

Order of Service "Who Are We? Whose Are We?"

Sunday, January 9, 2011

9:30 AM & 11:00 AM

Welcome: Board Host

Prelude

Chalice Lighting

Opening Words: "Our Whole System" by Maria Mitchell

Opening Song: #389 "Gathered Here"

Returning the "Guest at Your Table" boxes

Sung Response: #118 "This Little Light of Mine"

(Children go to their classes at 11:00 AM)

Reading: "I Call that Church Free"

by James Luther Adams

Celebrating with Music

Sermon: "Who Are We? Whose Are We?"

Sung Response: #1003 "Where Do We Come From?"

Spoken Response

Candles of Joy and Sorrow/Offering

Prayer and Meditation

Closing Song: #1023 "Building Bridges"

Closing Words

Closing Song: #1023 "Building Bridges"

Celebrants: Janet Farrell and the Rev. Dr. Gretchen Woods



Chalice Lighting:

We kindle a flame, a light in darkness,
A flicker of warmth needed in a cold world,
A reminder of the spirit within each of us,
Our gift to a world in need of light, of warmth,
of connections that unite rather than
divisions that separate.
May our flame burn brightly for all to see. . .

And we light a chalice of solidarity with our Partner Church in Korispatak, Romania and, last but not least,

Our Children's Chalice, that they may always know
The light and warmth of this, their spiritual community.

Opening Words: "Our Whole System" by Maria Mitchell

Small as is our whole system compared with the infinitude of creation,
Brief as is our life compared with the cycles of time,
We are so tethered to all by the beautiful dependencies of law,
That not only the sparrow's fall is felt to the utmost bound but the vibrations set in motion by
the words that we utter reach through all space and the tremor is felt through all time.

Reading: "I Call that Church Free"

by James Luther Adams

I call that church free which enters into covenant with the ultimate source of existence,
That sustaining and transformative power not made with human hands.
It binds together families and generations, protecting against the idolatry of any human claim
to absolute truth or authority.
This covenant is the charter and responsibility and joy of worship in the face of death as well
as life.
I call that church free which brings individuals into a caring, trusting fellowship,
That protects and nourishes their integrity and spiritual freedom; that yearns to belong to the
church universal;
It is open to insight and conscience from every source; it bursts through rigid tradition, giving
rise to new and living language, to new and broader fellowship.
It is a pilgrim church, a servant church, on an adventure of the spirit.
The goal is the prophethood and priesthood of all believers, the one for the liberty of
prophesying, the other for the ministry of healing.
It aims to find unity in diversity under the promptings of the spirit "that bloweth where it
listeth . . . and maketh all things new."

Sermon: "Who Are We? Whose Are We?"

As I imagined this sermon, I was aware that the ministers of the Unitarian Universalist Association are spending at least two years wrestling with the second question. I felt we needed to begin, however, with the first question, work to the second, and, in the process, acknowledge that both are key religious questions.

So, "Who Are We? And Whose Are We?" Anthropologists, biological scientists, psychologists, sociologists, and theologians - just to name a few disciplines - have spent centuries defining and refining our understanding of this question. Some stand on empirical evidence, some on anecdotal evidence, and some on spiritual experiences. Only you can judge which ones speak to you the best, but know there are many people with many differing perspectives on this topic.

My own take on who I am, begins with my biological awareness that I am an animal, a mammal - to be more specific. I am biologically female, have borne two children, and am aging, having passed my 65th birthday. I know some of you fit this profile reasonably well, others not at all. Still, it is important to me, when I consider who I am, that I acknowledge my physical reality.

What about my mental reality? The tests for my intelligence quotient were highly problematic when I was in fifth grade. My mother was furious with my teacher for announcing my IQ to the class - and only mine. Therefore, I choose not to discuss it. I imagine many of you have had difficulties over those evaluations, for all sorts of reasons. Odd how we qualify people, no? Yet, who we are does take into account our intellectual capacities.

My psychological tests necessary for admission into UU ministry noted that I am "emotionally dilated." I am still sussing that one out, but I assume it has something to do with the intensity with which I feel emotions. This is not uniform among *homo sapiens* and often leads to great consternation in relationships. I have been using spiritual practices to try to moderate my "dilation," with varied success, as some of you observe. Yet, my psychological make-up informs who I am in the world.

I am equally predisposed to introversion and extraversion according to the Myers-Briggs type indicator. That means I need both solitary activities and social activities. As most of you know, human beings are represented across the spectrum of these polarities, as well as the other three offered by Isabel Briggs-Myers. There is NO normal. So qualifying and/or quantifying mental situation or emotional predisposition is dicey at best.

