The spirit
likes to dress up like this:
  ten fingers,
  ten toes,

shoulders, and all the rest
at night
  in the black branches,
  in the morning

in the blue branches
  of the world.
  It could float, of course,
  but would rather
plumb rough matter.

Airy and shapeless thing,
it needs
  the metaphor of the body,

lime and appetite,
  the oceanic fluids;
  it needs the body's world,
  instinct

and imagination
  and the dark hug of time,
  sweetness
  and tangibility,

to be understood,
to be more than pure light
  that burns
  where no one is --

so it enters us --
in the morning
  shines from brute comfort
  like a stitch of lightning;

and at night
  lights up the deep and wondrous
  drownings of the body
  like a star.
SERMON

“To be understood, Spirit enters us -- and
in the morning
shines from brute comfort
like a stitch of lightning”

These words of Mary Oliver shine through our morning, proclaiming the spirit’s need for
a body, body’s need for the breath of life spirit confers ...

Spirit requires that we open the temples of our body to give it shape,
in return asking our bodies to share its encounter with the spirit -
to praise it, to allow its power to nurture us and nourish one another
The spirit not only dresses up like this, it asks us to feed it with embodied attention
It wants us to sing, to dance, to pray, to walk in the woods,
to gaze in reverent awe a the night sky
The body is the engine of the spirit’s regeneration,
just as the spirit is the animating force of the body’s love and power, its guide to truth¹

Today’s reflection on the nature of the spirit, is a result of a special program I was
invited to lead

Last Spring I was selected among my colleagues to work with Rev Mary Katherine
Morn, minister of UU Farifax, to be trained as our region’s facilitators in a new program
titled, “Whose Are We?”
This program was assembled in part by Rev Burton Carley of Memphis, Rev Laurel
Hallman of Dallas, and Rev Sarah Lammert, my internship supervisor and now the
Director of Ministry and Faith Development at the UUA.
In the days preceding the 2010 UUA General Assembly, 80 ministers from all over the
United States gathered in Minneapolis to receive this training.
We were charged with bringing this program first to our colleagues;
We did this May 1 - May 4 at our annual minister’s retreat in Lewes, Delaware.
We were then invited to bring it to our congregations, and so now we are exploring
Whose Are We? together this morning.

The idea for the program came from a sermon delivered by Rev Victoria Safford at the
2008 Service of the Living Tradition at the UUA’s General Assembly in Fort Lauderdale.
In exploring the call to a life of faith, Safford shared this ~
“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.

¹ from my Whose Are We? journal, May 2 2011.
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? 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?”

These are big questions. This morning we began addressing them in our time for all ages, where we asked invited each other to reflect on those people, places, institutions and ideas that have a claim on our love, our allegiance, our attention; these questions that require a recursive encounter - to ask and respond to them again and again and again.

In Safford’s 2008 sermon, the UU Ministers’ Association (UUMA) leadership saw an opportunity. For years they had been noticing how the newer crop of ministers - including some you know, like Rev Nancy MacDonald, Rev Anya, myself and others - were coming into ministry without as many barriers to encounters with and expressions of Spirit; veteran ministers also had demonstrated openness to spiritual practice and encounter. The UUMA leadership also noticed that congregations were transforming; no longer were our vital congregations dominated by those who defined themselves primarily by a way of faith they rejected; Unitarian Universalists are today yearning for spiritual practice they can embrace and use to enrich their lives. A sea change is taking place, and Safford’s sermon gave us the questions from which a rich new conversation could emerge and shape that change.

The Whose Are We? program declares the following objectives:
“Clergy will become more comfortable and articulate about their theology and spiritual growth, and share this with their congregations through preaching and teaching. UUMA chapters will provide small groups for spiritual discernment, practice and support to develop intimacy among colleagues. 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. This will in turn lead to growth in depth and numbers, as visitors can find a clearer and more compelling articulation of what our faith has to offer. Unitarian Universalists will feel more confident and competent to develop creative ways to experience spiritual retreats, spiritual practices, UU theology, etc.”

