustaining ambition "to find life and to find it abundantly.” Abundantly! There is abundant life to be found in sharing our stories and in listening deeply to the stories of others. And the potential for healing is found there as well – healing ourselves and healing the world. In sharing our stories we uncover the
life-sustaining – and life-enhancing threads of our interdependence. We begin to help one another and the world become Whole again.

These kinds of creative events are already happening in many of our congregations. *Woman’s Spirituality groups*, the *Men’s groups*, and *Building Your Own Theology courses* are a few that come to mind. Anti-Racism, Anti-Opression, Multicultural trainings and workshops lead us into engagement. And our participation in inter-faith groups is another way we are engaging difference and exploring interdependence outside the walls of our churches and Fellowships. These help us to seek “the religious way: the way that touches universal relationships; that goes high, wide and deep, that expands the feelings of kinship.”

“Going high, wide and deep” isn’t always smooth sailing. Transforming experiences rarely are. Sometimes we feel lost. But, if we don’t get a little lost, we will never make any new discoveries. Venturing into unfamiliar territory, our understanding of our own neighborhoods can be transformed. Our perspective on life and our sense of truth can be enlarged. Our interconnection with our world can be expanded. And our knowledge of ourselves can grow and evolve in new life-giving directions. “To become whole – we must sometimes take risks that threaten our security and safety,” says Susan Suchocki Brown in *Soul Work*. To become whole, we need to risk venturing out of the familiar to explore our interdependence with what is unfamiliar.

Being our own ultimate source of religious authority is a good thing. But it’s not an end. It is a means. It is the perspective that frees us to be able to engage others - in all our interconnectedness – no matter what their source of religious authority might be. I don’t believe truth is “relative.” That implies that truth lies in the individual. Rather, I think that truth is fluid. As Richard Francis says, “The truth is not visible until it begins to move.” And it doesn’t begin to move until we begin to engage others who are different from us in creative interchange. It doesn’t begin to move until we begin listening deeply to the stories of those different from us – and experiencing them listening deeply to our own. My guess is that in telling them to others who’s daily reality is very different from our own, we will hear our own stories quite differently. The truth isn’t in us or in them. It is in the space of interconnection that we create between us. It is in the sparks of Divine Light that are uncovered and reintegrated in that sacred space. Truth is found in the spaces between us.
“The central task of a religious community,” in the words of Mark Morrison-Reed, “is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all.” May we make that our central task.

Whose are we? To whom do we belong? We say “we are One.” If we are One, we belong to one another.

May it Be So