Whose We Are
Rev. Anthony David and Rev. Marti Keller
June 12, 2011

ANTHONY

Marti, in a sermon from several weeks ago, you defined spirituality as “that which makes us feel individually whole, authentic, and connected to the source of life”—and you talked about how summertime is a time for taking risks in doing just this, for counteracting the habits and patterns in our lives which shrink our souls and keep us in a state of forgetfulness.

So we take risks, and since we are holistic beings of body and mind and heart and spirit, the risks can be physical (like braving the Daredevil ride just opening at Six Flags), or cultural (you mentioned buying a ticket to a summer film in a genre you usually detest, say the fourth installment of the Pirates of the Caribbean franchise) and also theological (like exploring—from a place of curiosity— a belief that you absolutely don’t get).

Today you and I engage in such risk-taking, in the special form of spiritual autobiography. In every person is an invisible pull towards greater wholeness and authenticity and connectedness to the source of life, in much the same way that the moon and sun and rotation of the earth pull the seas and cause them to rise and fall in regular measure. Spiritual autobiography is a way of trying to tell the story of this spiritual pull as it works through the details of our lives, the places we’ve been, the people we have known. It’s the question—“Who am I?”—transformed into one that’s even more profound—“WHOSE am I?”

MARTI

Yes, profound and so rarely given the time and space to explore, even for those of us who are professional faith leaders.

I recently encountered the question “Whose am I?” in the context of a UU minister’s training…

The Whose are We Conversation I first attended as a trainee for facilitators in Minneapolis last June and then the follow up program at The Mountain during SEUUMA invited us, even challenged us, to pause in the dailyness of our lives as ordained fellowshipped ministers, mostly in fulltime parish positions, to examine to who and to what we are ultimately (and sometimes immediately) accountable. In who did we put our trust and allegiance, in who or what did we place our faith?

A lot of the conversation seemed, as in most UU congregations, to be reactive (or responsive) to beliefs previously held, either in childhood or in earlier adulthood, put forth by other faith traditions-- the ones we were no longer part of-- Orthodox
Christianity, Protestant or Catholic mostly. A smattering of born Jews.

There were conversion stories for sure, stories of rejecting singular narratives and creedal statements for the multi-textured stories of our religion and the near banishment of the word creed or even of belief. People could point to a saving moment-- when their questions were validated, when their lifestyle was accepted, even embraced.

I was jealous-- a kind of faith envy. Because for me, as a born Unitarian (not actually born, but certainly taken to the newish UU congregation in Bethesda Maryland at a very young age), there was no coming out as a religious progressive at all. Nothing to mark any kind of passage, let alone transformation.

There was not anything like the Coming of Age program and service that has become an accepted and much celebrated part of our work with children and youth at UUCA-- no mentors, no ropes courses, no spiritual homework assignment to write a credo statement, let alone to share it with hundreds of people in worship.

I was never asked to, let alone told to explicitly answer any of the open-ended questions that were central to our religious education. What is the source of life? What makes life meaningful? What did I think about death and afterlife? We didn't have to be tolerant of other's beliefs in our own classrooms and in our own congregations, because we never actually expressed them.

Whose are we? I think I would have answered: “whoever and whatever the last lesson was.”

Which may be one reason why Catholicism was so appealing to me—watching my best friend at the time (and for the past 40 years my sister-in-law) studying catechism for her confirmation—choosing to go with her to a Catholic mass after JFK died because everything seemed more "real" to me (the genuflecting, the incense, the Latin). It was kind of like the adolescent character played by Winona Ryder in Mermaids, whose mother (Cher) served a steady diet of hors d’oeuvres--food she could thread onto wood skewers—and platitudes. "I want to be a nun," the teen whined. "You can't," her mother told her. "You're Jewish."

Truthfully, growing up, being a girl and religiously (as opposed to culturally) Jewish wouldn't have satisfied my hunger for beliefs to bump up against and rituals of transition, because there were no Bat Mizvahs back then. My female cousins' faith lives were as unaccountable and unmoored as mine.

ANTHONY

Marti, I hear you when you talk about hunger for beliefs to bump up against. That’s what it was like for me too. Lots of silence around issues of religion and spirituality in my family growing up. As I look back, the only thing that really mirrored and amplified the Spirit in my life was the Canadian wilderness surrounding me as a child, the hills, the
wide Peace River that ran silver through the center of my northern Alberta town. All of it called me to a great Mystery, to God’s world, but I had no words or rituals for it.

There would be none, until my family made the move from Canada to Texas—specifically East Texas—where we ended up joining the Church of Christ. And let me tell you, we found plenty to bump up against there! Clarity out the wazoo! Church of Christers read the Bible literalistically, so that’s how we got our marching orders. Our purpose was to recreate the primitive and pure Christianity of Jesus’ early followers. No musical instruments in the New Testament? No musical instruments in church—just acappela singing. You get the picture. Lucky that the singing was so wonderful and full.

