“Whose Are We”
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Reading
A reading by Victoria Safford.

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?

Sermon “Whose Are We”
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Jon Luopo of University Unitarian in Seattle tells a story from his experience in the Seattle interfaith clergy group [story from a sermon by Sarah Lammert, February 1, 2009, as printed in the Whose Are We? Participants manual].

A highly respected Roman Catholic priest was sharing his life story with the group.

He remembered the days of Vatican II. The hope. The excitement. The sense that theirs was the generation that would make real change. They were going to bring the church they loved into the present century and meet the people where they were in their lives.

But then he came forward into the present, and acknowledged that the church had become deeply conservative. Their youthful dreams had dissolved, and a life’s mission had disappeared, failed.

The priest’s colleagues in the interfaith group were hurt and upset that this respected senior member was describing his life this way, as a failure.

One of the group observed that somehow his demeanour did not seem to match his words. How could he claim his life was a failure, and yet appear so calm and serene?

I know whose I am, replied the priest. I know whose I am.

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I have often admired those who, in times of crisis or difficulty, seem to be able to stay grounded and calm and sure of themselves. Neither arrogant, nor indecisive,
they remain capable of functioning and responding to the situation with what seems—even in retrospect—to be a reasonable and useful response.

This priest’s ability to step back from the drama of his entire life story, and remain calm, grounded and centred, struck the members of the interfaith clergy group of Seattle, and all of those who heard it afterwards, as a story of emotional, intellectual and spiritual depth, such as we all might hope to grow towards, in our own situations, whatever they might be.

This story, and the questions it brought up, sparked a series of conversations among UU ministers which resulted in a year-long study program.

Whose are we?

If my theological and faith commitments are to have meaning, surely they must show up as useful in my life? Why come to services on Sunday morning or spend countless volunteer hours drafting budgets and keeping in touch with committee members if there is not some larger benefit?

In our Unitarian Universalist communities we attempt to live out a vision of strong, expressive, conscientious individuals living together in community.

It is one of our tensions, that we value both the individual and the larger whole.

We pride ourselves on our respect for individual freedom of conscience. How often have I heard a new member – or a long-time member – say “here I can be myself, here I can believe what I want to believe.”

At the same time, I also hear members saying “here I feel seen and appreciated” or “it meant so much to me, to know that the Fellowship was thinking about me when I was ill” or “I am so proud that we are doing something to help those who are homeless.” We also value the sense of community in this Fellowship, both the caring for each other and the things that we are able to do together that we never could have done on our own.

It is clear that both individual and community are valued.

It is also clear that there is a tension between the two.

How do we decide what we will take a stand on as a community, when we each have our own issues that we are passionate about?

How do we respond to arguments or ideas that we don’t agree with?

How do we craft a mission statement that we can all get behind?
Well, the short answer is, with difficulty!

But the longer answer is more complex. It takes time. It takes commitment to processes both formal and informal. A willingness to share our deepest thoughts and desires. A willingness to listen and an openness to being changed. We make mistakes, we forgive each other, we begin again.

And, I think, it takes a willingness to engage, with respect, with the difficult questions of faith and meaning.

We aren’t here to impose our views on someone else. But we do need to be able to share our stories—our commitments and our experiences—to let them see the light of day and discover how they are heard by another’s compassionate ear.

If we stay at the level of labels (I’m a humanist; I’m a mystic; I’m not sure what I believe) then we miss an opportunity to discover the richness of who we might be if we connect at that deeper level.

What does it mean to live a meaningful life? How are we to respond to the pain and suffering in our own city, and around the world?

The words of the round we sang earlier, Who do we come from, what are we, where are we going, were penned by the nineteenth-century French painter Paul Gaugin. They seem to me to be rather Unitarian questions.

The question that came out of Jon Luopa’s interfaith clergy meeting – “whose are we?” might at first glance seem less of a Unitarian question, focussing as it does on the “we” rather than the “I”.

But I invite you to stay with it this morning, to try it on for size, even if only for the duration of this sermon, to find out if there is anything you can learn by following this line of questioning.

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In February I sat amongst a group of ministers serving from Victoria to Winnipeg and all points in between, as we asked each other the question “whose am I.”

“Whose am I” is sort of like saying “which people are you from?” Or “Who needs you? Who loves you? Who shapes your sense of self? Who do you think of talking to when you are at your most proud? Who do you confide in or confess to when you are at your lowest ebb? What are the ideals, values and principles that are inseparable from your being?

