BELONGING

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Last month, the UU ministers of the Prairie Star District gathered out on the prairie at a farm near Windom. We came from Kansas and Missouri to south, Nebraska to the west, Wisconsin to the east, and Minnesota from the north. We came together for our annual gathering, this time to consider the question: Whose are We? To Whom or What do We Belong?

Over three days, we participated in experiences that had us thinking about...and sharing...our deepest attachments and commitments, what it is that we value in the world, how we conceive of the holy, to whom and what we feel a sense of call or responsibility.

We shared deeply, writing in our journals, talking in pairs, and in small groups and large groups: sharing as we have never shared before.

All over the country this year, UU ministers are gathering in clusters, sharing with each other, our deepest selves. Discerning: Whose are we?

Here's how it came about.

A UU minister was attending an interfaith gathering of clergy, somewhere in the Pacific Northwest. A Catholic priest, nearing retirement, was sharing his disappointment at the direction of the church over the past 30 years. How his hopes for the church, the optimistic reforms of Vatican II, had not come to fruition. He felt like a personal failure in his vocation, he said. Another of the colleagues noticed that, even as the priest spoke of his deep disappointment and sense of failure, his demeanor appeared calm and at peace. It clashed with his words. The colleague commented about it. The priest said it was because, in spite of the disappointment and failures "I know whose I am. I know to whom I belong."

The UU minister there turned this over in his mind and heart, and shared the story with UU colleagues. It got them thinking: how would we answer the question: whose are we? to whom do we belong?

And thus, the leadership of the UU Minister’s Association began to develop a program to have all UU ministers reflect on the question of whose we are, to whom we belong. And then, to share the experience with the congregations we serve, as I am doing today, and will do further in the coming months, particularly at the Midwinter Retreat, on Feb. 12. You might want to make a note of it.

Whose are we? To whom do I belong? To loved ones, to family, to friends, to my husband, to the earth, to the prairie grasses, to humanity to the church to my colleagues, to you, of this congregation.

I recommend this question to you. This week perhaps, to spend 5 minutes, in reflection, perhaps writing down the answers that come to you. Whose are you? To whom do you belong? You might be surprised at what comes. I was. I didn't know I belonged to the ancestors and to the prairie grasses, quite like I know it now.
To belong to something, or someone, is to be part of them. We can belong to people and to groups, to hobbies and to pets, to God and to humanity and to the earth and to the mystery of life. And knowing to whom we belong, reminding ourselves of that, is to experience ourselves as connected, as loved. To belong is to be attached, not estranged, lonely, or in exile.

The need to belong is hardwired in us. Attachment to our earliest caregiver is essential for thriving. All our lives we are in need of one another.

We are born into some of our relationships of belonging: we are born to a mother...born into a family, into a community, into a religious group, into an ethnic group. We are born into a culture, a region, a piece of earth. Some are born into vocations and affiliations and religions. We are born into an earth with sunlight and sorrow...goodness and beauty. And love. Some things we are born into.

Other belongings come to us through adoption. Some of us are adopted into families, some of us adopt new homelands, new affiliations, new faiths. We choose friends, schools...new towns. We choose new religious communities.

However it is that we belong to something--by birth, or adoption or choice--it always involves a process. And the truth of the matter is, belonging is an ongoing process. We make choices to continue to belong, or not. We choose, consciously or unconsciously, to nurture a relationship of belonging or to let it go.

One thing to notice is that belonging is most often a mutual relationship. And belonging comes with responsibilities. A simple example: my dog belongs to me, and I belong to my dog--I’m one of his humans: I have responsibilities to my dog, and he in turn loves me (rather unconditionally) and has (gladly? instinctively?) taken on the responsibility to protect me. When our children are young they belong to us (in a fashion,) as long as we fulfill our responsibilities to them. This is part of belonging, whether it is with other beings or organizations. Belonging brings responsibilities born of attachment and love.

How is it with a church? What is the nature of belonging to a religious community, to a congregation, to a church? To this congregation?

To join this congregation is a voluntary action by adults who wish to become members. To join this church involves a simple act: signing the membership book. But to belong is more complicated.

Belonging is about getting to know others who belong here. Belonging is about getting to know what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist. Belonging is about getting involved.

At the most basic level, belonging happens as we join in sharing the responsibility for the church. As we become partners in the work of the church, sharing in the ministry of the church, the ministry that belongs to all of us. When we belong to the church, it means that we accept the responsibility to help nurture the church, and see that it thrives, through the gifts of our involvement and our financial support. Belong to the church means participating.

And how do we participate? How do we choose what to do, when there are so many things to do, things that need doing?
Here's my best advice: Listen for what calls to you. Don't say yes to things just because someone needs to do them, just because someone asks you. As someone once said, saying no to things can be just as important, as sacred, as saying yes. Listen to your heart. Try out some new activities, stretch yourself, see if it's a fit. And to let go if it's not a fit or when it is no longer a fit, or when it's time to give someone else the opportunity.

The deepest need of the church is for you to be true to your own self. To bring energy that is clean and fresh, to be conscious of contributing positively to the health and beauty of this place. And to learn the spiritual art of being involved and letting go. That's what keeps the energy flowing.

For this is a place that at its best, is filled with energy. A place where we bring our whole selves and maybe our families. It's a place where we are committed to caring for one another. Here we find companions for our journey through life; here there are others who can help us in our times of need, just as we help others in their times of need.

This is a place where we come to nurture our spirits. It's a place where we seek answers to the deepest questions we have and where we share and learn and grow and make mistakes together. This is a place where we create a community of many generations and where we pass on our values to the future generations.

This is a place where there are opportunities to bring our deepest values to life, both within our walls and in the broader world. It's a place where we work together to help heal the world.

This is a place that we support with our life energy, our love, and our money. And in turn, it is a place where we can feel supported.

And that's how we belong. That's how we belong to religious community and how we belong to one another.