You may ask yourselves, “weren’t our ministers already doing that?” ~ The answer is yes - no and - maybe sometimes. There are many of my colleagues who, like me, are comfortable with the language and practice of the spirit; others have had different experiences. For a long time we Unitarian Universalists defined ourselves so much by what we were not we got out of the habit of proclaiming what we are.

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2 [http://www.uuma.org/resource/collection/7576546F-5A01-46D4-8102-C8022346E600/Whose_Are_We_Chapter_-_Quoteless_PDF.pdf](http://www.uuma.org/resource/collection/7576546F-5A01-46D4-8102-C8022346E600/Whose_Are_We_Chapter_-_Quoteless_PDF.pdf)
Some sought the easy middle ground of not offending anyone to the extreme that too often they inspired no one. Many trembled at the criticism of colleagues and congregants who warned if we embrace the language and practice of the spirit we might alienate people in our midst, all the while ignoring that others might need us to nurture how they can be enriched by embodying authentic spiritual practice. Many clergy feared for their jobs when major donors handed them lists of words they better not say and rituals they better not employ.

~ Well I am here to tell you those days are over. My colleagues and I are not cowed by naysayers nor by threats of desertion; we will never acquiesce to a fear-based ministry, the elevation of one’s previous religious trauma as the primary touchstone of how to run our religious community. Brothers and sisters, Understand, I know that far too many have been traumatized, denied, ignored even abused by traditional religious communities.

I too suffered such trauma; I had my deepest theological insights dismissed, my need of spiritual community ripped from me at age 12; but I will not define myself by those who denied my inherent spiritual  wisdom - no has to.

We refuse to be defined and confined only by our pain; we will never give the bringers of our pain the power to proclaim who we are. Today, with programs like “Whose Are We?” Unitarian Universalists are proclaiming our embrace of spiritual practice and crafting powerful new paths of healing and soul saving. We are living in the midst of a liberal religious revolution, and we - you - are its vanguard.

Proclaiming a need for spiritual growth and discernment is one with acknowledging our interdependence upon all that exists, the web of life of which we are a part. This revolution in liberal religion has been a long time coming; it began perhaps in 1950 when the Austrian mathematician Alan Turing demonstrated the limits of human knowing; it was informed by Black theology and Liberation theology that reminded us to include the voices of the marginalized; the revolution was propelled and nurtured by the Women in Spirit movement that reclaimed the divine feminine and brought ritual and embodiment into our worship.

We were reminded that we are dependent upon one another; we owe the spirit of life humility. attention and praise.

Allow me to share this story I received just yesterday from Janice Marie Johnson, Multicultural Director of the UUA, the keynote speaker at yesterday’s hospitality conference in Arlington.

This story comes from the 5th Discipline Field Book, “Among the tribes of northern Natal in South Africa, the most common greeting [their ‘hello’] - is the expression: Sawu Bona. Sawu Bona. It literally means, “I see you.” If you are a member of this tribe, you might reply by saying ‘Sakhona,” which means “I am here.” “I See You;” “I Am Here”.

The order of the exchange is important: until you see me, I do not exist. It’s as if, when you see me, you bring me into existence. This meaning [is] implicit in their language; it is part of the [nature] of Ubuntu, a [philosophy] prevalent in [sub-Saharan] Africa.
The mantra of Ubuntu is “A person is a person because of other people” -
“I am who I am because of who we all are.”
When you look into someone’s eyes and say “I see you,” that connection brings another
dimension into your [encounter].
We are liberated by our connections to our community, and when we truly see each
other, we offer each other a mirror to our selves.”

Say it with me -
“I See You” ~ “I Am Here” - The great gift of truly being seen, and heard

This common hospitality of the Ubuntu proclaim our interdependence.
~ Consider how our lives depend on one another - not just on the doctors and
politicians, but on those who pave the roads, those who toil in the power plants so we
have light, those who prepare our food, those who operate planes and trains and
subway cars, the other motorists on the beltway, the food safety inspectors, the police
officer and the soldier, those who maintain traffic lights -
~ those in our spiritual home who walk with us in times of sorrow and grief, our friends,
our families ...
Interdependence points us to discover Whose Are We?
~ Our interdependence widens to include nature, the weather, our culture, the market -
It embraces our notions of the divine
This acknowledgement of interdependence - encountering the question Whose Are We?
- leads us to praise and gratitude -
Our hearts, filled with gratitude, long to develop a practice of engaging those questions
that ground us and deepen our faith
This begins with our personal allegiances -
those to whom we are in covenant as individuals - Whose Am I? -
and moves us to covenant as a people - Whose Are We?

