Let us be a house of welcome,
living stone upholding living stone,
gladly showing all our neighbours
we are not our own!

_from SLT #317, words by Brian Wren_

“Douglas Steere, a Quaker teacher, says that the ancient question, “What am I?”
inevitably leads to a deeper one, “Whose am I?” – because there is no identity outside of
relationships. You can’t be a person by yourself. To ask “Whose Am I?” is to extend the
questions far beyond the little self-absorbed self, and wonder: Who needs you? Who loves you?
To whom are you accountable? To whom do you answer? Whose life is altered by your choices?
With whose life, whose lives, is your own all bound up, inextricably, in obvious or invisible
ways?”

That passage, from the Reverend Victoria Safford, claiming that ‘you cannot be a
person by yourself” – challenges our Unitarian exaltation of individualism. How dare we ask
“whose are we”? Why should we bother to ask “whose are we”?

In the past year, Unitarian Universalist Ministers across North America have been
challenged to (and challenged by ) that very question for the purpose of becoming more
articulately informed in our theology. In the first unit of the series, we paired off and in a timed
session, simply asked one another over and over again that question: “whose are you?” in a kind
of intense brainstorming session, and met each response with a blessing, only to ask again
“whose are you”? ... and the first answers came easily to me: I am my congregation’s, my
vocation, my call, my parent’s, my son’s .. these for me are literal covenants of belongingness,
but over and over again I was asked and the answers broadened, became metaphorical – I belong
to Unitarian Universalism, to Buddhism, to world views and politics that shape and inform me;
still the questioning went on, and still the scope broadened – for my existence and nurture I owe
the sun, moon, brother sky, music, peace, and an amazing and abundant grace, grace, amazing
grace.

_Whose_ are we?

Unlike the certain priest in Sara Lammert’s story [cited in the reading], we Unitarian
Universalists have no ready answer to the question. I imagine any priest would be quite
confused at needing several full minutes to really delve into the beyond to name his existential
betrothedness. But we Unitarians -- we point to probabilities and possibilities. For us, to
grapple with ‘whose are we’ is a process to be lived, not a puzzle to be solved.

The answer, I propose, is already inherent in our seven principles. The principles
outline a series of concentric circles of care. Each principle is a compass point, by which we
may navigate the circumference of ‘whose are we’. No single principle taken on its own is an
adequate map; rather they must be taken as whole to be holy.

Orthodox religionists can call this quest of ‘beyondering’ God, the Almighty. We have no
such shorthand for immensity. We stumble on metaphors, and risk by naming it everything, it is
nothing at all . . . yet we feel it keenly, cite it as our 7th principle affirming the interdependent
web of all existence of which we are a part.

When we consider, whose are we . . .what names shall we choose?

*Response #8 “Mother Spirit, Father Spirit”*
If you can hear me, clap once . . .
If you can hear me, clap twice . . .
If you can hear me, clap three times . . .

Many of us heard that story at coffeehouse last year, and since then we have often used it in our noisy coffee hall to quiet the crowd and make an announcement. It works every time, by the third clapping.

There’s something about the beat and the impulse to play along, keep the beat, Catch the breath, move the feet, feel the spirit. It is why we sing together, read together, sway together. There is a natural draw toward synchronizing ourselves with each other. There is a natural draw toward finding literal ways to experience something beyond ourselves, even if it is only for a moment, clapping to the beat, singing the chorus of a song, marching in step for awhile.

We who are non-conformists, historical heretics, like to celebrate that we are unique (just like everybody else). The question: WHOSE are we? causes a twinge, an itch.

If, for the Orthodox, the answer comes as easily as breathing -- what of us? . . . is the opposite of ‘orthodox’ paradox? The central paradox of our faith is how the individual expresses him or herself in the collective.

We cannot become all we are unless we are set into a community. To be holy, we must be part of a whole. Our 2nd – 6th principles cite examples of how we interact in our relations – in the congregation, society at large, and the world. They call on us to use our individual powers of creativity in service to the collective. There is more at stake in these than fulfilling our individual desires.

We often invoke Henry David Thoreau’s celebration of ‘marching to the beat of a different drummer” . . . but marching to a different drummer still implies there is music. For there to be a ‘different’ drummer implies that there is a heartbeat from which we may deviate. That we may also march together is not about conformity, but a matter of covenanting. It’s cooperating in the interests of a bigger vision, a mission wider than oneself and self-interests. It is a mission, the understanding of why we exist. It is the difference between a club – where we serve the interests of its members, -- a corporation – where we serve the interests of consumers, and a congregation – which must, to thrive, exist to connect each of us as individuals and as the collective to something beyond ourselves. While our hearts beat singly, they follow a familiar universal rhythm shared by humanity.

