“WHOSE ARE WE?”

_A Sermon Reflection by the Reverend Carole Martignacco_
Delivered at UU Estrie, North Hatley QC – 5 June 2011

Chalice Lighting: _O Hidden Light_ – Annie Besant, English Theosophist, _Vers un reve_
Opening Words: _Community is a safe place_, from M. Scott Peck, _Different Drum_
Reading: _Listening For Our Song_ – David Bumbaugh, _100 Meditations_, Skinner House

_Whose are we?_ A strange question! Not who are you, but whose? The first time I heard it, I thought – who’s asking? This morning I want to invite you to eavesdrop with me as I unpack my own response to this question. On one level, it’s a question of belonging, on another, it holds potential to point us toward articulating our larger purpose. “Whose are we” depends not just upon who’s asking, but what level of belonging we’re talking about. Do we mean as individuals, members of a family, humanity in general? Do we mean our emerging global culture early in the 21st century, or as a religious community?

To be honest – along with others I know, including some in a group of over 50 Canadian UU ministers at our annual retreat in Toronto who’ve just spent time together exploring the question – I admit I balked on first hearing it. Oh no, not more navel-gazing!!! And then: if left to me, I would have framed the question something like “To what do we belong?” “Whose” personalizes it – the subject becomes not a what, but a who. Which seems to presume a personal being as that something larger to which we might commit ourselves to be in service or belong. For non-theists among us, that’s a big issue. With a bit of reframing, we can get past it, though – we’re used to translating, eh?

Having my colleague Allison Barrett here from Hamilton for a few days, sharing stories about our daughters, and thinking about this question – Whose Are We? - reminded me of something I’d nearly forgotten about when my own four children were small. It all comes back like yesterday – like Allison’s girls, they were toddlers and preschool to Kindergarten age. I recall how challenging it was, taking all four of them out in public. We had a most elaborate system for keeping track of who held onto whom, and on what circumstances anyone was allowed to break contact. Being a mother, leading my brood in the wide world activated some primal fear that put me on hyper alert. I was sure if I lost my grip, shifted my attention a brief moment, one of them – likely the smallest - would separate, get lost in the crowd. I must have looked like the
quintessential mother duck with her little ducklings; no doubt the girls felt herded. But as a parent, you hear stories – how just crossing the street, turning your head a moment, the toddler trotting along faithfully at your side suddenly disappears from sight – and you panic. You’re terrified for the child. Too young to find her own way home, would she know where and to whom she belonged? In the confusion and anxiety of separation, could she remember or articulate the address we’d rehearsed so many times, sing-song fashion, in the car, getting dressed, setting the table, taking a bath. You young parents can probably relate; I was obsessive. Their outer wraps were always marked with laundry tags bearing name, address, parents’ names and phone – I almost said serial #. Just to be safe, we slipped the same information into their shoes. Long before their first words, we’d rehearse a little jingle to memorize the spelling of their name. Along with the alphabet song, they learned: M-A-R, T-I-G, N-A-C-C-O – to a tune everyone of a certain age here will associate with a certain large-eared mouse named Micky. If you ever get lost, I’d tell them, remember to sing our song. So anyone finding you will know whose you are. Maria, my eldest, who now runs her own day care center back in Minnesota, does something similar with her small charges, all eight of them under age five.

**Whose are we?** On one level, an answer might be that as individuals – we belong to those we love, who love us. To friends and mostly family – parents and grandparents, natural or adoptive – whether or not we knew them personally, siblings, extended family, and the family or families we’ve created, our spouses, our children, and their children. Whether that family is still alive, wherever they are in the world, whether or not we get along, we in some way belong to them, and they to us. That’s the first level response.

We may not be lost – needing to find our way home. Still whose are we is a question worth asking, as it evokes a range of responses. When I posed the question to our small group yesterday in the Worship workshop, as a theme for designing worship, out of four people – you guessed it – there were more than four responses. One said: it’s important to me to know something of our history – where we’ve come from as a religious movement, ideas and founding figures. Another asked: Wait a minute! Which “we” are we talking about? - We as individuals, as Canadians, as Unitarian Universalists, as human beings? Defining “we” differently leads to different answers. It’s something I learned working in a research lab: research topics are often referred to as “questions”, and before you start to try to answer your question, you need to fully define the terms in the question. Three people at a table hearing “whose are we?” ended up answering several different questions. Each level of “we” deserves an answer, but to understand the answers
shared requires understanding the different questions each level poses. The third response you heard in Kelly McDowell’s beautiful reading of a deeply personal sense of connection with ancestors, out of an urgent need for power and connection, who gave her the inner spirit strength to face life’s unknowns.

