Reading:  
_That Which Holds All_ by Nancy Shaffer

Because she wanted everyone to feel included in her prayer, she said right at the beginning several names for the Holy:  
_Spirit, she said, Holy One, Mystery, God_

But then thinking these weren’t enough ways of addressing that which cannot fully be addressed, she added particularities, saying, _Spirit of Life, Spirit of Love, Ancient Holy One, Mystery We Will Not Ever Fully Know, Gracious God, and also Spirit of this Earth, God of Sarah, Gaia, Thou_

And then, tongue loosened, she fell to naming superlatives as well: _Most Creative One, Greatest Source, Closest Hope_ – even though superlatives for the Sacred seemed to her probably redundant, but then she couldn’t stop:  
_One who Made the Stars_, she said, although she knew technically a number of those present didn’t believe the stars had been made by anyone or thing but just luckily happened.

_One Who Is an Entire Ocean of Compassion_, she said, and no one laughed.  
_That Which Has Been Present Since Before the Beginning_, she said, and the room was silent.

Then, although she hadn’t imagined it this way, others began to offer names.

_Peace_, said one.  
_One My Mother Knew_, said another.  
_Ancestor_, said a third.  
_Wind_.  
_Rain_.  
_Breath_, said one near the back.  
_Refuge_.  
_That Which Holds All._
A child said, *Water.*
Someone
Then: *Womb.*
*Witness.*
*Great Kindness.*
*Great Eagle.*
*Eternal Stillness.*

And then, there wasn’t any need to say the things she’d thought would be important to say, and everyone sat hushed, until someone said

*Amen.*

“Whose Are We?” Rev. Fred L Hammond

Those of us who are old enough to remember the Hippie Movement, perhaps some of us even were hippies, when asking about a friend might hear, “He’s off to find himself, man.” It was a time of self-exploration, of dropping out of society, to wander across the country, to participate in vision quests in the hopes of finding oneself. It was a quest that was often met with derision from the then over 30 crowd. But the quest is as universal as any other experience. Who am I? Where do I belong? What am I supposed to do with my life?

In some European cultures when their youth graduate high school would take a moratorium, a year or two off, to explore life a bit before going back to school for an advanced degree. It is not a bad idea. How many of our high school graduates know what they want to do for the rest of their life when they enter college. How many change majors more than once as they attempt to sort things out for themselves. The quest to find oneself, to become aware of who one is, is an important question to ask. But if that is all we ponder then we risk falling into a sort of self-love that borders on idolatry. We risk the fate of Narcissus, the Greek tale of a handsome young man who fell in love with a reflection of himself but found this love to be unfulfilled and subsequently died.

Rev. Colin Bossen interprets the story of Narcissus as lifting “up the importance of being connected to something other than, something greater than, ourselves. If Narcissus had been connected to something other, something greater, than himself he would not have died. The same is true for us. If we are not connected to something greater then we risk falling into a consuming self-love and spiritually wasting away.”

So the quest to discover who we are, is an important one, but if it ends there it leaves us wanting. So as we ask who are we, we need to follow up the question with whose are we? To what or whom are we responsible? To whom are we accountable? Who lays claim to me/us?
Last summer the Unitarian Universalist Minister’s Association began a nation wide conversation on the question whose are we? And in the fall our various minister chapters gathered and began to ask the question of each other, whose are you? We continued to answer the question to whose are you until we had no more responses left to give. The response our listeners were to give to each of our answers was “God be merciful.”

The response was just as challenging as the question. In the room were myriad concepts as to what god is or isn’t. The word merciful in this context also brought on debate, what is mercy? How can the Mystery, the Spirit of Life, the Spirit of this Earth, Gaia, One my mother knew, That which holds all, and Breath, be merciful? And what is mercy in the context of whose am I?

In my own journey there are many who have laid claim to me in some fashion and whether they still lay claim to me today or not, these relationships have shaped my perspective on the world and shape my actions.

Whose am I? I am my family’s. I learned early in life that my actions and the actions of each member reflect on my family as a whole. When I was growing up to say that one came from a good family was an important statement in society. I experienced the emotional disappointment of others when expectations were not met by me or by any one of my family. At some point in time we all fell short of the ideal we sometimes held high of the other. Sometimes we were able to find forgiveness for each other and sometimes forgiveness came too late. God be merciful.

Whose am I? I am the earth’s. My grandparents on my father side were conservationists. My grandmother would take me on walks and show me all the great variety of life that grew on their property. She would point out the subtle differences between two varieties of Hepaticas, an early spring flower. One variety had leaves rounded and another had leaves that came to a point but the flowers looked the same. And she would reveal to me the diversity of life even within the same species. A fern frond has one point and another frond on the same fern ends in two. All living things express diversity. Observe life on earth and it will reveal its secrets.