Whose are we? The question, for Unitarian Universalists, seen through the lens of our principles, is an invitation to belongingness instead of obligation; of serendipity rather than surrender.

If every member of the choir sang their own tune, it would be chaos. None would be heard; sung together there is little challenge, in unison, but no harmony, less depth. Singing together means harmonizing; taking the same tune and creating countermelodies and complementary rhythms, unique parts, but in service to the vision of the whole. This is where we sing best.

Somewhere in this tension between the each and the all that our Unitarian Universalist answer lies to that question: WHOSE are we?

*Response #1011 “Return Again”*

For me, the WHOSE ARE WE challenge brought to mind the mantra of my mentor in ministry. The Reverend David Bumbaugh used to pose three questions to seminary students for discernment: “What do we believe? Whom do we serve? To whom or to what are we responsible?” Again and again I’ve returned to those central questions, all necessarily parts of my understanding: “who am I becoming?”
It is a question much on the mind of this congregation this year, and especially today, with the initial name change selection process ballot and the important vote about the accessibility grant after the service.

These two issues have allowed those of us in congregational leadership to put into practice what we learned at a leadership series last May at the Canadian Unitarian Council’s annual conference, led by church consultant Robert Latham.

Latham outlined 5 facets to an institution’s identity:

1. **mission** - the key to sustained motivation – the focus of why we exist as a congregation beyond individual satisfaction.
2. **leadership** (which makes everything happen that is going to happen)
3. **organization**, which is the means by which we fulfill our mission
4. **message** – our view of reality and our belief in the unlimited creative potential to transform society—our faith that what we do matters.
And, finally, 5. our building itself – which is a symbol of identity, declaring our permanent status – We are HERE. The building houses our complete public image. I’ll say it again: “the building houses our complete public image”. It’s appearance, upkeep, visibility, architectural perspective, and its nature of welcome, declares to the public – tells those who are not YET among us -- what CAN happen – what promise lies behind these doors.

Our institutional identity – its mission, leadership, organization, and message – is housed in *this* building. And our collective identity is indicative of how we practice our first principle, celebrating the inherent worth and dignity of every person. If we did an audit of our institution, would we discover the implied answer to: *Whose are we?*

We are grappling with the question in two ways today – first, with the name change choice. In your orders of service there is a ballot. This is a preliminary narrowing down of names from which the top ten or so will be up for debate and discussion in an open forum in January. This choice is open to all of our friends and members of any age. Please only choose your top 5 and no more. Just who do you think we are??? Are we our geography? Our vision? Our mission? What metaphor speaks to who we wish to become in our deepest and finest aspirations? Place your name change ballots in the box downstairs.

Secondly, today after the service, we are holding a special congregational meeting to vote on whether to devote significant financial resources toward making our building more accessible by proceeding with building an elevator and new staircase. For two years, at Canvass Stone Soup conversations, our members let the Board know that improving accessibility was a key issue. The Board responded by applying for a grant, and we were awarded 75 thousand dollars toward that purpose by the government, followed by 10 thousand more by an anonymous donor. In a pre-canvass survey, 21 of us have already pledged a total of 64 thousand dollars toward this build. In total, then, we have in grants, donations and pledges 149 thousand dollars committed to this cause.

Today’s vote is not about whether *we need* to be accessible . . . or whether you personally *need* better stairs . . . or whether as a congregation we *need* to extend our welcome in a way so that our facilities reflect our first principle, affirming the worth and dignity of every person, regardless of mobility or physical ability. It is not a vote about whether or not there are ‘enough’ people here, today, needing better access to all our spaces . . .because this forward-thinking congregation has a history of always voting to accommodate the guest, the friend, and the member who has not yet arrived. For over 50 years, this congregation has always answered “whose are we” with the answer: “*to the next generation of Unitarians*”.

I urge you to understand that we are voting on one simple question today: are you willing to support accessibility this year? And whether that answer comes down to practicalities of timing or technicalities of space is up to you as an individual as how you see yourself and express yourself in this congregation, and in this community. Are you willing to join me and 20 others to do what seems daunting, but a daring declaration of our institutional identity? Let your vote respond to that question: *WHOSE are we?*
Indeed, **whose are we?** In those concentric circles of care, where as individuals we create relationships in the world, the community in which we live, and the congregation we choose, we affirm that we are part of a vast interdependent web of humanity and more, which guarantees we can never, by our actions, ever do ‘just one thing’ (*Robert Latham*), because every decision impacts the whole – across space and across time.

Whose are we? We have come from the past.

Whose are we? We, here, are in service to the present.

Whose are we? We belong to the future.

What, by these choices we face today, are we becoming?