Whose Are We?
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Act I. The scene I’m about to describe takes place in a land far, far away, at a workshop being held in a conference centre somewhere in the Netherlands. The participants have been split into pairs. On the surface, the assigned exercise appears to be simple enough. Ask your partner one question repeatedly: Whose are you? Follow each response with the refrain “God be merciful.”

“Whose are you?”

“My ancestors’.”

“God be merciful. Whose are you?”

“My family’s.”

“God be merciful. Whose are you?”

And so it goes, for what feels like an eternity. Five full minutes, or was it more? The longer the questioning goes on, the deeper you have to dig for answers. I don’t know. Whose am I? What does this question mean, anyway? Am I being pushed toward a specific answer?

Who are these crazy people asking this question over and over again? We are a group of Unitarian Universalist ministers from all over the world. My partner for the exercise comes from a tradition of exceptional politeness. He cannot bear to keep asking me the question. Surely, it is time to stop. But he has no problem with the refrain “God be merciful.” Where he comes from, the phrase flows easily. At first I answer with the obvious, there is my family and all its members and there is this congregation. But eventually, my answers slide from the sublime to the absurd, and there’s an all-purpose feel to the response. Whose are you? The sun and the stars’ (God be merciful). Whose are you? The dirty dishes (God be merciful).

The closer I get to the absurd, the more I realize I’m approaching the truth. There is so much claiming my time. So much that can fill my life, mostly in a good way, but there’s plenty that draws me away from a deeper purpose. The more I hear the question, the more I become aware of my thirst.

This one exercise is the introduction to Whose Are We? A Theological Conversation, a program developed over the last two years by the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association. As Sarah Lammert, director of ministries and faith development at the UUA, explains, the project came out of a gathering of Unitarian Universalist organizations that had come together to explore the future of ministerial formation. In other words, they wanted to answer the question: How can we prepare and equip our ministers and laity to lead us into the future?
The gathering started with a worship service, as Sarah writes, “and the very first words uttered were those of Rev. Jon Luopo, the minister of the University Unitarian Church of Seattle. He told this story:

“It seems that in Seattle the interfaith clergy organization has a tradition of asking senior colleagues to share their life odysseys. On this particular occasion, a Roman Catholic Priest was telling his story, and he said that his life had been in large measure a failure. He remembered the heady days of Vatican II and how hopeful he and his generation of liberal priests had been that real change was coming to the church he loved so dearly. And yet, these many years later he felt that the church had if anything become hardened and deeply conservative, and his dreams had not been realized.

“Now, this priest was someone who was valued among his interfaith colleagues, and they were somewhat hurt and stunned by his revelation. And yet one colleague noted, despite the severity of his words, his demeanor seemed quite peaceful and content. ‘How can you claim that your life was a failure, and yet appear so calm and serene?’ ‘I know whose I am,’ replied the priest. ‘I know whose I am.’

“Whose are we?” Sarah writes as she contemplates what this question could mean from a Unitarian Universalist perspective. “Whose are we, we who claim so many diverse approaches to what is of ultimate truth, and yet gather as a unified one? Whose are we? What or who do we serve, beyond the narrow interests of ourselves? What transcends our small individual being, connecting us to the pulsing life of the universe we are a part of? Is it energy, is it God, is it Love or Justice, is it the people who surround us, the cloud of witnesses whose lives passed before us? Whose are we?”

Out of these musings the Whose Are We? program arose and was set in motion among all our ministers, with hopes that it would eventually move out into our congregations. For me personally, it became an opportunity to have the kind of theological discussions that we rarely find time to have. We know so well how we, within our congregations, can get caught up in the day-to-day administration of things, losing sight of the bigger picture. Even when we leave home, we seem to do no better. There’s always so much business that claims our time. For me, these theological conversations were a welcome shift in perspective.

Act II. Another scene, a year later: I’m in another conference centre in a land far, far away known as Ontario. This time, I am with my colleagues who are serving congregations in Canada. We’re split into pairs to ask this same question, “Whose are you?” Besides the facilitators, I’m the only one in the group who has already had a taste of this program. There’s strong reaction to the refrain “God be merciful”, so the group proposes several alternatives, finally agreeing upon the phrase “Held by the holy.”

The overall effect of the exercise was the same, but I missed that feeling of “God be merciful” and the way it sounded as its emphasis could be shifted in response to each answer. Plus I liked being pushed to the edge. I appreciated the depth of conversation that arose as we struggled with the value of this exercise. It was but a warm-up for the rest of the program, a way to get the theological juices flowing – and yes, it was designed to be provocative. As I wrote in my journal
about the experience, I came to an important realization that how I hear certain words is very different from other Unitarian Universalists because I was not raised in a Christian context. I found myself thirsting to delve into a deeper understanding of my own past tradition.

There’s something that our minister emeritus Charles Eddis said to me in the midst of this program that has stayed with me. “We need to get into something deeper,” he said to me. “People are looking for faith and understanding, an experience they’ve never had. They need to study and learn. Not a mishmash of world religions. They need to study one thing and know it deeply.” Charles said he that he has been working on his own understanding of faith for more than 80 years and he still hasn’t gotten there– but he’s getting closer. Somehow it was reassuring to know that the journey is supposed to take a lifetime. Our conversation set me yearning to reclaim the Judaism of my childhood from the perspective of an adult. I wondered why I’m still drawn there, and not somewhere else.

