As many of you may know, I am member of a national committee for Ministers known as CENTER, which stands for Continuing Education, Networking, Training, Enrichment and Renewal. I’m sure that some of those words are just there so that we could spell CENTER because we just love acronyms. The mission of committee is to design and deliver excellent programming for the continuing education of Unitarian Universalist ministers. To that end we offered an Institute for Excellence in Ministry last year that was quite the success. Over a third of all Unitarian Universalist ministers attended the Institute and received a week of quality continuing education in various fields such as preaching, vocal arts, liberal theology, and social justice. It was a great week in California, and now we are planning the next one for 2013, this time in Florida. We love the beach.

Another program we offered and will continue to offer is something called Collegial Conversations in which it is hoped that all Unitarian Universalist ministers will engage in a conversation on a particular subject. The first of these conversations began last year and is continuing. It is called Whose Are We? You may recall that this past spring the Rev. Dr. Laurel Hallman, Minister Emerita of the First Unitarian Church of Dallas, introduced the program to us at the Eastern Carolina Cluster meeting held here in Wilmington. One of the purposes of this particular dialogue is to deepen the conversation we have about our spirituality and theology and to be able to articulate what it is that we are bound by and to.

We began the dialogue with a simple question…Whose am I? Every participant worked in pairs and answered the question several times. Each time there was a deepening of the answers. “Whose am I” is a fairly easy question to answer because we all can name the people and beings to whom we “belong;” that is to whom we are accountable in some way shape or form. In fact the project began with a story about a priest and the question “whose am I.” As recounted by the Rev. Sarah Lammert, in her sermon entitled Whose Are We, she was attending a summit meeting of various Unitarian Universalist leaders and they began the morning with a worship service in which the Rev. John Luopo told the following story:

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.”

I know whose I am. I suspect for that priest the answer was fairly straightforward, he belonged to God. But to whom do you belong? It may be God, your family, your partner or spouse, your children, your pets. I know I belong to Hazel, the cat, because when I come home and she is waiting for me to open a can of cat food I am clear that because I am responsible for her I am also accountable to her. And being a cat she is clear that she is ruler of the universe. I also belong to my partner Elizabeth. She is not the boss of me, but I am accountable to her; being in relationship carries with it a measure of accountability. I belong to you. As the minister of this congregation I am accountable to you, though you are not the boss of me either.

And ultimately I am accountable to the God of my understanding. I do not believe in a judgment day when I will be held to account for my life, but I do believe there is a force in the universe that calls me to serve the common good, and I am accountable to that force for keeping up my end of the bargain. My life for the betterment of the lives of others. These are just a few of the answers that I came up with when I answered the question whose am I? To whom are you accountable? To whom do you belong? Whose are you?

The dialogue continued on through a series of exercises until we got to the ultimate question “Whose Are We?” And then it seemed all hell broke loose. Because the question “whose are we” begs another question who is the we? Was it the people participating in the workshop? Was the “we” all Unitarian Universalist ministers? Was the “we” members of our respective congregations? Was the “we” members of the cluster, the district, the faith? Was the “we” the whole human race? Who is the we? I have to admit that we were stumped by the question. In all of our planning for the workshop it didn’t occur to any of the six people putting it together that we would find the word we such a stumbling block.

It ended up being such a problem that in the end we limited it the “we” to members of the Unitarian Universalist Minister’s Association. I have to say I felt we had failed because I believe the “we” has to ultimately be all of Unitarian Universalism. Given that we are community of faithful people walking together while un-agreed on the most essential issues of faith, our answer to the question “Whose Are We?” is difficult to define for all of us. You know how we feel about defining something for all of us short of we all breathe the same air. Even then someone will argue that we are each breathing in different molecules. Yet I believe that it is essential that we do have a shared answer to the question. We need a shared purpose, without which we are just a conglomeration of diverse people hanging around with no place to go, no reason to go to the place we don’t have and no clue as to the reason we are hanging around with no place to go.

If you were to ask any number of people from different faith traditions the answer to “whose are we?” might readily be known. There is agreement within those faith traditions on a certain set of beliefs. To the Christian, the Jew and the Muslim, the answer would be to the one God. To the Buddhist the answer might be to all living beings. To earth centered religions the answer might be to nature and nature’s way. To the god and goddess. But for us the answer is more difficult because we don’t have a set of shared beliefs. This is what ultimately distinguishes us from other faiths and what is also our greater challenge.
If we cannot agree upon what we believe then how are we ever to agree upon an answer to “Whose Are We?” Well, I think it will take a lot of work to answer that question. But the question itself is important because if nothing else it shifts the focus of our faith from the individual to the collective. Not in a way that negates the individual, we never would and probably never could do that, but rather the question understands that there is a WE. Unitarian Universalism has been, for too long, focused primarily on the individual and not enough on the larger community of faith. Individual freedom has been one of our most attractive features yet we cannot just be about individual freedom without collective responsibility.

I believe there is an answer to the question whose are we that is plainly obvious. We are each others. The farmers in the story this morning each thanked and praised God for sending them angels, when all along it was their neighbors who were doing the work. What we know is that we are each other’s angels. We are accountable to each other, and we belong to each other. When we become members of a Unitarian Universalist congregation we enter into covenant with one another. That is the theological basis of our faith...covenant. Just look at the bylaws of our Association, our principles. We begin with the words “We the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association covenant to affirm and promote…”

When we become members of a congregation we enter into a binding agreement with one another. Not about what we believe, but on how we shall be, and what we will work towards. The covenant of the Association is a covenant of the member congregations, but what covenant do we individuals enter into when we become a member of a congregation? Many congregations have their own covenants. We have no such statement. We have a mission statement it’s printed on the cover of your order of service, and we have a vision but we do not have a covenant that states clearly what we promise to one another, how we will be with one another and what we will work towards together. We have policies on how we will not be with one another, but perhaps it is time to have a covenant that states how we will be with one another.

What it would look like I am not quite sure, but I am sure that it is time we had one. It will take time to develop it, and there is much work we each need to do to make it happen. First we need to ask ourselves the question Whose Are We? There is a new curriculum that was developed by the same people who developed the Whose Are We curriculum for ministers, but this one is for members of congregations. In the coming months we will offer that curriculum and I encourage you to participate in it. If for no other reason than it will deepen your individual spiritual and theological grounding and it will deepen your understanding of what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist.

A covenant will mean that we explicitly state what our faith is, through what we promise to each other and what we will work towards. As James Luther Adams wrote

“A faith that creates no community of faith and a faith that assumes no definite form is not only a protection against any explicit faith, it is probably also a protection for a hidden idolatry of blood or state or economic interest, a protection for some kind of tyranny. It is not the faith of the free. The faith of free persons must tangibly make them free in a community of human dignity and equal justice.”

It is time that our faith take a definite form. The freedom we so very much cherish needs be a freedom to, and not a freedom from. In our covenant we will not try to define what all Unitarian Universalists believe. It will not mean that we all believe in the same God or any god for that matter. It will not mean that we will all believe in the same things. It will mean that we know why we are here in this faith and why this faith matters. It will mean that we know “Whose Are We.” We will know it means we are each others.

Amen, blessed be, ashay.

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i Rev. Sarah Lammert, Whose Are We, sermon delivered at the Unitarian Society of Ridgewood, NJ, February 1, 2009.