Sermon delivered at the Universalist Unitarian Church of Halifax, Sunday September 11th, 2011, by Interim Minister the Rev. Fran Dearman

“Whose Are We? A theological reflection on some basic teachings of Universalism and Unitarianism at a time of Ingathering and Regrounding.”

There’s a story. It’s a true story, from not so long ago, from somewhere out west, perhaps Seattle. One of our Unitarian Universalist ministers met a priest there who does challenging social work, where hope is a sliver of light at the end of a very long tunnel.

This man’s work is like Sisyphus in the old story from Greek mythology, pushing a huge boulder uphill through eternity; and when he gets to the top of the hill the boulder just rolls back on down again, over and over again, pushing that big rock back up the hill.

The work is valuable, demanding, exhausting. Success lies in doing the work, not in seeing it done; the work will never be completed in his lifetime. How does he go on, my colleague asks? Ah, he replies: “I know whose I am.”

“I know whose I am”, he says. He knows where he belongs, and where he places his trust, and so he finds the strength to push boulders uphill towards a sliver of light.

Whose am I? Whose are you? Whose are we?

After six decades on this earth I have some glimmer of who I am, and whose I am. I belong to myself. I belong to my family; I am daughter, niece, and granddaughter, sister and cousin, friend and lover. I belong to Vancouver’s Island, with deep roots in the rainforest. I am a sailor and a scholar and a walker. I am a Unitarian and a Universalist most of my life; as such I belong to a living tradition of liberal religion with roots deep in time and the human condition.
I belong with some classical thinkers of the ancient world, with the pre-Socratic natural philosophers, with Epicurus, and with the epic poem of Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*—“Concerning the Nature of Things”, written in Latin two thousand years ago.

I belong with some of the early church fathers of Christianity, those who looked for the humanity in Jesus, and saw meaning more in his life and teaching than in his death. I belong with ancient Origen, of the church fathers and mothers seventeen hundred years ago, who reckoned there might need to be a hell, but he couldn’t see any reason why there needed to be anybody in it.

I belong with some of the old rabbis, seventeen hundred years ago. When they read the story of Exodus and the Red Reed Sea and the destruction of Pharaoh’s army, “horse and rider thrown into the sea”, the rabbis wrote in commentary that when the angels began to sing of victory their God rebuked them—could they not see that some of his children were drowning, even as others walked safe between the waters?

I belong with any tradition that respects the reality and integrity of the physical world, and chooses to walk lightly on the earth. And I belong with dreamers. I belong with any human being who can look into the face of a stranger and see there the face of the holy. I belong with any human being who can see the suffering of the innocent, acknowledge the suffering for what it is, and maybe even try to do something about it, rather than merely blame the victim or blame an impossibly powerful god.

Whose am I? I belong to a four hundred year old religious tradition that brings meaning and strength and hope to each day of my life. Not perfect, but human and hopeful and enduring. I shall speak of Unitarianism and then of Universalism. I see them as a mated pair, like hinged clam shells, dancing through time hand in hand. And the hinge is Humanism.

Unitarianism emerged from the Reformation in Europe, half a millennium ago. Historians would describe the enthusiasms of early Unitarian thinkers and communities as rational radical reform, emerging from the Protestant Reformation of Christendom, committed to radical reform, that is
to say going to the root of the matter, and relying on their own reason as authority for the
interpretation of scripture and tradition and personal experience of the holy.

The issues foremost in their struggle included the nature of Jesus Christ and the nature of
baptism. The early Unitarians saw God as one and Jesus as more human than divine, teaching by
his life rather than his death. The early Unitarians were anabaptists, literally re-baptizers, who
rejected infant baptism in favour of adult baptism.

The first congregations to name themselves as Unitarian were gathered about four hundred years
ago in the kingdom of Transylvania—now absorbed into Hungary and Romania. What endears
them to me, and calls me to name them as whose I am, is that their sovereign and legislators
generated an edict of religious toleration four hundred and fifty years ago, the first in
Christendom.

Historians, examining the ebb and flow of rational radical reform, would come to characterize
Unitarianism as valuing freedom, reason, and tolerance. From Calvin we learned to value the
right to private judgement. And if I am to have my private judgement, I must honour also your
private judgement.

Those Unitarian congregations in Transylvania continue to this day. Impelled by persecution, the
Unitarian tradition spread west through Europe and England and across the Atlantic to North
America. And here we are.

