

Who Are We Really?

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The Japanese Monk Dogen once wrote, “To study Buddhism is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to become enlightened by everything.” He goes on from there. I once had a teacher tell me that you could spend your entire life practicing with just this one essay by Dogen, called the Genjo Koan, and you would have everything you ever needed. It’s all in there. All the spiritual awakening one could ever need or ask for starts from the same place: the self.

Which I suppose is just a mystical Eastern way of asking the question, “Who are we really?” In this month where we explore the theme of character, “Who are we?” gets right to the heart of the matter. Normally when we use the word “character” we are talking about someone’s essence. When we say something like, “That is their character,” we are making a statement about their core being. We are asserting who they really are.

This was pretty consistent with what I heard from some of you around character. Some shared that character is “whole heartedness, integrity, authentic, persistent, and someone who keeps their promises and commitments.” When asked the question that is the title of the sermon, who are we really?, people said that we are evolving souls, bundles of energy that go out into the universe to make it a better place. In other words we are not static. We are not one thing or another. Our character is not something that is permanent and unchanging, though we sometimes talk about it as if that were so.

I think Rev. Bret Lortie, in his reflection on music, notes the paradox of music that it can never be one thing or another, but constantly and dynamically moving. When we ask “Who are we really?” or “What is our character?” I think we are presented with a similar paradox. We are not all one thing or another, but the dynamic interplay between counterpoints.

Let me give you an example. About eight years ago my Uncle Jerry passed away very unexpectedly. Jerry was a beloved uncle and he and I would go on various adventures together. He lived in Texas, but would come back to Michigan in the summer when he wasn't teaching Middle School. He would take me around and show me the campus of Western Michigan University, where he went to school. We used to go swimming at the lake.

He would tell me stories. I have a whole treasure trove of precious childhood memories of my uncle Jerry.

As I said, he passed away eight years ago. He was in Michigan, staying at my parent's house when he had a heart attack and died instantly. I don't know if you have ever had someone you love ripped from your life that suddenly before. It is a shock to the system; like taking a hot shower only to have someone come by and pour a big bucket of cold water on you. It takes time to recover.

Needless to say I was pretty upset. If you were to have met me for the first time in those months following Jerry's death, I probably could have kept it together enough to make a good first impression. If you asked me our question for the morning, "Who are you really?" I could have given a pretty good answer. I am a husband, at that point, I was a brand new father. I am a minister; I am ordained and have a doctor of ministry degree from a historic Unitarian Universalist seminary. I could go on and on, trying to impress you with my resume. Someone once called this the stuff after the comma. Meaning that when someone writes your obituary, what do they say in the commas that follow: Josh Snyder, minister, husband, father etc...

There is another name for these accomplishments. They are trophies in a way. They are the facts about myself that I like to put on display. So that if you were to meet me or come over to my house or visit my office they would be on my wall of fame. When we meet new people or talk with each other at coffee hour, we present each other with our wall of fame.

But that is at best only half of who we are. Had you met me in those months following my uncle's sudden death, I might have been able to hide the fact that I was emotionally reeling inside. I could barely figure out what to do with myself. I was wounded and vulnerable. I wasn't about to show that to a stranger on the street. Those feelings of woundedness and vulnerability are a part of a very different display case: my wall of shame. It's not that the things on the wall of shame are bad necessarily, it's that they are far more tender and fragile. There is nothing wrong with grieving a loss, but I am going to be more careful about who I share that with. Strangers don't get to see the wall of shame. It takes time and trust to get there.

So who are we really? We are both. To return to Lortie's metaphor of the paradox of music we are not either our wall of shame or our wall of fame. We are harmony, a constant interplay, a going back and forth between the two. The wall of fame and the wall of shame are both authentic expressions of who we really

are. We are a counterpoint between the things we have done and the things we have failed to do. We are a mix of sin and savior. We are the victims and survivors of life. We are the heroes of our own narrative and sometimes the villains in someone else's narrative. Even Bach wouldn't be able to keep up with the complex harmonies that make us who we are.

No wonder that Dogen said that to take up a serious spiritual practice, be it Buddhism or something else, eventually comes around to a study of the self. Who are we really? When we study the self it leads to awakening, we are enlightened by everything. That is because the self, our self, is not one thing. We are relational beings. If you start with the self, you soon encounter the whole universe. If you had asked me in those months following my uncle Jerry's death, "Who are you?" I would have rattled off my wall of fame, all those accolades that someone will print in the commas after my name when I die. But let's say that as we are talking we become close friends. I decide to lower my defenses and let you see my wall of shame. I talk about those tender places in my heart; especially my uncle's sudden death. By sharing who I am, you learn that he has affected me. Jerry's life changed my life in a real and tangible way; his death is a real loss to me. It was not that his life was like a light bulb on a carnival ride that blinked out but left the other lights unaffected to

shine on. To know who I really am, you have to know something about who he was. All of us are connected to people like that. Who we really are, are relational beings.