In addition, we human beings gather in groups, because we are, most generally, social beings, not unlike our closest relations in the animal world: the Great Apes. Being in community helps us to understand our selves by giving us direct or indirect feedback as to how we are experienced. We either go with the feedback or against it, but it helps us to clarify who we are.

Although most Unitarian Universalists like to believe that biologically we are thinking animals having emotional experiences, Daniel Goleman (of *Emotional Quotient* fame) asserts that human beings are evolutionarily "feeling animals with thinking experiences." Our primitive brains evolved first with emotions that assisted survival, like fear and anger. Our prefrontal cortex is a much more recent development and one that matures much later in life than the primitive brain of emotions.

Still, I think we can agree that we are physical, mental, emotional, moral (from the Sufi constructs), and some of us would add, spiritual in our being in the world. And, for the most part, we live in communities, beginning with families, thence on to our work systems and our recreational activities which often include other people.

Here is an interesting fact in relation to who we are: Brain researcher, John Hawks, states in the September 2010 *Discover* that our human brains have been shrinking for millennia:

Over the past 20,000 years, the average volume of the human male brain has decreased from 1,500 cubic centimeters to 1,350 cc, losing a chunk the size of a tennis ball. The female brain has shrunk by about the same proportion. (P. 56)

There are many theories about this, including the notion that larger brains need larger bodies to keep them properly fueled, and that we may have developed more sophisticated wiring, hence needing less body and brain mass to function well.

The most interesting fact is that brain density went down as population density rose with the development of cities and agriculture. Cognitive scientist David Geary came to a radical conclusion: "As complex societies emerged, the brain became smaller because people did not have to be as smart to stay alive." He adds"

. . . The rise of agriculture and modern cities based on economic specialization has allowed the very brightest people to focus their efforts in the sciences, the arts, and other fields. Their ancient counterparts didn't have the infrastructure to support them. It took all their efforts just to get through life. (p. 58)

Clearly, we do need each other in communities to allow us to follow our gifts and talents, rather than being totally focused upon survival as individuals. We are thus given the time and energy to focus upon self-knowledge and understanding, an impossible luxury for the Cro-Magnons.

This has huge implications for our second question: "Whose Are We?" It brings us to the heart of the conversation among the UU ministers: We know that we are not people of creeds (God-given laws that tell us what to do) but of covenants (values and agreements that guide us in our shared efforts at transforming life for the greater good of all). This is a radical understanding about whose we are and how we need to be in relationship in our communities. Our intuition is affirmed by cognitive science. Our sense of belonging is not predicated upon a supernatural being but upon how we are in relationship with what matters most to each of us, whether it be simply our selves or includes our communities and/or our planet. This is called "object relations theology."

Now, I understand that God-given laws can make life easier, but Unitarian Universalists are the sorts of people who want to examine our experience and to take our thinking and feeling into action to better our world. That means we don't accept givens, we seek greater understanding for greater possibility.

Some of us would assert that we gain understanding from our experiences of transforming energy (spiritual energy) found through deeper connections with our own inner knowing, the knowing of others in our community that we respect, and our direct experience of nature. These tend to gather around shared values and goals and provide guidance and direction for our work in the world.

If we truly gain our sense of meaning from our sense of self and our values in relationship, there are many things we can do in this community. We may share our discoveries in our Adult Programs. If you are interested in helping make more of these happen, please come and give us your contact information on the pad provided up here. We may care for one another through the Caring Connection. If you are interested in doing this through the Caring Connection, please come up here and give us your contact information on a separate pad. We may join our energies to work for peace through the Peace Action Council. Check in with Bob Ozretich. We may study and work for the health and well-being of our planet through the Environmental Action Council. See Elizabeth Waldorf. All of these ways to connect inform us as to whose we are and what calls us into covenant for the greater good of all of life.

No one can do it all. In our religious communities we find the mutual support and energies to do more than we can alone. What more could we ask, for we increase our impact upon our world, even as our brains are shrinking, though it appears with the increase of availability of good food, they have begun to grow again over the past 200 years.

We are continually learning more about who we are and whose we are. Each of us belongs to the unique set of gifts, talents, and energies that we have held since birth. Each of us can use those in our own particular ways, whether through teaching or caring or direct action within a larger community. Whether you feel called by the values you have embraced in your lifetime or a "Spirit of Life" larger and more inspiring to you than your own brain, you may find that you belong here as a place important to refining the flow of your life. You are a precious spirit and loved.

Frederick E. Gillis, now retired from the Unitarian Church in Providence, RI, offers this insight:

We are part of a web that makes us one with all humanity, one with all the universe.
We are grateful for the miracle of consciousness that we share, the consciousness that gives us the power to remember, to love, to care.

May we come to know who we are and whose we are in fullness that allows us to continue to transcend our narrow views of our world and our lives. So Be It! Blessed Be!

