As I remember the story and make up parts that I don’t remember, a Unitarian minister and a Roman Catholic priest have seats beside each other on a transcontinental flight, and they get to talking shop. They share the stories of their spiritual formation and seminary education; of their ordinations and parishes in their early careers. There’s far more in common than different between them. Then the priest tells of how his work for the church becomes complicated. Let’s say that he takes the reforms of Vatican II, Pope Paul VI and John Paul I greatly to heart and teaches a loving, forgiving and liberal interpretation of Roman Catholicism to his parish. He becomes a beloved and respected Bishop, but then, John Paul II comes in and begins reversing all the progress made. The resisting priest is demoted back to the parish, and then sent far away to a remote, poor church, and then he is silenced from preaching at all.

The Unitarian wonders what it would be like if this were to happen to her, and she asks, “How do you handle all this?” The priest shrugs and looks at her with a faint smile: “I know Whose I am!” In translation, “I know that I am God’s servant wherever I go, whatever I do.” I ask you for a moment to suspend your judgment about his belief to consider, I hope in a way that you can make relevant to yourself, his devotion. Wherever he goes, whatever he does, he knows his purpose, his role: what/whom he serves.

Last winter and spring, Unitarian Universalist ministers across Canada join our colleagues in the United States and beyond to participate in a designed professional and spiritual development workshop named “Whose Are We?” The UU Ministers Association, wanting to develop a deepening workshop for its members, asks two prominent, spiritually-minded colleagues to write it, The Rev. Dr. Laurel Hallman now retired whom some of you met here a few years ago and The Rev Burton Carley minister of First Unitarian Church of Memphis, Tennessee. This association-wide program is the first one offered simultaneously in all our chapters to help ministers grow further into our vocation.

Just as I bet some of you are right now, not a few ministers take exception to the title and what it implies. Whose are we? Who’s the who? There is no who. What is it with this implication of ownership? No one owns me. You can’t make me do this!

No one, of course, wants to make anyone do anything. Rather, the lead-up to the workshops encourages people, especially ministers, to approach the program with an open mind, ready to translate the language into what is personally relevant. Some
ministers have a who; some have a what; some, a concept; some, an ideal. Almost all congregations deal with what words mean so surely we ministers can do that ourselves. And if we let language limit how we talk or what we talk about, then we’ll end up only talking with those who use words the way we do who probably also agree with us. That’s not very open-minded or illuminating, even if we all see language as vital for us to be able to understand each other. In any case, Whose Are We? goes ahead and as far as I know the majority of ministers participates.

Although my soul resounds to “Whose am I?,” I can easily see that “What or whom do I serve?” is itself a deep question for me and for any of us to ask ourselves and, indeed, every one of us is challenged to answer. So I ask you: “What/Whom do you serve?”

Your response may have been immediate, or perhaps you got caught up in the idea of service so let’s begin there. Our Mission Statement says that we “inspire actions in the service of life.” In its short form, we say, “Act in service.” Some wonder, “In service of what, or to whom?” which in fact is the question before us today, but let’s for a moment simply look at ‘in service.’

That phrase implies humility and from what I’ve heard at times, some of us mix up humility with humiliation. Both come from the word humble, but to be humble and to make someone humble are very different things. And humiliate doesn’t mean just to make humble; it means to degrade, shame or put down. To be humble is to be modest or respectful: terms that imply equality. In humility, we don’t feel less than someone else, we recognize that he is equal to us; just as deserving as we are.

Humility in the spiritual sense goes beyond mere equality; it is the choice to respond to the deservingness of another, to honour her quality, in fact to honour her being, for Unitarian Universalists see all human beings as born in dignity with inherent worth. In humility, we bow to that worth, again not in subservience, but in the sense of “Namaste,” the spirit of humanity in me bows to the spirit of humanity within you. Our Seventh Principle calls us to go even further as Samaya will speak to you about shortly.

By aiming to act in the service of life we come to live in the service of life, which means that we live within a sense of service. To act in service, then, is not a technically incomplete statement, but figuratively a wide open one – to be thoughtful that all our actions need to be guided by what we can best judge as serving life.

So I ask you: “What/Whom do you serve?” Perhaps your answer is different now, perhaps not. I invite you to forgive yourself for your limitations – those that come from your character, or experience, or energy level, or stressful life – I invite you to sit for a moment in a state of self-forgiveness, and I ask you again, “What/Whom do you serve?” Perhaps your answer is different again. We all serve a number of people, a number of purposes, but underneath, if you keep asking yourself, perhaps there is an ultimate
answer: “This is what I serve. This is whom I serve.” On that level, perhaps ‘service’
doesn’t seem like a task or a chore. Perhaps it’s more like a breath – a constant, an
essential, a reflection of life.

This all sounds very nice, but this ‘living in service of the ultimate’ thing isn’t easy.
Some people label it a call when we come to know what or whom we serve, but ‘call’
can mean a lot of things. It can be a call out: “Let’s take this outside!” Prepare to fight
your inner conflicts and failings. Usually it’s also a call-back: “This is a reminder that
your service is due; when can we expect you to act?” “Now” is usually a good idea
because delay is futile. The ultimate calls us on the carpet, too: “Are you responsible
for this?” The answer is always yes.

Deepening our lives with a commitment to serve what is ultimate to us will confront us to
deal with oppositions. What is ultimate speaks to us in terms of ideals, but we live in a
world defined by imperfect realities; we wrestle to find a middle way that doesn’t require
us to compromise what we most value. Righteousness is a trait we tend to see in those
who follow certain other faiths, but if we redefine it as I’m-always-rightness, what is
ultimate asks us to develop more tolerance, not of what is intolerable, but of what is so
different from us that we want not to bother understanding it. Many of us value our
independence and autonomy very highly, but what is ultimate usually brings us into
communion with others, even into relationships so important that only a word like
‘covenant’ can maintain the bonds. Perhaps the hardest of all is that the ultimate needs
us to let go of fear to make room for love: first love of the ultimate itself which transforms
into the love of rising to its demands.

By now, I hope you see that I’m talking of something far greater than merely serving the
church, although I hope that most of us see this congregation as intricately connected to
what we each find ultimate. Perhaps, as our Mission says, North Shore Unitarian
inspires you to act in service of what you find most important; perhaps our values guide
you to what is worthy of serving; I hope that in many ways, this community sustains you
as you reach towards a better world.

It is a coincidence that the beginning of our Canvass for 2012 is occurring on this day,
when our service has long been planned to deal with this call of the ultimate. I hope
today you might consider what the church needs from you so that it can continue to
inspire, guide and sustain you.