

Whose Are We? Our UU Identity

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Whose are we? Or to put it another way - to whom, or what, are we accountable? On Friday, Carl and I went to meet with a new accountant here in Hamilton. I have to admit that, years ago, when I learned that you could actually hire someone to do your taxes, I thought I'd just been released from the thirteenth level of Hell. Since that time, every year, I've invested in having a professional do my taxes.

With our move this year, I was truly glad to find someone who could help us understand our new country's tax laws and how to correctly account for ourselves in Canada. Ministerial taxes are particularly interesting and I didn't want anyone "official" deciding that I'm a bad risk and need to be sent back to the States.

It will be a couple of weeks, and probably numerous phone calls between us, our US CPA and our Canadian accountant, before we know exactly to which nation we are more "accountable" this year. We were informed on Friday, however, that this year would be the most challenging and that figuring out our taxes from here on out ought to be a piece of cake. I like cake, and I'll still go to a professional to get my taxes done.

There are many ways in which we are each held accountable – some of our choosing, and some not so gleefully chosen.

We live in communities, provinces, neighborhoods, and countries where rules, laws, and codes form a network of expectations about our behavior, participation, and engagement. We choose to participate in clubs, organizations, groups, and institutions where covenants, by-laws, and policies govern our actions and interactions. We have families and circles of friends where obligations, expectations, and inter-relationships frame our involvement.

Whose are we? We are sisters and brothers, sons and daughters, spouses and partners, friends and foes, employees and employers, neighbors and strangers, grannies and grandpas, and on and on and on. In each of these complex relationships, we are somebody. And, we are also somebody's – we engage with and are engaged, offer support to and gain support from, find meaning with and gain meaning from our interactions. We are in relationship.

There are cultural connections, family ties, professional associations, and social networks. We know these external systems of accountability and belonging, and life offers us the opportunity to learn how we're connected and accountable in each of them. We learn how to be in relationship.

Quaker Douglas Steere says that "the ancient question, "What am I?" leads to a deeper one, "Whose am I" because there is no identity outside of relationships. You can't be a person by yourself. From "Whose am I?" the question extends to "Who needs you?" "Who loves you?" "To whom are you accountable?" "To whom do you answer?" "Whose life is altered by your choices?" "With what other lives is your's all bound up, in obvious and invisible ways?"

Whose are you? In a spiritual or religious sense, do you belong to something, or someone, within and beyond yourself? To who or what, are you accountable? What is dearest to your heart?

I think that sometimes, for Unitarian Universalists, this question can be harder to answer, especially if we have not yet engaged in a rigorous inventory of our personal spirituality and theology. Our Principles encourage us to spiritual growth through a free and responsible search for our truth and meaning. I admit that I'm as guilty as the next Unitarian – sometimes I focus my attention on the “free” aspects of the search, and try to ignore the “responsible” part – the part that demands discipline, rigor, reflection, and integration.

Last November, I attended a ministerial retreat with my UU Ministers of Canada colleagues where we engaged in this kind of necessary reflection and discussion. We encouraged each other to engage the question – “Whose are we?” We shared our responses and moved into deeper relationship through our interactions.

One of our facilitators shared the story of a Roman Catholic priest who had shared his life odyssey with his interfaith colleagues. He said that he felt that his life, in large measure, had been a failure. He recalled the days of Vatican II, and how he and his fellow liberal priests had hoped to see real change in the church which he loved so much and for which he held so much hope. Reflecting on the past, he said feared their vision had not become reality. Rather, he felt that the church had become hardened and deeply conservative.

His clergy colleagues were rather stunned to hear this revelation from their respected and valued friend in faith. One of them commented that, despite the disheartened tone of his words, he himself seemed 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.”

(From: “Whose Are We?” Rev. Sarah Lammert, 2/1/2009)

This man has done his spiritual work. He's clear about his core values, about what calls to his spirit, from where he receives his authority, and to what he is accountable. His mission is clear to him, allowing him to be calm and serene with his life.

