SERMON: Whose Are We?

By The Rev. Sarah Lammert,

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Unitarian Society of Ridgewood, New Jersey

I’m sitting in row 14f, reading a book in which the atheist character likes to have conversations

with the God he doesn’t believe in. I look up at the exit door above me and wonder if I could

get it right if we land in the Hudson today, and could there be two miracles like that anyway? A

man behind me in uniform gasps in awe at the sunset rolling out to the west over a carpet of

cotton ball clouds, the sky lit up in a pink orange golden hue. Flying over the earth I wonder,

“Whose Are We?”

“Whose Are We?” This is a question that has gained some traction for me lately. In December,

I was one of sixty-five individuals lucky enough to be included in a summit meeting held by the

Unitarian Universalist Association. We were all leaders representing various constituencies

within our movement – in my case the UU Ministers’ Association – and we had gathered to

imagine the future of ministerial formation, both lay and professional, for Unitarian

Universalism. The findings of this gathering will serve to help direct the financial and staff

resources of the UUA in terms of lay leader training, theological training, and continuing

education for our ministers.

We started with a worship service, and the very first words uttered were those of Rev. Jon

Luopo, the minister of the University Unitarian Church of Seattle. He told this story:

It seems that in Seattle the interfaith clergy organization has a tradition of asking senior

colleagues to share their life odysseys. On this particular occasion, a Roman Catholic Priest was

telling his story, and he said that his life had been in large measure a failure. He remembered

the heady days of Vatican II and how hopeful he and his generation of liberal priests had been

that real change was coming to the church he loved so dearly. And yet, these many years later

he felt that the church had if anything become hardened and deeply conservative, and his

dreams had not been realized.

Now, this priest was someone who was valued among his interfaith colleagues, and they were

somewhat hurt and stunned by his revelation. And yet, one colleague noted, despite the

severity of his words, his demeanor seemed quite 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.”

Whose are we? Whose are we, 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 we are a part of? 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?

This question, in Seattle, became a major thread in the conversation about the future education

of our ministers and laity. Strangely, I found myself the convener of this conversation, although

there were many present who were more expert than I in such matters. I didn’t know where to

start, so I asked everyone to sit in shared silence for five minutes. “It is easy to lose sight of the

fact that we belong to something beyond ourselves,” I offered tentatively. “There is something

larger than us (or something which both transcends and includes us), yet we find that this is

difficult to express.” “Yes,” agreed a colleague, “and sometimes it is something that

congregations find difficult to hear. The language that we use to express some of the

experiences and concepts (and how we understand our own theology) can be frightening,

trigger baggage, invoke reactivity in our congregations. Unitarian Universalists love diversity,”

he added, “it’s difference we don’t like.” “We tend to have a spiritual don’t ask don’t tell

policy,” added another colleague.

On Friday, I sat at a table in the back corner of this room, amazed as the first Bar Mitzvah in the

history of the Unitarian Society of Ridgewood unfolded around me. Many of you know Edith

Mayer, one of the new members we celebrated today, a woman who personally witnessed

Kristallnacht at age 15, saw her temple burned before her eyes, was sent to three

concentration camps in as many years, and somehow survived the horror of the Holocaust

although most if not all of the rest of her family were killed. Because Edith has been diagnosed

with end-stage cancer, her family became determined to grant her fondest wish – to see her

grandson Bar Mitzvah’d before she dies.

Now, Max is only twelve and has not been raised in a religious household, nor has he been

attending Hebrew School. This didn’t fit with the requirements for Bar Mitzvah at area

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synagogues, so the family searched for and found a wandering minstrel Cantor, the wonderful

Cantor Debbie, who was willing to teach Max what he needed to know over webcam and flew

up here from Florida to preside over this ceremony on Friday. It was a beautiful night, full of

poignancy and love. At one point Edith, herself, got up to offer a toast to her grandson. “I

didn’t think I would live to eighteen, much less live to see my grandson have his Bar Mitzvah,”

she said. Max too spoke, promising to tell her story.

There were tears of pain and loss, but also a deep sense of continuity with the past, broken as it

was. There was also a sense that the generations that came before passed what is most

essential down, that the generations to come might have beauty and wisdom and something

larger to live into and be a part of. “Thank God for Unitarians,” said one of the guests,

acknowledging that it was our community that had made this meeting of cultures and traditions

in such an authentic but also decidedly nontraditional manner possible.

Whose are we? Each of us comes from such different roots, each with such different stories.

Some of us resonate deeply with Judaism, carrying the bones of the Torah inside of our DNA.

Others, like me, can still recite the Lord’s Prayer from memory although we have left behind the

Christian story as central to our spiritual lives. Still others among us were schooled in Hinduism,

Islam, Humanism, or an amalgam of traditions and beliefs. Whose are we, and what draws us

together?

