As a people of faith, we adore the question, “Who Are We?” That question was the impulse behind the 2005 Commission on Appraisal Study on our theological diversity. If we could just name who we are – slightly healthier than naming who we are not – perhaps we would then have a clearer sense of our mission as a religious people and our relevance in the changing landscape of faith in the 21st century. A quick glance through our hymnal confirms this somewhat narcissistic fascination: We are the Earth, Upright and Proud… We are Children of the Earth… Actually, there are six hymns with “We Are” in the first line, and scores more that are slightly less obvious in their quest for individual and group definition and meaning.

The problem with the question, “Who are we?” is that the focus is inward and often up to individual interest and interpretation. It is hard to build a people of faith with an unwavering vision, if our gaze stops at our own navels. Much more relevant is the much harder question, “Whose Are We?”

Whose are we? The question can be unnerving, since it implies we belong to someone or something other than ourselves. In a tradition that values theological diversity, it is clear we are unlikely to answer this question in unison. In a tradition that honors individual worth and effort, it is difficult to imagine moving from an individualistic culture to a more collectivist one. In a tradition that has been deeply influenced by the Transcendentalists and Humanists, it can feel risky to even contemplate our relationship to something larger than ourselves. But the truth is that is exactly what our religious tradition has been, is, and should be about.

Theologian Martin Buber puts it this way: “The real essence of community is to be found in the fact – manifest or otherwise – that it has a center. The real beginning of a community is when its members have a common relation to the center overriding all other relations: the circle is
described by the radii, not by the points along the circumference.” A community is defined by its center and by the various individuals’ relationships to that center. A circle cannot exist without a center and a community cannot exist without a central, overriding reason for being. What is at the center of Unitarian Universalism that calls us into relationship with one another, with the world, and with the Source of Life? What is at the center of our faith that calls us out of our individual concerns, even as it gives us the strength to nurture our own growth? Since we are not a creedal faith, there is not a single answer to these questions – no statement that everyone can sign on to as a core belief. Rather, we describe ourselves as being a people connected by covenant – promises of how we will be with one another and how we will work toward wholeness – together.

I’ve been thinking about covenants lately – perhaps because I am teaching a Hebrew Bible class at the local community college. As I reacquainted myself with the covenants made between God and Abraham, Noah, Moses, and David – I am struck by the fact that these covenants were not easy. They cost something. Individuals and the community were held accountable by the covenants, and they identified the early Israelites as a people apart, in relationship with their God. When we in our congregations create covenants we must do so with a strong sense of our Center – our common calling and our common quest for wholeness for ourselves and for others.

Have you ever tried to draw a circle using a pin, a string, and a pencil? The string must be firmly grounded in what will become the center of the circle. Once the string has been pinned down and the pencil has been tied to the other end of the string, there must be tension placed on the string as you draw the circle. If there is no tension you will end up with a wobbly mess. A circle can only result when the anchor is firm and the string is held taut with a consistent amount of tension – then the pencil line will be true. In the earlier analogy of the circle, if we are the individual
points along the circumference, then the center must hold firm for us to form true community.

We can’t skip over some points along the circumference – there must be an equal distribution of the tension. Following that analogy for just another moment, all of the points along the circumference need to receive the same amount of stress from the pencil point if the circle is to appear whole and not as a dotted-line. Finally, as long as all are rooted in the center, there can be strings of various lengths, creating concentric circles by establishing multiple points of entry.

But what of the center? What is the center of the circle, of the community, that anchors everyone and provides the necessary tension to keep our strings taut? There is not an individual or an individual concern at the center. Buber said that the center defines us – it is the beginning point of the radius that holds all of the points along the circumference in relationship as a circle – and that center overrides all other relationships. And so we have circled back to our question: Whose are we? I think when we are able to identify the center, that which anchors us, we will be able to answer the question of whose we are.