The Rev. Sarah Lammert reflects on this question for Unitarians with these words: “Whose are 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 of which we are a part? 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?”

Finding one's own answer to these profound questions is a joyful part of our Unitarian philosophy and way of being as a faith community. We appreciate that each of us can ask these questions and find a different solution, an alternative way of describing our connections and interconnections to the ground of our being. Answering the questions of who, or what, we belong to grounds our actions and stokes the fires of our commitment.

Personally, I'm still reflecting and searching for answers to these important questions, but I do know some of the “truths” I've found to which I feel accountable. One of those is hope – I feel that I serve hope and wholeness. I feel that a part of my mission is to hold a place for a better future, a happier life, a sense of fulfillment and wholeness, even in the midst of despair and on a path where the way forward is not clear.

In a world of joy and sorrow, triumph and defeat, hope can be hard to maintain. And, sometimes I despair. Yet, for me, from that place within, hope renews. I see hope as a choice. With perseverance, it can change the world. I choose love and I choose to hope. It's good for us to know where we can go, within ourselves and within our community of faith, to renew and refresh our hope, our determination, and our commitment to the future.

In this morning's responsive reading, the author reminds us that religion is something we have when we stop thinking of ourselves as self-sufficient and self-sustaining. Religion is when we look at others and see beyond their failings, when we see our own good and the purpose in our hearts. He says we have religion when we have done all that we can, and then in confidence, we entrust ourselves to the life that is larger than ourselves. In these way, my faith supports me in having and holding on to hope.

The questions "Whose are we?" is an important one for us as individuals, but it is equally important for community of faith. What is it that we are here for? What is our mission? As a liberal Unitarian church – a congregation in Hamilton, Ontario that has been a beacon of progressive thought and religion for over 100 years – what are we called to do? Who is it that we serve? What is it that our relationship here with each other makes possible that we could not accomplish alone?

Each of us has a piece of the answer to that question. Each of us holds a piece of the vision that makes this a church, a community, a place of memory and hope. We have inherited the vision of the founding members, who in 1889 formally incorporated the First Unitarian Church of Hamilton. We have benefited from those throughout the ages who have kept the vision alive, through moves and minister, growth and decline, good times and bad. We are because of the stewardship of our ancestors in faith, because of a dream that they carried in their hearts, minds, and hands.

Ours is the opportunity to hold the vision and accomplish the mission, not only for ourselves, but for those who will inherit this legacy from us. We belong to those who came before us and those who will forge the future. If we believe that Unitarianism offers an important faith alternative, if we are committed to others having the same access to our saving message of hope that we have, if we want our children and children's children to know the joy of a free faith, we have an obligation, we have work to do, we have a mission.

It is said that in native cultures, when decisions are to be made, the elders consider the consequences of their choices to the seventh generation. What legacy will their actions leave for the ones who will inhabit the future?

It is time, as a faith community, to revisit and reconsider the mission of this church. Our new ministry together gives us a place of stability and community from which to recommit ourselves to not only our own purposes, but to service in the larger community, and stewardship for future generations.

On Sunday, May 1st, following worship, I would like to invite you to participate in sharing your insights as we work together to craft a mission statement for this church.

This morning's story reminded us of what a committed group of friends can accomplish, when they set their minds to a task. I'm hopeful about our future, I'm excited by the opportunities that our relationships and being in community offer us. I know that, together, we can create a mission statement that is rich, challenging,

meaningful, and possible. I know that we can work together to accomplish much for ourselves, for each other, and for the larger community.

Whose are we? In a faith community, we are each other's. We are grateful for all that we have received. We hold a hope that sees beyond the present and dreams into the future. We see beyond our faults to the good, and to the purpose within every heart. We have the confidence and faith to entrust our lives to the life that is larger than ourselves.

It is written, it is taught. So may it be. Amen.