

Whose Are We?
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Over the past year, and continuing on into the next, Unitarian Universalist ministers across the country have been engaging with one another around the basic theological question: “Whose are we?” Interest in this question was raised back in 2008 by the Rev. Victoria Safford in her sermon at the Service of the Living Tradition at General Assembly. Here is how she framed the question:

Douglas Steere, a Quaker teacher, says that the ancient question, “Who am I?” inevitably leads to a deeper one, “Whose am I?” – because there is no identity outside of relationship. You can’t be a person by yourself. To ask “Whose am I?” is to extend the question 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 choice? With whose life, whose lives, is your own all bound up, inextricably, in obvious or invisible ways?*

Whose am I? On the surface, it seems like a simple, straightforward question. But Safford’s framing of it, and Naomi King’s reading that I shared earlier, suggest something else. This is not a simple question with a simple, straightforward answer. There are multiple dimensions to consider, multiple layers to be peeled away like those of an onion.

This morning I would like to begin peeling away some of those layers, and identifying some of those multiple dimensions. I will not leave you with any final answers, but I hope to give you a place to start in your own quest to determine “Whose are you?”

It all begins, as Victoria Safford suggests, with that basic question of identity: who am I? Where do I fit in the world? Am I essentially on my own? Is it me against the world? Or is it me as a part of the world? Do I answer only to myself? Or do I have some responsibility to something beyond myself? And if so, what is it?

There is a strong streak of individualism running through both our culture and our religious heritage. Personal independence and self-reliance are highly valued. Just check out one of our Unitarian icons, Ralph Waldo Emerson. And look at the first principle of our Association, which touts the inherent worth and dignity of every individual person. And where do we place the highest source of religious authority? Not in scripture, not in tradition, not in a priestly hierarchy, but rather in the individual conscience.

And yet, that is not the end of the story. Yes, we place great value on individual freedom. But we also recognize that with freedom comes responsibility. Our principles call on us to engage in a free *and responsible* search for truth and meaning. And we recognize that we are not isolated beings answering only to ourselves. Those same principles that hold up the value of individual worth and dignity culminate in a call to respect the interdependent web of all

existence of which we are a part. *Of which we are a part.* We are a part of something larger than ourselves. As the choir sang this morning, “The earth does not belong to us. We belong to the earth.” However free we are as individuals, a part of our responsibility is to find our appropriate place in that larger reality. To determine who or what, beyond ourselves, we will answer to.

I mentioned earlier that there are several dimensions we can consider in approaching the question of whose we are. Let me name and talk about a few of those. One such dimension is past versus future. We are all products of our past. We are born into a particular historical and social context, and into a particular family. In fact, our family of origin typically provides the first experience of belonging. In a very real sense we belong to our parents, who gave us life and who tended and cared for us. And so each generation of us has some debt, some responsibility, to the generation before. It is up to us to carry on the family name and legacy. To live up to its past and carry it on into the future.

That future may or may not include children of our own. But it definitely includes the children of our friends, neighbors, and acquaintances. And so we may owe as much to future generations as we do to those past. There’s an old Native American proverb that says “We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children.” And so we owe it to them to leave a world in which they can continue to grow and thrive. We belong to the past and to the future, and we have a responsibility toward both.

Another dimension to consider is one that I would call either objective vs. subjective or involuntary vs. voluntary. This has to do, once again, with the exercise of individual freedom regarding loyalties and allegiances. Because of the circumstances of our birth, there are certain built-in relationships with their associated expectations of conformity. I’ve already mentioned that we are born into a particular family. We are also born into a particular community and nation, and perhaps into a particular religious tradition. Each of these lays claim to a portion of our identity, as well as our loyalty.

But ultimately, another part of our responsibility is to develop and articulate our own identity. We can acknowledge that we are not isolated beings sufficient unto ourselves. But which groups or communities beyond ourselves come to define our identity as part of something larger, is still at least in part a matter of our individual choice.

When faced with the military draft during a war I didn’t believe in, or with paying income taxes to a government whose priorities I don’t always share, I have generally gone along. I have given what *they* tell me I owe. But that is not the same as acknowledging that they are whose I am. I am a part of my community and my nation, and I will continue to be engaged in trying to shape them according to my deepest values. But I see it as not so much that I belong to them, as that they belong to me and my fellow citizens.