On a good day we surpass mere toleration and seek out wisdom, understanding, and respect for
diversity. And so we are a welcoming congregation.

The liberal religious community in Halifax first named itself as a Universalist church in 1837.
Universalism emerged, like Unitarianism, in the debates of the early church fathers in the fourth
century. Universalism is the generous impulse that recognized a God who loves all God’s
children, such that all souls shall be called back to God’s self at their death, and nothing is ever lost. All creation is holy, all people are children of God, and all shall be saved.

I see Universalism and Unitarianism as the left and right hands of the holy, as the two wings of a clamshell. For if the holy is one, as Unitarianism would have it, then the holy is vast enough to embrace all souls and all the universe. And if the universe is so vastly generous that all shall be saved, then all is encompassed in one great unity.

It has been said that Unitarianism speaks for the head, Universalism for the heart. It has also been said that Universalists thought God was too good to damn any one, while Unitarians thought they were too good to be damned.

After a century of dalliance, Unitarians and Universalists were united as one denomination in 1961. Much ink has been expended since then, in honouring both those overlapping circles of our living tradition. And Unitarian Universalism is indeed a living tradition. Out of respect for the right to private judgement, there can be no creedal statement, no test of belief, to define our faith. And so our faith is redefined by the experience of each new generation. That which is novel to one generation becomes the air we breathe for the next. Each generation will work with their own issues and evolve their own metaphors with which to trace the holy. We belong to time; and time is an ever flowing stream.

When I consider whose I am, I find a home with the Renaissance scholars of the humanities, who turned their eyes from theology, queen of the sciences, to study those matters that concerned human beings in this world, like medicine, mathematics and music, architecture, language, and law.

When I consider whose I am, I find a home with those of this past century, who reckoned they could be good without God. God is not a word I use lightly; I have too much respect for that word to confuse God’s will with my own private judgement. Also, I am certain that a decent human being could live a decent life—a holy life—without recourse to a supernatural authority;
many have lived good and great lives based on the judgement of their reason, conscience, and experience. In the past century, Humanism has found a natural home within Unitarianism.

Recent surveys by the Commision of Appraisal of the Unitarian Universalist Association suggest that about eighty percent of Unitarian Universalists would describe themselves as humanists, which might or might not also mean agnostic or atheist rather than theist or deist.

Similarly, about eighty percent of UUs would also name their most meaningful, profound, or spiritual moments as occurring in nature. Whose am I? I am of the light and shadow in the deep forests of Vancouver Island where I grew up, and the tall ferns that danced above my footsteps there. I am of the wave on the waters where I sailed for so many years. I am of the earth I walked on, all the way to Santiago and beyond, in eternal pilgrimage.

In conclusion, how shall I answer that question, “Whose am I?” I am my own. I am of my family and friends. I am part of all that I have seen and known and done. I am of the earth and of this world, and I trust whatever may be for any world beyond.

I am privileged to live a life of relatively free choice, so I may hope to take responsibility for my own decisions, and make a heaven or hell for myself here on this earth, and serve the holy here on this earth, as best I may.

I am of a four hundred year tradition of Unitarianism, able to see the holy and the world as one great wholeness. I am of an age-old universalist tradition that could see the holy in a stranger’s face. I am of those who could weep for horse and rider, thrown into the sea, even in the midst of joy for those who crossed on dry land. I am of a people so generous they could not imagine any soul so far from the love of god they would not be called back to god’s self at the end of days.

Whose am I? Whose are you? Whose do you choose to be? [1700ww]

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Bibliography

See the work of historian George Hunston Williams for his description of the anabaptists: Unitarianism as emerging from rational radical reform; such as Mennonites who emerge from pietistic radical reform; and Quakers who emerge from the spiritualistic side of radical reform.

See the work of historian Earl Morse Wilbur for his characterization of Unitarianism by freedom, reason, and tolerance.

See Viktor Frankl’s, “Man’s Search for Meaning” for the argument that it is we humans who craft meaning in our world, and that at the least we can choose our own attitudes to the events and circumstances that overtake us.


See the Holy Bible, Book of Exodus, chapter 15, verses one and twenty-one for the narrative of the destruction of Pharaoh’s army in the sea; see Rabbinic Commentaries on same for the admonition not to rejoice at the suffering of an enemy.