This all happened during my teenage years, and I took to devotion VERY passionately and seriously. One of my clearest memories is when I was 15 and preaching for the first time. Just like it was yesterday, I can see the congregation beaming at me with pride. I’m standing in my pastor’s pulpit—Pastor Dan Manuel, who sprayed Aquanet on his blond hair to get that televangelist big-hair look. He was bigger than life to me. He loved Elvis, and I’ll never forget how his beautiful voice could move effortlessly from “Amazing Grace” to “Jailhouse Rock,” from “How Great Thou Art” to “Blue Suede Shoes.” I’m standing in his pulpit, and my text is from Walt Whitman, where he says:

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems,
You shall possess the good of the earth and sun—there are millions of suns left,
You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the specters in books,
You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,
You shall listen to all sides and filter them for yourself.

I quoted Whitman and the people beamed because they were so proud of me. But lemme tell you, it just wasn’t good Church of Christ theology. And what would have happened if they knew that the guy I was quoting from was gay? I was simply out of place and didn’t know it. For sure, I resonated with the passion and devotion of the Church of Christ, but what my heart yearned for was to plug into the Spirit of Life in all its varied manifestations. I found myself reading the Hebrew and Christian Bible side-by-side with the Koran and the Tao Te Ching—but I can’t begin to explain to you how I must have made sense of this back then. I was a bundle of contradictions. Hungry.

One time, I was working really hard to save the soul of a fellow Christian, who was going to hell (!) because he was not the right kind of Christian, didn’t read Scripture like I did. I was quoting it fast and furiously, he was quoting it right back at me, and right in the middle of this theological tennis match I had this overwhelming realization of the foolishness of it all. What was I doing?

Then there was my high school English teacher, Mrs. Starkey. She was five feet tall, pudgy, with sparkling dark eyes and a razor sharp intellect. When I asked her to sign my Senior yearbook, she said of course and then told me she’d get it back to me the next day. This surprised me. I expected her just to write something down then and there, like
Here’s what I read when I got my yearbook back: “My dear little Anthony. This is from Kahlil Gibran’s The Prophet. It says a bit of what I believe. ‘Say not, ’I have found the truth,’ but rather, ‘I have found a truth.’ Say not, ‘I have found the path of the soul.’ Say rather, ‘I have met the soul walking upon my path.’ For the soul walks upon all paths. The soul walks not upon a line, neither does it grow like a reed. The soul unfolds itself, like a lotus of countless petals.’ Your petals are, so far, a joy to behold. Thank you for sharing your mind and spirit with me for the past two years. “

Blood rushed to my face when I read this. I LOVED what Gibran had to say, and part of me was with him. But the other part was not. I was a bundle of contradictions.

What finally got me unstuck had to do with my Mom’s mom who was dying of brain cancer. I remember a picture taken of her right before she died. She was wearing a soft pink hat that was like a halo around her bald head. The right side of her face sagged. Big dark eyes staring out of the photograph.

The week after Mom and Dad returned home from the funeral, on a Sunday after church, Pastor Manuel accompanied us to the local Baskin-Robbins for ice-cream. Imagine the scene. We’re sitting around licking ice cream cones, listening to Mom having a serious theological discussion with the Pastor. Mom asked, “Pastor Manuel, Do you really believe that full-immersion baptism is absolutely essential for salvation?” The thing was, Baba was a Ukrainian Catholic and had only been baptized via sprinkling, as a child. So Mom was desperately worried. She hoped her Mom’s soul was all right. Was she all right? Pastor Manuel said, “I’m so sorry. But no.”

I left the Church of Christ because of that one word: no. I didn’t care anymore about the rigid inner voice which insisted that the Church of Christ was the only way to truth. I flew out of that nest and away. Disgusted with all of it. Disgusted with the church’s exclusivism, disgusted with the confusion in my heart. I just flew and flew, into the night.

No more church. Of any kind of all! It didn’t matter that there was a whole world of progressive Christianity—progressive religion of any kind--beyond the fundamentalism I knew up close and personal. I was going to fly solo from now on. I didn’t need anybody else. I didn’t need community.

