

“Who Am I?”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

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N.B. These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship, supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

I’ve added an important accessory to my clerical garb this morning.
Do you like it?

I admit it’s a little “out of the box” to wear a nametag if you’re one of the ministers in a congregation.

On the one hand, we really hope that you already know our names, which of course are printed in your Order of Service...

And it’s also true that as a minister, my own personal identity is in some ways less important than my ability to serve you in this role.

When I’m in the pulpit, who I am—or who I think I am—both matters, and doesn’t matter.

When we wear our nametags, that is, when we affirm and share our sense of unique personal identity, we offer each other a gift—something we can all easily use to help us grow as a community:

The simple gift of our names.

I’m all for name tags!

But who am I, anyway?

§

Just down the street at St. Clair and Yonge, there's a tall building with the name "Padulo" on the top.

It's an advertising agency.

I worked for that company (at another location) when I was 24 years old, fresh out of Ryerson and in my first career.

Whenever I walk from St. Clair subway station to First Unitarian, I ponder the distance between the identity I held at that time, and my professional identity today.

We change in so many ways throughout the course of our lifetimes.

In fact, as I wrote today's sermon, I kept this picture of myself in front of me.

In it, four-year old Lynn sits cross-legged, wearing a trusting and easy smile...and miraculously straight hair!

I know that she is utterly "me," and yet in many ways very unlike the "me" you see today.

I'm sure you have similar pictures of yourselves.

I encourage you to gaze upon them, as you ponder the mystery of your "identity."

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Now, it's unlike me to question the great poet Maya Angelou, but I've always wondered about her line
"When someone shows you who they are, believe them!"

I know she likely meant that we must not accept unjust or abusive behavior from anyone.

I agree with that wholeheartedly.

But I don't believe that our immature behavior, our shortcomings, or even our worst mistakes are essentially "who we are" and for all time.

As the writer Octavia Butler once wrote:

"All that you touch
you change.

All that you change
changes you.

The only lasting truth
is change.

God is Change."

In other words, we all have an infinite capacity to evolve and to become, in a way that is healing and life-giving—not only for us, but for the entire world.

This creative capacity within ourselves may be more "the real me" than any one outcome of any change we make.

We are more than the temporary details of our lives, as meaningful as they are.

More than our occupations, our possessions, and our accomplishments.

When we believe we know who others are, we label them in ways that may be quite inaccurate...and that certainly don't account for the human ability to grow and change.

This labeling—this naming—that we all do, also can't allow for the projections that we make, based on our own stories.

In our UU tradition, we affirm the “inherent worth and dignity of every person.”

Through it, we recognize that at the heart of every person, there is something we hold in common:

Something that transcends our individual characteristics yet that also includes those amazing personal “uniquenesses” that make each of us who we are.

Here we find ourselves in the territory of paradox: the landscape of all deep religious thought.

Who I am matters! (*Flip nametag*)

And “who I am” doesn't matter. (*Flip nametag*)

Let's stay with that awhile.

§

Many sources of wisdom, both ancient and modern, teach us that no matter what our circumstances, we simply ARE...and that matters.

In the essential, inherently worthy core of being, there is no need to strive for self-improvement.

Jay Michaelson is a contemporary teacher of non-dual Jewish thought.

Like many wisdom teachers, he sees contemplative practice as a way of gaining insight into life and its meaning.

He writes, “Each of us thinks he or she is this individual who moves around through the world and bumps into others along the way.

Eventually however [by inquiring deeply into the question “Who am I?”] we identify not as the body in the world but as the world itself:

The space of consciousness in which all of life appears to unfold. This shift in awareness” Michaelson writes, “Leads to the notion of the Self as Kosmos, as primordial awareness, as the timeless utterance of “I AM”.¹

Needless to say, this is something quite different than the accomplishment-oriented life that many of us—myself included—have often seen as the measure of worth.

As philosopher Ken Wilber puts it: “That ‘I AM-ness is a constant condition of all that arises, is the space in which it all arises, has nothing outside of it and thus is complete Peace... and radiates its own beauty in all directions.”²

Here we might be reminded that in some translations of ancient Hebrew scripture, YHWH or what some call “God” described itself as “I Am That I Am”— a description not of personal identity but of Being Itself.³

And then later, the Jew known as Jesus (who went on to become very famous), is said to have responded to the question “Who are you?” by answering “Who do say that I am?”⁴

¹ Jay Michaelson, *Everything is God: The Radical Path of Nondual Judaism* (Trumpeter: Boston, 2009), 24.

² Ken Wilber, quoted in Michaelson *Everything is God*, 24.

³ Exodus 3:14

⁴ Luke 9:20

Looking at this from a historical perspective,
this may be an important clue that at the time,
Jesus was not wearing his nametag!

It also suggests that perhaps he understood what Carl Jung later
named as “projection”—the human pattern of seeing our light or our
darkness projected onto others, or receiving that projection
ourselves.

§

The ancient Hebrew and Christian texts, like those of virtually every
other wisdom tradition, point us toward the essential “AM-ness” of
ourselves...and away from the more materialistic, accomplishment-
driven markers of identity promoted by our culture.

They point toward the “inherent worth” of each person that cannot
be damaged by our own mistakes nor the enhancements or
diminishments of time and circumstance.

