

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, naturalistic-mystical-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.