I went solo, and for me, this amounted to reading anything and everything that looked like a source of spiritual wisdom and adventure. My primary spiritual practice became highlighting. I read books about Taoism and Zen, especially those by Alan Watts. I read Carl Jung and meditated on the wisdom of dreams. I explored shamanistic “techniques of ecstasy,” learned how to read Tarot cards, meditated on mystical treatises of all kinds. I had also changed college majors to Philosophy, so through this I studied Plato, Descartes, Kant, Nietzsche, William James, and on and on. Everything proved to be grist for the mill--and everything helped to transform my understanding of the meaning of faith. Faith, I came to realize, just did not have to be a fear-ridden obedience to
church doctrine in defiance of all reason and humanity (as it had been for me in the Church of Christ). Faith—that most powerful of human experiences—could be something far better. This: radical trust in the process of Life, trust in its goodness and rightness. Faith is knowing that, despite how odd and disjointed the journey of our lives might seem, despite all the disappointments and the suffering, somehow we are being helped along into the riches of our best selves.

And sometimes it happens in a way that is supremely ironic. I say this because, after several years of being a solo wander and explorer, despite all my reading, reflection, and experimentation, I came to realize that I had become nothing but a consumer in the spirituality marketplace, pursuing spiritual highs without ever giving myself to the discipline of just a few things. My consumerism was all ungrounded and superficial. It was also apolitical. How was it going to help me become a more generous human being and father and husband? How was it going to help me become a more responsive citizen and friend? How?

I had flown far away from the nest, but that in itself didn’t bring me back fully to my true self. I had been freed from the tyrannical dogmas and doctrines of the Church of Christ—I knew what I didn’t believe—but what was it that I DID believe and stand for? A moment ago we said these words together:

This house is for the ingathering of nature and human nature.

It is a house of friendships, a haven in trouble, an open room for the encouragement of our struggle....

This house is a cradle for our dreams, the workshop of our common endeavor. (Rev. Kenneth Patton)

But where was this house for my family, or for me?

This was the point in my life where I really got it, that “Who am I?” was an incomplete question, and in fact to answer it I would need to ask another alongside it, one that was larger and more profound in scope: “WHOSE am I?”

MARTI

Anthony, you spoke about your "leaving church," the Church of Christ, for the life of a spiritual wanderer and what Wade Roof, a religious sociologist, has described as the abundant spiritual marketplace available to us now—in bookstores, on the worldwide web, in freestanding workshops and retreats, on television, in podcasts. Well the Boomers paved the way almost 50 years ago!

There was a time, a short time as an adult, when I too "left church", in my case the Unitarian (and when I was in high school, with the merger) the Unitarian-Universalist congregations I was raised in, for college life in the late 1960's in Berkeley, California.
The nearest UU congregation was several miles and several buses away, up on a hill. I went one time with a girlfriend. It took a long time to get there and when we got there, we were the youngest worshippers by at least 20 years, or so it seemed to us. The sanctuary was dark, the music Bach (or so I remember), and the sermon droned on. I never returned the whole time I was an undergraduate, turned off by admittedly a single experience as an "adult" in our faith, and otherwise caught up in the cultural and political and spiritual marketplace that was all around me--on Telegraph Avenue, on Sproul Plaza, in concerts and even in classrooms. I had the Beatles and the Hare Krishnas and Russian poets and Whirling Dervishes.

The Whose Are We was what was happening outside on the streets, where as a budding young journalist I bore witness to what we were all sure was the Revolution taking place in what I saw at the time as being a wider parallel universe to the Unitarian Universalist world I had grown up in. It mirrored the call to worship, the doxology I had sung so often as a child on Sunday mornings;

From All that dwell below the skies
let songs of hope and faith arise,
let peace, good will on earth be sung
through every land, by every tongue.

I carried those words with me in my heart in those protest years- and not only the words but the impetus to action that had also been so much a part of my Unitarian childhood. For me and for my family, you see, there was no line between the liberal religious faith community we were part of and the progressive secular community that pressed for change--that met in coffee houses and bookstores to plan protests and marches--that opposed the nuclear bomb, that called for civil rights.

This was the clearest identification I had as a Unitarian (Universalist), that there was a possibility, if not probability of good in the universe and that we were called to act on this assumption. Even despite the National Guard with rifles pointing at us, the noon time riots and the tear gas, the violence and warfare.

Truth is, in the wide open spiritual and religious and political climate of the California I came into adulthood, I may have never found my way back to institutional Unitarian Universalism. I did not need a sanctuary community to shield me from biblical fundamentalism or even a place to explore alternative spiritualities. I did not, as the UU urban myth suggests that many of us did, join a cult, become a born-again Christian or a Jew for Jesus. I simply, like a large number of folk who say they are UU but don't attend or join a congregation, remained outside the doors.

Until I had my children. Which for me was young, so my absence was only a few years.