As the Whose Are We? program progressed we were invited to pursue questions of our call, and our covenants with others. We took time to journal, to share in pairs and in small groups. Along the way there were rumblings. Is this really how we should be spending our time? Shouldn’t we be out there doing something, creating the next social justice movement in Canada? Do we really need to have these kinds of discussions? I found my mind floating to memories from another lifetime.

Act III, a flashback: New York City, the auditorium of the New School for Social Research. The year is 1980. I was studying economics – political economy to be exact. My fellow students and I were Marxists to the core. We were sure that we could save the world if we could get Marx’s theories right. Meetings of our student organization provided me with guaranteed migraine headaches for the first and only time in my life. The meeting this day was no exception. There were those who argued that you had to forget about theory. Just get out into the world and take action, oppose the evils of capitalism at every corner of the city, they said. There were others who argued, no, you had to get the theory right first. (Of course their version was always the most pure and accurate). A balance is what we need, others of us argued. It is the dialectic that Marx taught, we said. We weren’t talking about that dumbed-down explanation of thesis, anti-thesis, synthesis that we were taught in high school. We meant the constant give and take of two forces, theory and practice, that gradually reshape each other and eventually forge something new.

I didn’t last long as an economist or as a Marxist. Most likely those migraine headaches were trying to tell me something. Where was the spirit in all that theorizing and those feeble attempts at action? But I’ve held onto that image of two forces, like ocean and shoreline, shifting and changing each other over time, until they become transformed by each other’s presence.

This spring I wrote two phrases into my journal. The first was a quote from Martin Buber: “We are promise making, promise breaking, promise renewing people.” The second was from the gospel of Matthew, “You must be faithful over a few things to be ruler over many things.”

To what are we faithful? We make promises to our families, our communities, our world, our Gods, our universe, and as promise makers we are guaranteed to be promise breakers. When we
fail, either we give up in despair, or we begin again, renewing our promises and hoping to get it right the next time.

In my days of radical economics, all I wanted to do was to make the world a better place, to bring economic justice to people in need of food and shelter, to create a balance between the rich and poor. Then pragmatism set in, my children were born and their needs became my purpose. I lost track of one covenant and made a new covenant with my family. I promised that I would never let my love waiver and I have always kept that promise. Yet as much as I belong to my family, as much as they are a part of me, I still feel called to belong to something greater. I have always been searching for the answer to this question, “Whose am I?”

Maybe the obvious answer to the question is that I am God’s. But to say that is to say something that I am no longer sure I know what it means. Maybe the answer is Justice or Love. This is my personal struggle, the context that I have been shaped within. The things you wrestle with will come from your contexts.

Act IV. A final scene in the Children’s Chapel of this church, nearly four years ago. The Board of Management is meeting around two long tables. The words “Welcome and nurture, inspire and challenge, take action in the world” are being presented to the board for the first time. This is four governing bodies ago. So many new people have come into our midst since then. So many wonderful people we have come to know and love have gone, saying goodbye as new jobs or circumstances called them elsewhere. Yet we, as a body, somehow remain constant. We build upon the work of others we may never meet.

Those words of our mission had taken a year to develop after many congregational conversations and activities that led up to the final statement. That evening, the first draft was unveiled to these key leaders in the church. Some approved instantly. Others hesitated. “There’s something missing,” they said. “The words could apply to any institution,” someone argued. “How can we define ourselves as a church?” Then several on the board insisted, “We’re a spiritual community. That’s what’s missing.” That night the words, “As a spiritual community,” were added to the rest. “As a spiritual community, we welcome and nurture, we inspire and challenge, we take action in the world.” This was the final statement that the congregation voted upon and approved that spring.

That short preamble “as a spiritual community” serves a constant reminder for me. There are days when I need to remember that we are a spiritual community. As I see it, spirituality is the promise we make to stretch beyond what is known, to be more than just a collection of individuals, to have faith in a greater good, to dedicate ourselves to love, to feel a connection to all that fills us with light and compassion, to honour the beauty of this earth and its people, and the longing to respond to their cries for help, to wonder at the mystery of the cosmos, and to recognize the thirst that keeps us searching for something more. In the heart of that definition of spirituality is a responsibility to community, this community and world community. It is this inexplicable thing that enables us to care for each other, to keep moving forward together and to start over again when covenants are broken. I wouldn’t call it easy, but I would call it lifesaving.
Spirituality or action? I don’t see these as an either/or proposition. Falling back on the language of my radical days, there is a dialectic that is always at play. There are times when the well runs dry and we must go back to the source for inspiration. There are other times when we need to march forward, standing up for what is just, healing the wounded world. But we cannot do one without the other, and as we go, spirit comes to shape our actions and our actions come to shape our spirits until we are transformed into something new.

Whose are we? What do we serve beyond our narrow interest? What informs the action we take in the world?

Whose are you? I invite you to ask the question of each other. God be merciful or witnessed by the holy, may you be shaped and changed by what you share and what you hear.