On Tuesday and Wednesday I sat at Starr King School for the Ministry, my alma mater, for a two

day gathering of interns and their supervisors. Above me, festooning the beams of the Starr

King Fireside Room, were the symbols that Ken Patton had fashioned for his Charles Street

Meeting House in Boston. Before coming here to Ridgewood to serve as minister from 1960-

1986, Ken had attempted a grand experiment under the auspices of Universalism in Boston.

The Charles Street Meeting House was to be his temple – a home for a “unitive, naturalisticmystical-humanistic World Religion” that would celebrate the evolution of humankind and

religion itself.

Immediately upon being called to this experimental pulpit, Ken began refashioning the worship

space, something he would later also take on in this building. He arranged the seating so that it

would be a church in the round, reflecting a microcosm of the universe, a place for the

democratic exchange of ideas and shared inspiration. Ken then helped to create two large

murals – one of the “Great Nebula Andromeda” and the other of the “Atom”. The atom

represented the particular, while the nebula would be the “window into the universe” beyond

the four walls of the church. And along the walls, Ken created and hung copper symbols, now

housed along Starr King’s beams, of art, of science, and of the world religions.

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Looking up from my chair, I could see many of these symbols – a snake coiled there, the Latin

Cross there, the Muslim Crescent, a simple Circle, a Spiral, a Chinese character, a Hindu ohm.

For Ken, honoring all the many ways that human beings attempted to express what is of

ultimate importance was a means of allowing one world religion to emerge which would have a

harmonizing effect on humankind.

The future of the human venture depends on enough people becoming universal in their

imagination, their learning, and their compassion….

The continents are all surrounded by one great body of water—not seven oceans, really,

but one great ocean. There is only one atmosphere that blows about the whole earth,

and the air that is over Boston now may be over Cape Town in a short time. The earth is

one globe, one mass of soil and rock. How silly we are to think it is divided by the way it

juts up above the surface of the one ocean. This is one world, so defined by the vast

space of the universe that surrounds it.1

Unfortunately, Ken’s dream for the Charles Street Meeting House never was realized, as

denominational politics, a scarcity of resources, and perhaps Ken’s own limitations as a

community builder (he always said he was a poet more than a minister) combined to do in this

grand experiment. The Meeting House was sold in 1961, just a year after Ken and his family

moved here to Ridgewood. The symbols which Ken so carefully crafted now serve to inspire a

whole new generation of aspiring ministers, and perhaps Ken’s message becomes instilled in

them, became instilled in me, as we learned in the company of these symbols of humanity’s

greatest stories and best wisdom. And perhaps we in Ridgewood continue his legacy as we

wrestle, reaching for unity through our vast diversity of experience, of identity, of being, of

belief.

So, whose are we? Whose are we as we dream, as we fail, as we dream anew? Whose are we

as we grow, as we live our daily lives, as we encounter grave challenges of health and fiscal well

being, as we wonder what the future will bring? Whose are we as we raise our children, as we

release them into the world, as we mourn those we love who die, as we ourselves face the fact

of our own mortality? Whose are we in a world that seems upside down, filled with violence

and depravation and oppression? Whose are we in world that is at the same time brimming

with beauty, potential, freedom, and love?

“She says when she can’t pray she calls up prairie grass. 2

” Some of us look to nature in this way. “God speaks to each of us as God makes us. Then walks with us silently out of the night.”

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Patton, Ken, A Religion for One World.

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“Epiphany” by Pem Kremer

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From “Book of Hours: Love Poems to God” by Rainer Maria Rilke

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Some of us imagine the Divine in this way. “When we all serve one another, then our heaven is

begun.4

” Some of us look to humankind for greater meaning. And some of us lose ourselves in

music, in the arts, in silent meditation, finding there the larger tapestry of which we ourselves

are merely a strand. However we name the transcendent, however we speak to this great

presence, however we honor it or envision it, kneel humbly in its presence or stand tall, holding

out our hand, our lives are contained in something larger – something that comes through us,

lives with us, and connects us to a greater whole.

If we cannot make ourselves vulnerable enough to speak of such things, if we muffle one

another’s expression of the holy, or of that which stirs us and moves us to want to love more

fully, we do damage to one another as whole human beings. If we ignore the transcendent,

never pausing long enough to fill the cup of our being, we do damage to ourselves as whole

human beings.

Whose are we? Ponder such things in your heart. Serve what is good. Love what is true. Take

time for spiritual practice. Do justice. And when you cannot pray, call up prairie grass,

responsive to the slightest shift of wind, full of infinite charge, All One.