Perhaps it will be useful to make the question personal – whose am I? With whom is my life inextricably bound? Who is affected by my decisions or my lack of decisive action? Who needs me? Who loves me? To whom am I accountable? A veritable parade of names and faces follows this line of thinking – taking me outside of my own concerns to consider the needs and desires of those to whom I am accountable. It suddenly becomes clear to me that this line of questioning leads me inexorably to questions of authenticity and integrity. Whose cries for justice do I ignore or refuse to hear? Whose dignity and self worth stands in the way of my interests? Ouch. No one said this would be easy.
Remember our pencil and string metaphor? If I try to please each and every person in that parade of names and faces it will quickly become apparent that I am not anchored – I’m just bouncing from one perceived need to another. Does that mean I shouldn’t give my attention to those to whom I belong? No – but there must be an anchor, a center, something larger than myself and larger than all of those individual selves that I can never please. The personalized question, whose am I, can offer insights but it cannot contain the fullness of that which the process theologian, Henry Nelson Wieman claimed has the power to transform us as we cannot transform ourselves. The personalized question can point the way – but it is not necessarily the way. Although we have asked good questions – questions that provide our lives with meaning and direction – we have not found our way to the center of our religious community. So, whose are we?

Mary Hunt, a contemporary feminist theologian, names four dynamic elements that, when working in harmony, create generative relationship: Love, Power, Embodiment, and Spirituality. Love drives us toward unity and community, deepening bonds between persons without losing our individuality. Power is individual and personal, social and structural; we use our personal power to effect changes in structural power. Embodiment acknowledges that all of our reactions and relationships are mediated by our physical bodies. And Spirituality is an intentional process of making choices that affect self and community. Spirituality is attentiveness, focus, awareness of how our behavior and choices affect the people around us. (Excerpted and paraphrased from Belonging: The Meaning of Membership, Commission on Appraisal, 2001.) Could these four elements be an anchor, the center of the circle of our community? Could Love, Power, Embodiment, and Spirituality lead us to whose we are?
Perhaps. All four are elements that we experience both individually and communally. We work for justice and the common good as we learn how to balance and promote these elements in our lives, in our churches, and in our world. I propose that love, power, embodiment, and spirituality are paths to the center of our circle – aspects of that to which we belong.

I want to add one more voice to my own here – since I firmly believe that many heads are better than one. I turn to my mentor and colleague, David Bumbaugh. In an effort to articulate that which holds Unitarian Universalists together rather than focusing on the theological diversity that has the potential of distracting us from ever discovering our purpose and living out our mission, David compiled a belief statement of those things that most folk who identify as Unitarian Universalists could probably identify with. I am excerpting just a couple of those statements here as they relate to the question at hand: Whose are we? David articulates these by stating ‘we believe’:

**We believe** that in this interconnected existence the well-being of one cannot be separated from the well-being of the whole, that ultimately we all spring from the same source and all journey to the same ultimate destiny.

**We believe** that the moral impulse that weaves its way through our lives, luring us to practices of justice and mercy and compassion, is threaded through the universe itself and it is this universal longing that finds outlet in our best moments.

**We believe** that our location within the community of living things places upon us inescapable responsibilities. Life is more than our understanding of it, but the level of our comprehension demands that we act out of conscious concern for the broadest vision of community we can command and that we seek not our welfare alone, but the welfare of the whole. We are commanded to serve life and serve it to the seven times seventieth generation.

**We believe** that all that functions to divide us from each other and from the community of living things is to be resisted in the name of that larger vision of a world everywhere alive, everywhere seeking to incarnate a deep, implicate process that called us into being, that sustains us in being, that transforms us as we cannot transform ourselves, that receives us back to itself when life has used us up. Not knowing the end of that process, nonetheless we trust it, we rest in it, and we serve it.
We are interconnected – the well-being of one cannot be separated from the well-being of the whole… the moral impulse lures us into practices of justice, mercy, and compassion… We are responsible to serve the Spirit of Life… anything that divides us is to be resisted in the name of that larger vision that called us into being and transforms us. Whose are we?

Although it is never my preference to state things in the negative, perhaps it is informative to do so in answer to this pivotal question. Whose are we? We are not our own.

We belong to Life and to Love. We belong to the path of Justice and Mercy. Whose are we? We are one another’s. We may even be one another’s keepers and caretakers. Whose are we? We belong to that creative something that transforms us as we cannot transform ourselves. Whose are we? We are Life’s. We embody the expression of Life and Love in a universe whose arc bends toward justice. Whose are we? We belong to the circle whose radius is Love and whose Center is Life. We belong to the circle and we are the circle. May we find our Center and may our circle be unbroken.