From my own parents, I had two very different models, two different scenarios for what my relationship to a faith community was once I became a parent myself.
My mother, a very convicted secular Humanist who came to see any organized faith community— even the most liberal one— as worthless, had been mostly truant from the beginning. Her interest in our childhood had been in insuring a degree of social normalcy for her tribe of four children, and on Sundays that had meant finding some exposure to religious life and worship— as opposed to her modeling and embracing one herself. In the summers, she dropped us off at all sorts of day camps, including Bible camps, where I loved the bible stories and the hymn-singing, lustily belting "Jesus Loves Me." During the school year, the drop off point was UU.

My father, who had been more faithful in his Sunday morning attendance, even teaching religious education, moved on at some point in my middle school years to the local Ethical Cultural Society, where he became President for quite a few years. Some years later he left that philosophical and ethical home for weekends birdwatching. For much of his life, he sought out communities where he could share and test his beliefs, and where he enjoyed the group interaction— as well as the classical music that was always a part of Sunday programming. There was that model for me, however dormant, as I entered adulthood.

My return to organized UU was initially more like my mother’s. First, it was a co-op preschool that was housed in that same church on the hill I had found so uninteresting as a college student, and then it was the religious education program so they could be with other children of like-minded parents. And only then did I venture over to the sanctuary side of the congregation—where the adults met for worship, for coffee hour, for fellowship, for support.

And I realized what I was missing.

The Whose Am I, you see, was not a supernatural being, or an array of Saints or Prophets, or a set of beliefs or even a set of practices. What I had missed and needed to reconnect with was what one of my UU ministerial models and heroines Sophia Lyon Fahs called "a rich educational fellowship cooperatively endeavoring to learn anything and everything that might help toward a better and more intelligent living. "What process theologian Henry Nelson Weiman spoke of " an organic fellowship of persons who hold different opinions and perspectives but who are mutually nurtured, where reconciliation and wholeness are modeled and valued."

What we have come to call Beloved Community.

A community that had changed in the very few years I had been away— that had started to talk about African American theologian Howard Thurman and Buddhist monks and Thomas Merton, Mandalas and Medicine Wheels. Where there were Jews and even a few women in the pulpit. Where the sermons seemed less like lectures and the classes for adults felt less like debating societies. Where individual experiences— stories and stages— mattered. Where there was song and dance. Where there were regular and particular rituals: chalice lightings, water ingatherings, flower communions.
And within a few years came the Principles and Purposes that gave shape to our world view and in the first and seventh principles—the inherent worth and dignity of all people and the interdependent web of all existence—an articulated and compelling theology. Surrounded and supported by the wisdom sources of our living tradition.

I came home to a faith that felt rich, felt deeper, felt like a place I could stay.

ANTHONY

So it’s been quite a journey to Unitarian Universalism—the Whose we are—for you and for me. Your journey as a born-inner, mine as a come-outer. So many other stories in this room today, as well, that witness to the invisible spiritual pull towards greater wholeness and authenticity and connectedness to the source of life as it works through the details of our lives and the communities of faith we belong to.

And so much more could be said about what happened after we came (or after we returned). Our calls to ministry, for example—the congregations we’ve served and serve now.

But what about all the amazing people we’ve come to know? When you are a solo wanderer, as I was, meaningful connections are harder to make. But you become a member of a Unitarian Universalist congregation, and BAM, amazing, interesting, fascinating people are everywhere, all around you! One who instantly comes to mind for me is the person who clued me in to the reality of adult figure skating and got me involved. Diane Platts. Would I be skating today if I had never left my solo wandering and given myself to community? I’m honestly not sure.

I’ll also say that my years as a Unitarian Universalist have helped me reconcile with my religious past in a very positive way, so that today, I can say with pride that as a Unitarian Universalist I know my Bible far better than I ever did as a fundamentalist Christian, and I can read it and appreciate it with greater faithfulness to what that book means and wants from me than I ever did before. We really have a gift to give the larger world around this.

And finally there’s all the spiritual growth that’s taken place in me, from all the searching as well as finding that Unitarian Universalism supports. Listen to these words from the Sufi poet Rumi:

Lovers find secret places
inside this violent world
where they make transactions
with beauty.

Reason says, Nonsense.
I have walked and measured the walls here.
There are no places like that.
Love says, There are.

Unitarian Universalism is growing this love inside me, this voice that insists there ARE places inside this violent world where we can transact with beauty and be transformed by it and so become the change we wish to see. So many forces in our lives that tell us, NONSENSE, that say, “I have walked and measured the walls here. There are no places like that.” We can even say that to ourselves, as we walk and measure the walls of our personal histories. But Unitarian Universalism says, “There are.” That is the religion that has changed and continues to change my life.

CLOSE

Anthony: Marti, Whose are You?
Marti: My essential self and a world made whole
Marti: Anthony, Whose are You?
Anthony: Love, and love's voice

ANTHONY AND MARTI: [to congregation] Whose are YOU?