There was a popular story making the rounds among UU ministers a few years ago. I believe its origin was Rev. Peter Lutton who serves in the Pacific Northwest. He was a part of an interfaith clergy group that did a lot of community organizing together. These ministers, priests, and rabbis would get together to organize their congregations around various social justice topics. Their congregations worked together so often that their clergy leaders started to meet regularly and share their stories. The group developed a practice of one member giving their “Odyssey” – and extended autobiographical sermon on their ministry up to that point.

On one such meeting it was the priest’s turn to give his odyssey. Now this priest, whose name I never learned so I will just call him the priest, was perhaps the most venerable and respected of the group. He had a long history of activism in the community, and his parish seemed to be in the middle of many of their activities. This priest was known to be pretty liberal, and his opinions and insight were often sought. Everyone was excited to hear the priest’s odyssey and all of the terrific adventures he had

over the course of his ministry. The group was sorely disappointed.

Instead of presenting them with his wall of fame, all of the great battles with the powers and principalities of the world, the priest shared his wall of shame. He told them about coming into the priesthood at around the time of the Second Vatican Council. It appeared that the church was opening up and engaging the modern world in ways that excited him. The priest was called to ministry. However, in his experience the church did not live up to that promise. The priest told story after story of the church letting down the poor, taking overly conservative stands on key moral issues that he did not personally agree with. Time and again this priest was on the losing side so many of these grand debates, moral stands, and social justice actions. He lost far more than he won. And here he was, facing retirement in a few short years, only to see the church drift further and further away from that vision that had excited him so much as a young priest.

Well, his colleagues were dumbstruck. They had expected to hear something completely different. The priest sat down and there was a moment of silence for a good bit of time. It was the custom at these odysseys to take questions and have some dialogue with the audience. Someone finally broke the silence with the question that seemed to be on everyone's mind. "How

did you go on in the face of never-ending challenges? Why didn't you give up when you knew the church was not going to come around to your way of thinking?" The priest smiled, and leaned back in his chair. In a quiet voice he said, "Because I know whose I am."

What? "Whose I am?" Don't you mean, "I know who I am?" No – whose I am. The priest elaborated. It's not who I am but whose I am. I know who I belong to. I know who is really in charge of my life. For you see the calling that a priest or minister or rabbi has is to the people they serve, true, but only in a preliminary sense. Our calling comes not from the people or a specific congregation, but rather that source of life that the church itself serves. Obviously the priest was referring to God in a traditional, albeit liberal Christian sense. In 2011 the entire Unitarian Universalist Minister's Association went through a workshop entitled "Whose Are We?" As you might guess the UUs did not always answer that question with "God." But we did gain some clarity around the source of our call.

In many ways "Whose are we?" is a much better question than "Who are we?" And no you don't have to be a minister of some sort to ask that question of yourself. For you see the question "Whose are we?" presupposes that we are a complex harmony of relationships full of tension and counterpoints. Dogen

said that if you scratch beyond the surface of the self you will forget the self because you will find a whole complex web of interdependent relationships. The self is inherently relational. I would not be who I am if it had not been for my relationship with my uncle Jerry. He is a key part of my self, my being. To ask the question, “Whose are we?” is to ask, “Which one of those relationships, those strands of interconnection that make you who you are, which ones do you value the most? Which are the most formative?” The priest in the story could take comfort in knowing that even if he lost some of those social justice fights, even if the whole Catholic church saw social issues differently than he did, his life was not wasted. Because he knew whose he was. According to his faith, he belonged to God.

Now rather than critique or make light of that faith, let us ask ourselves the same question. We will likely have a different answer, but the question of “Whose are we?” is still important. Who or what does this church serve through its programs, ministries, and mission? What is that sacred reality that we try to bring to life?

When I ask these questions as a minister, I am confronted with “What is the source of my calling beyond the here and now, beyond any single group of people, to that deeper reality?” I lack the equanimity of the priest, and his confidence in his answer.

But for me it is rooted in the bodhisattva vow to help all beings be free from suffering and experience true joy. I find that my role as a Unitarian Universalist minister is the best I can come up with to fulfill that calling. That's whose I am.

But as I said, this is not a minister only thing. Whose are you? What calls to you in your life? What calls our church as a whole to serve? This is a question about relationship: how are we as a church in relationship together? How does our covenant, our commitment to being relationship, bring us new life and new hope? These are deep, deep questions that only you can answer for yourself. But they transcend the potential narcissism of asking, "Who am I?" "Whose am I?" cuts right to the quick.

May we celebrate ourselves and each other for the complex harmonies of life that each of us represent. May we remember our covenant and our call to serve as a congregation. Let us do so in love, today and every day we are together. Amen Blessed Be.