There isn’t just one answer.
Whose am I?
I belong to my spouse, my partner Paul.

I belong to my family—my father, my brother, my nephews.

Whose am I?
I belong to my friends. Friends from childhood. Friends I made when I started a new school, moved to a new city, began a new career.

I belong to my commitments—to the causes and ideas that I work for. The alleviation of suffering. The healing of the earth. The provision of basic rights to all peoples.

Whose am I?
I belong to this Fellowship. To this city.

I belong to my country.

I belong to my self.

I belong to this earth.

The air that flows in and out of my lungs blows round the whole planet. The water in my cells cycles endlessly round the globe. My genetic material is not that different from many other beings. I belong to this whole universe. To life.

**Whose are you?**
Underneath your chair, you will find an envelope and a pen and a piece of paper.

I invite you to take a moment and write yourself a few notes about your own responses to “whose are you?”

You will not be asked to share this, it is for your use only. If writing is a challenge for you, you might turn to the person beside you for assistance.

Reading over my own responses to the question “whose are you?” I am reminded of Paul Gaugin’s questions, where do we come from, what are we, where are we going.

Some of these answers have been mine for a long time, from birth even.

Some of them have been discovered along the way.

Some have been wrestled with, and refined.
Even if a commitment is easy to identify (and it may not be) there are often challenges in living out the call.

We may struggle with others, or even with parts of ourselves.

In the ancient Hebrew story of the ancestor Jacob, Jacob stayed alone one night at the side of a river, having sent his wives and children and worldly goods on ahead. The story tells us that in the night Jacob wrestled with a man and neither prevailed. As dawn was breaking the man struck Jacob on the hip, injuring him, and demanded to be let go. Jacob refused to let go, unless the man would bless him, and so he did, renaming him and blessing him as one who had striven with God and humans and prevailed.

Now, the God of the Hebrew Bible is not, by and large, for me. But there is something in this story—of the mysterious figure, wrestling—that reminds me of the powerful forces in my life, conscious and unconscious, and how patterns are often not visible until much later. Only later, in a reflective moment, do I see that I was struggling with a particular part of myself in a series of relationships. Only later do I connect the dots and see the work of half a lifetime as part of a larger story. The contradictions between the values that were the greatest gifts of my childhood, and the conflicting and at times hypocritical understanding of race and class in Canadian culture took years—is taking years—to untwine and clarify in my psyche.

Such struggles are evident in groups, as well as individuals. As Canadian Unitarians, we sometimes struggle with the claims of individuals and the claims of the group. The Canadian Unitarian Council Executive Director’s survey of several years ago highlighted tensions around our understanding of authority, power and the democratic process. We work with these tensions through our Active Democracy Study group conversations—it is a process, it takes time, and the result will be worth it even if all we are left with is a richer, deeper understanding of who we are.

Now, it is your turn again.

**Who, or what, do you wrestle with?**
What are the patterns do you see in the things or people that draw you?
What tensions do you live with?

I invite you to take a moment to reflect and write.

**Hymn #1019 “Everything Possible”**

Sometimes liberal religion has been accused—justly—of being a bit simple. Expecting that things will always get better. Just do your best and everything will turn out ok. Sometimes it doesn’t turn out ok. What then?
Faith is not a feeling, it is action. It is an optimistic belief that all things are possible, even if they aren’t happening right now.

Faith is our commitment to acting as if the world we believe in can truly come to pass.

Even if we are confronted by bigotry or intolerance, how should we respond?

Even if we know that our climate has gone past a point of no return. What sort of response are we called to make?

How can we, like the priest in Jon Luopo’s story, judge our own efforts honestly—because we don’t want to delude ourselves about what has happened—AND still find a way of being at peace with ourselves and who we are?

This is the non-rational part of faith. The willingness to work for a cause that appears hopeless, because we believe it is the right thing to do, because we have an internal commitment to it. Some describe this as trusting in the Tao, or the Holy, or the ways of God. It is at basis an optimism of the spirit. A decision about how we want to see ourselves, who or what we want to align ourselves with.

Whose are you, and what difference does it make in your life?

And whose are we? And how can we work together?

I’ll close with a reading by Parker Palmer:

The power for authentic leadership, Vaclav Havel . . . tells us, is found not in external arrangements but in the human heart. Authentic leaders in every setting—from families to nation-states—aim at liberating the heart, their own and others’, so that its powers can liberate the world. [Let Your Life Speak p. 76].

What could be more powerful, than a community that calls and inspires each person to liberate their own authentic heart?

Amen, blessed be.