But the greatest secret of all was that all things grew out of the earth in one fashion or another and all things would return. Whether it was the pitcher plants that would die off and sink into the bog on the edge of the old ice pond or the insects that would fall into its pooled water to feed it, all things find nourishment from the earth and all things would one day return to it, including me. Spirit of the Earth be merciful.

Whose am I? I am my childhood friend Glenn’s. My relationship with Glenn was a life altering one. We were best friends in junior and senior high school, both gay, but back then both too afraid to say those words aloud. I sought refuge in Christianity and Glenn found reconciliation and came out of the closet. We remained friends and I would visit him every so often in our adult lives. Then in 1987, Glenn told me he was HIV positive.
I sought to find a way to support him from afar—that support led to my co-founding Interfaith AIDS Ministry, serving as board president then stepping into the Executive Director position when the fledgling agency lost its third director in about the same number of years. This agency went on to serve hundreds of people living with HIV/AIDS, preserving family integrity of families affected by this disease, and empowering youth to be prevention educators to their peers.

In the process I reconciled my own sexuality and was excommunicated from my Christian community. Glenn died before I became director, before I came out of the closet, but I was able to thank him for being in my life and opening my life to new possibilities. One who is an entire ocean of Compassion be merciful.

Whose am I? I am god’s. My favorite hymn from childhood was I Come to the Garden Alone. Some of you may know it from your childhood as well. I loved the chorus especially where “He tells me I am His own.” Believing that I belonged to god was an important part of my identity as a child and as a young adult. As a child struggling between my sexuality and the churches teaching that my mere sexuality, prior to any behavioral expression of same, meant I was an abomination; the knowledge that I was god’s brought me comfort.

My childhood faith in a loving god and my young adult faith in a god who heals the broken was one of immense hope that belonging to god would bring me the deliverance I sought. As I came to realize that my sexuality is fine just as it is; the deliverance I found was not from my sexuality but rather from a restrictive dogmatic belief.

I began to see the eternal as something far more fluid, far more flexible in expression than I ever realized. This realization resulted in being excommunicated from a community I called home, divorced from people that I loved dearly, shaken from a faith that no longer could answer my questions and opened the doors to a freedom I was only just beginning to experience. Closest Hope be merciful.

Whose am I? I am justice’s. Two of my great grandfathers, my grandfather, granduncle and grandaunt were public servants. One great grandfather served as Mayor and County Judge. Another great grandfather was President of the Board of Health. My grandfather served as town supervisor. A granduncle was a lawyer who assisted in rewriting the mental health legislation for New York State. My grandaunt, also a lawyer, was a consultant in the writing of the constitution for the country of Liberia until a military coup assassinated their president.

They served their constituents well and in the process instilled in me a sense of duty to protect the welfare of other’s rights and freedoms. The duty of justice-making led me to support the formation of a people’s first chapter for the developmentally disabled, found an agency to advocate for medical care for people living with AIDS, coordinate the formation of Faith Leaders for Peace in San Diego, March to Washington for equality for LGBT people, and most recently organize an interfaith response in the form of yesterday’s rally; Somos Tuscaloosa: Neighbors against HB 56. The drive for justice
where oppression lives, the drive to empower voice where speech has been silenced is as deep a part of me as the blood the flows through my veins. Yes, I am justice’s. *Refuge* be merciful.

Whose am I? I am my ancestor’s history. I grew up on the legends of a proud family history. Many of the legends in investigating them did not equal the reality of their lives. Yet other stories emerged. Some painful to uncover like my 12th great-grandmother Adrienne Cuvelier who is blamed for the first massacre of the Manhattan natives in 1634. She is also the mother of the first white male child born on these shores. Others emerged with joy like my 9th great grandmother Anne Dudley, who was the author of the first published book of American poems. At my nephews wedding, a poem by Anne Dudley was quoted unbeknownst to the bridal couple that these words brought his 10th great grandmother into the wedding ceremony. There are grandfathers who fought in the war of 1812, the civil war, the Spanish American War, and the War to end all wars with the guns and swords from these wars echoing on our family’s walls. There was the great-uncle who was the accountant for Thomas Edison. And the host of ministers, too many to count who stood in pulpits and preached their truth. There is the wonder; what of their life story still courses through my veins? *Ancestor* be merciful.

Whose am I? I am the universe’s. *One who made the stars* be merciful.

Whose am I? I am America’s. *Great Eagle* be merciful.

Whose am I? I am my deepest desire’s. *Most Creative One* be merciful.

Whose am I? I am yours. *Spirit of Love* be merciful.

Whose are you? Who do you find yourself most accountable to in this life? Who do you strive to remain in relationship with no matter what the cost? To whom do you find yourself being shaped and guided in ways that are mysterious, ever unfolding, and perhaps enlightening? *That Which Has Been Present Since Before the Beginning* be merciful. Blessed be.

[i]“Who Do We Serve?” preached by the Rev. Colin Bossen, March 6, 2011 at Unitarian Universalist Society of Cleveland. As found at http://www.uucleveland.org/worship/WhoDoWeServe.php