Allow me to share how the Whose Are We? program functioned at our ministers’ retreat;
The first of our 3 days we began in pairs with a simple question - “Whose are you?” -
and we were asked to reply with one word or phrase responses.
Then we said to each other - “may you be blessed; may you be a blessing”
After a series of deepening exercises designed to build trust, we then got into groups of
four. In response to the question, “How are you honoring the source of your truth and
power?” we employed the following process

We began with 5 minutes of silence;
then one person responded, for 10 minutes, without interruption or advice;
after a brief silence, we asked one or two clarifying questions, like, “You said you felt
you were not being true to your self, could you explain how?”
The permission was there to leave the questions unanswered.
~ Then, each of the three listeners prayed for the one who had shared, for up to 3
minutes each.

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3 from the 5th Discipline Field Book, as shared by Janice Marie Johnson, May 21, 2011, UUCAVA
It is nearly impossible to describe how deepening and refreshing it is to do this practice. One simply must do it to understand.

After service today I want to sign up folks who want to begin setting up these prayer circles over the summer. But allow me to share with you the responses of my colleagues. For the first time in memory, nearly everyone gave the minister’s retreat a nearly excellent review; ministers can be notoriously critical of their colleagues, especially when they are asked to engage programs that come from the senior leadership. But at this year’s retreat, people who never knew one another well have become intimate; just yesterday my wife Anya’s prayer partner—a senior colleague with many friends—asked Anya to officiate her brother’s memorial service; they never said more than hello before our retreat. Apparently Whose Are We? is also a good way to make ministers cry.

I have never seen my colleagues so close and concerned for one another. The most senior colleagues, some who have served for 4 decades, said this was the most meaningful time they had ever spent doing ‘professional development’. One old humanist minister, about to retire, was so overcome with emotion he could barely speak; through a veil of tears, in a broken voice, he said, “I have served this faith for 42 years; this is the first time I know of that any of my colleagues has ever prayed for me.”

I do not want 42 years to pass before you know someone has prayed for you. For those of you who are suspect of all this praying and deep listening, let me share this little piece with you, from “The Future of Faith,” by Harvey Cox.

“The Spanish writer Miguel Unamuno dramatizes the radical dissimilarity of faith and belief in his short story, “Saint Manuel Bueno, Martyr,” in which a young man returns from the city to his native village because his mother is dying. In the presence of the local priest, she clutches her son’s hand and asks him to pray for her. The son does not answer, does not pray. As they leave the room, he tells the priest that, as much as he would like to, he cannot pray for his mother because he does not believe in God. “That’s nonsense,” the priest replies, “You do not have to believe in God to pray.”

Belief is propositional, composed of words, wrapped in reason and logic. Faith comes from a deep seated confidence, an acknowledgement of our interdependence, embracing the mystery beyond human knowing, and proclaims our duty to the source of all. Once we heed the call of faith, living today in what Harvey Cox calls the Age of Spirit, we can deepen our lives with practice, social witness, praise, humility and community.

Let me leave you with the poem that started us off:
Annunciation

Even if I don’t see it again — nor ever feel it -
I know it is — and that if once it hailed me
it ever does –
And so it is myself I want to turn in that direction -
not as towards a place, but it was a tilting
within myself,
as one turns a mirror to flash the light to where
it isn’t — I was blinded like that — and swam
in what shone at me
only able to endure it by being no one and so
specifically myself I thought I’d die
from being loved like that.
– Marie Howe

BENEDICTION

Whose Are You? Everyone’s, and your very own
~ How does your spirit dress up?
How will you deepen the grounding that sustains all you do and all you are?
~ I see You: I am here
How will you honor the divine within?
How will you honor your duty to the universe?
~ I am who I am because of who we all are
Let us covenant as a people
Whose Are We?
We save the World one soul at a time, beginning with our own
Let the work of healing be our focus and our joy