Part of my freedom and responsibility means choosing what groups larger than myself I will be a part of. To which I will belong and will give of myself. And so, for example, I have chosen to give of myself in service to this congregation and to the Unitarian Universalist movement. I belong to you, and to Unitarian Universalism. This is not true in any absolute, objective sense, of course. You, or any religious group, have no rightful claim on me or my life.

But because of who and what you are, I choose to be yours, and to serve you to the best of my abilities. I believe that I must serve something larger than myself. But I also believe that I get to choose what that something is.

Now when I say that I choose you because of who and what you are, what does that mean? I haven't chosen you because of your nationality, or your ethnicity, or your educational background, or even your political affiliation. I have chosen you because of some very important things we have in common. Because together we can participate in a quest to cultivate and live those deep values that we share. It's the values that are key. They are what I ultimately wish to serve.

That brings me to another dimension I want to mention: the horizontal vs. the vertical. In the religious context, the horizontal dimension refers to the human relationships within a religious community. The fellowship, the sense of community that is so important to all of us. But there is also a vertical dimension. While we look around and bond, horizontally, with our human comrades, we also gaze vertically upward seeking something more, something transcendent.

In more traditional religious communities that vertical dimension is understood to mean the sacred, the holy, the divine: God. And if that is the language you use, that's fine. If that language does not work for you that's all right too. There is still a vertical dimension which transcends our basic human interactions – which indeed guides and shapes those interactions. This is the dimension of religious, ethical, human values. Those ideals that we envision and to which we aspire.

The Rev. Dan Hotchkiss, a Unitarian Universalist minister who currently serves the Alban Institute as a senior consultant, wrote an article a few years ago that brings many of these ideas together. It also introduces yet another dimension to our conversation: individual vs. group perspective. The name of the article is “Who Owns a Congregation?” This expands the question from “whose am I?” as an individual, to “whose are we?” as a congregation.

Hotchkiss raised the question for the benefit of church boards trying to understand who they serve. As a fiduciary body, a congregation's board of trustees exists to represent the owner. So who is that? Who does own the congregation? There are a number of possible answers. Again, looking to more traditional religious communities, the answer might be that God is the owner, and the one to be served. In the case of some independent, pastor-centered congregations, the pastor may be seen as the owner. I don't think either of those understandings works for this, or for most, Unitarian Universalist congregations.

Given our penchant for democratic process, our logical response might be that the members of the congregation, collectively, own it. From this perspective, the fiduciary responsibility of the board would be to know what the congregation wants and to provide it.

Hotchkiss, however, offers another response to the ownership question. He believes that “The owner of a congregation is its mission. A congregation exists to serve its mission. The duty of a congregation's leaders is to . . . articulate the mission well, and to ensure that what the congregation does will realize the mission.”

Democratic process still plays a role, since it is the congregation as a whole that must work together to determine what its mission is, to determine which values will be held up as primary. Hotchkiss goes on:

And what is the mission? The great management consultant Peter Drucker wrote that the core mission of all social-sector organizations is “changed lives.” The specific mission of a congregation is its answer to the question, “Whose lives do we intend to change and in what way?” A congregation that limits its vision to pleasing its members falls short of its true purpose. . . For one thing, if the only mission is to current members, the congregation will soon die. And so the mission must be not only to change the lives of members but of others yet to join. . . Pleasing people – members, future members, leaders, or anybody else – is not the mission. The mission is to change lives.

I like his perspective. It includes the individual/group dimension, the present/future dimension, and the horizontal/vertical dimension. And it also highlights the voluntary nature of determining whose we are. By articulating a mission grounded in our highest values and aspirations, we define an “owner” worthy of our efforts and our allegiance.

Hand in hand with our mission goes our vision: an explicit statement of our aspirations. We just adopted a new Vision Statement for our congregation: “To create a better world through our open minds, helping hands, and loving hearts.” Those are just a few simple words, but they actually encompass and imply a great deal of substance. Next fall, through September and October, I will be doing a series of sermons on this vision statement, unpacking it phrase by phrase, exploring how it can guide our lives together as a religious community.

Our mission constitutes our commitment to real-ize – to make real – those values we espouse – “both within and beyond our walls.” Values like peace, justice, compassion, freedom, and responsibility. Core values like Life, Truth, Love. May we always answer “yes” to those values, as long as we have breath to speak and to live.

So may it be.