*Whose are we?* Before we can answer as a collective, as we, we each must search our own hearts. First and foremost, whose are you? In your best moments, and when you struggle - to whom or what do you belong? To what are you in service? In the depths of your spirit, when you are profoundly alone, do you know whose you are or what you belong to? Having a sense of being part of a larger purpose or pattern of existence, leads us on, keeps us on track, helps lift us out of the general drudgery and smallness of life. This is important soul-work. It’s a theme I intend to explore in our monthly small group ministry gatherings. However we might rephrase it, whose are we depends upon who’s asking.

A bit of background: Where did the question come from? It’s a question the UUMA – our intercontinental UU Ministers Association – has assigned its members as a major theme for professional development. As ministers throughout Canada and the US, we were invited to engage in a full year or more of exploration. First we elected two ministers from our chapter – which includes all of Canada, who joined others in the States to take part in an intensive training course. Those two returned home to share their learning among colleagues throughout the past year, in regional retreats and in our annual meeting this May just past. We are committed to continuing throughout the coming year to deepen our sense of self, identity and spiritual awareness, to strengthen our individual and collective sense of call. And an important feature for us is to bring the work back to our congregations, as I do this morning, engaging you in the conversation. My colleagues and I spent the better part of three full days together, speaking, sitting in silence, listening deeply. Around and between business and governance sessions, exploring the question from as many directions as possible. Whose are you – in all its complexity, first listing the myriad levels of connection. Then moving deeper, whose work do you do? Who – or what – owns your soul? What sparks your spirit, drives your engine, fuels your fire? Whose life are you living – who or what’s in charge? If, according to Will the Bard, all the world is a stage, what robes are you wearing, or masks, who’s designed the stage sets, who’s directing, and from where? To what or whom are you playing or feel called to live for? We met in pairs, in groups, and full circle, sharing our responses to a series of carefully crafted questions. Taking us through so many levels of belonging – to family, to community, to a
profession, to a covenant with each other, as called to a spiritual tradition, to a life in service to something beyond ourselves. For some the Who or What was un-nameable, for others quite clearly a larger spirit, the universal. In the end, with patience, good will, and healthy doses of good-humoured teasing among peers, even those who had at first balked – comme moi-meme - at what threatened to become “more navel-gazing, in the end felt renewed in service to our highest ideals, more deeply and thoroughly reminded of our connections, and profoundly inspired.

My friends, I have this dream – that our congregations might become like seminaries for lay people. Places set apart from the ordinary business of living for deep reflection and spiritual engagement. Where shared ministry, theological exploration, and mutual empowerment to accomplish our dreams is the order of the day. Keeping us focused on the holy, keeping us, like the religious people of King John’s day, from degenerating into infighting and magnifying our differences. Along with doing the business of church – if we truly are to be more than a non-profit org. or social club, if we are to be a mature religious people with a cohesive identity, we must commit time to engaging together with the deeper questions. - However elusive the answers. Because it matters to whom or what we belong. Our sense of belonging – to community and to a vision or a purpose beyond ourselves - matters for how we live our lives. In fact, it may be the single most determining factor undergirding the minute, moment-to-moment decision-making that shapes our lives and creates our history, giving life its meaning and purpose. At a time of confusing transition in our culture, a time of incredible potential for growth for our religious movement, a time when people the world over are more and more seeking meaning, connection and purpose – “Whose are we?” is not a trivial question.

Like “where do we come from, what are we, where are we going” – it’s one of those subliminal religious questions – like hearing your own song – playing in the background of everything. The song we sing by heart, a song of connection. Because religion is about connection, from the Latin re-ligare. It’s about belonging. As Unitarians and Universalists, with so many diverse theologies struggling to find our place under our one umbrella, what we often lack is a cohesive and unifying sense of identity. James Luther Adams, UU theologian of the 20th century, called our free churches to “the prophethood of all believers.” His vision was that, as individuals and as members of religious community we rally ourselves, become bold enough to search our souls, and ask the only ones who could possibly know – ourselves and each other.
Our answers, if we have them – or merely the discipline of asking the question – may point us toward a richer future. May it be so.

CLOSING WORDS
As you may have noticed, my sermon is unfinished. I began by posing a question, which I purposely have left unanswered. Because I cannot answer for you. It is work we must engage with together in the coming months. So I close with these words of Bruce Marshall, from Taking Pictures of God:

“It happens. Sunday morning comes and my sermon doesn’t seem finished. I know what I want to say, but I haven’t quite figured out how to say it. So I go with what I’ve got and I hope. Maybe the best sermons are those that aren’t finished. Maybe they are best when there is some space, some emptiness in which we can move around. That is how our lives are – incomplete, unresolved, a little messy at the edges. Our lives are unfinished, which is what gives us reason to be.”