When we are rooted in the Deep Self or the soul or the I AM or the
Dharma...we are both free of ourselves in a way that is loving and
liberating...

Yet also, at the same time, more true to ourselves.

As Leonard Cohen said, about his extended time in meditation at the
Mount Baldy Zen Centre, “The less there was of me, the happier I
got”...

(Flip the nametag to the blank side.)

...meaning that he became less and less interested in his own
storyline.

And lest we be tempted to think that he became less of a contributor to society after that mountaintop experience...

Remember that in his 70's, after learning that his longtime friend and manager had stolen millions of dollars from him leaving him with no retirement savings...

He began to tour again, continuing to inspire and teach others through his music until his death on November 7th last year.

§

That calm, beyond the storm of our own storyline, is what seems to me at the heart of the Unitarian composer Jim Scott's song, "I Am Waiting" which the choir performed so beautifully.

It's a fascinating song because it puts the singer (or songwriter) in the voice of the character of "Peace."

As Jim describes it on his website:

"The lyric begins "I Am Waiting..." and as it unfolds, it is Peace who is speaking: "I am Peace, and I am waiting."

It goes on to say that peace doesn't solve your problems for you, but it can provide the way.

This Peace can be found by those who seek it, despite all injustice and inequity.

In fact the only way to peace is through peace - and peacemaking."⁵

⁵ Jim Scott Music, I Am Waiting SATB
http://jimscottmusic.com/store/index.php?route=product/product&product_id=60

In my own view, the choice to put the lyric in the first person makes a challenging and astonishing point:

That “Peace” (and Jim does capitalize the word in his own description) is in some way also the singer—whether that be “Jim,” or “Dallas” or “Lynn.”

Peace is within us...

Peace is our witness (to use the poet Danna Faulds’ word)

And Peace is always waiting for us.

In lives such as ours, so multi-faceted and full of choice, there are many places to seek and investigate that peace...

Whether it be a Zen Centre or a contemplative room with candles, or a downtown Toronto ravine, or simply your favourite chair in your apartment.

And as Unitarian Universalists, we are encouraged to draw on the sources of wisdom that best suit us—to foster our personal spiritual growth.

And here we come back around again to the importance of our individuality.

(Flip nametag back to the ‘name’ side.)

§

Even though he was not a religious leader, the psychologist Carl Gustav Jung, who died in 1961, put forward a number of ideas that intersect with ancient wisdom teachings.

Consider this, from the collection of his writings called “Memories, Dreams, Reflections.”

I’ve edited it slightly to bring the language up-to-date.

“The decisive question for [human beings] is:
Is [the person] related to something infinite or not?

That is the telling question of [a] life.

Only if we know that the thing which truly matters is the infinite can we avoid fixing our interest upon futilities, and upon all kinds of goals which are not of real importance.

(Flip the nametag to blank side.)

Thus we demand that the world grant us recognition for qualities which we regard as personal possessions: [such as] our talent or our beauty.

The more a [person] lays stress on false possessions, and the less sensitivity [that person] has for what is essential, the less satisfying is life.

[...But] If we understand and feel that here in this life we already have a link with the infinite, desires and attitudes change.

In the final analysis, we count for something only because of the essential we embody [...]

In our relationships to [others] too, the crucial question is whether an element of boundlessness is expressed in the relationship.”⁶

⁶ Carl Gustav Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, Amelia Jaffe, ed. (New York: Vintage, 1898), 325-326.

Interestingly though, Jung goes on to say that the only way we can access that “boundlessness” is through our own limits...through our own uniquely limited individual selves.

Okay then! (*Flip the nametag.*)

He writes: “In knowing ourselves to be unique in our personal combination—that is, ultimately limited—we possess also the capacity for becoming conscious of the infinite.

But only then!”

§

And here I’m reminded of that wonderful Jewish wisdom story, which I’m sure I’ve shared with you before, in which the Rabbi Zusya comes to his followers with tears in his eyes.

They ask him: "Zusya, what's the matter?"

And he says, "I've learned the question that the angels will one day ask me about my life."

The followers were puzzled.

"Zusya, you are pious. You are scholarly and humble. You have helped so many of us.

What question about your life could be so terrifying that you would be frightened to answer it?"

Zusya responds: "I have learned that the angels will not ask me, 'Why were you not a Moses, leading your people out of slavery?'

And that they will not ask me, “Why weren’t you a Joshua, leading your people into the promised land?”

Zusya sighed: "They will say to me, 'Zusya, why were you not Zusya?'"⁷

Why were you not simply who you are?

§

As the “Who Am I?” question is re-asked and re-answered in so many ways throughout a lifetime...

We do need to hold and to offer our names...
That is to say: our best answers at the time.

We need to share and affirm our sense of “identity,”
which is both inadequate to describe a human life...

And yet essential to our exploring of it.

I wish for you joy in the exploration
of the “I Am”...whoever you are.

Wear your name tag!

And join me now in singing the words of Hildegard of Bingen, a fellow seeker, who was writing in the 12th Century.

Let’s sing Hymn #27: “I Am That Great and Fiery Force.”

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⁷ From Martin Buber, “Tales of the Hasidim”