

## "Whose Are We?"

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto (Online)

30 July 2023

This distinction between 'who am I?' and 'whose am I?' is so subtle, and yet can be so profound. Often when asked, "who am I", individuals will pull out pieces of identity that can characterize our human nature for those asking. We offer a first, and perhaps a last name, an occupation, our relationships with others, wife, parent, son, friend. Maybe we describe our likes and dislikes, the city that we call home, or that the stars were aligned in a certain pattern when we were born. Some people might refer to themselves as part of a religious group, or fan of a certain sports team. There are endless ways of being able to describe the question "who am I?" and yet when asked with the pronoun 'whose' the question is turned on its head, and instead of asking about ones identity, we ask of belonging. Grammatically – who is a subject pronoun, it is used to identify a person, or specify which person did "something". Whose is a possessive pronoun – so it is used to refer to which person something – or in this case "Someone" belongs to. Who are you? – requests identity, but "Whose are you?" requests belonging.

I might still give the exact same answers, but the focus will again be shifted.

Who Am I?

My name is Danielle.

Whose am I?

I belong to the Webber Family, Bev & Jeff are my Parents, Mel & Pat are my Grandparents. My grandfather was the eldest of 7 "The Webber Family" includes all his siblings, all of their children, and their children and now, the beginnings of a 4th generation of

Webbers has started. We gather ever 5 or so years to catch up and celebrate one another.

Who Am I?

I am a Unitarian Universalist Minister,

Whose Am I?

being a Minister in this faith means that I am part of a group of colleagues who help me to remember and discover my highest self and helping me to navigate what it means to be a member of clergy in Canada, and what our faith has to offer this country.

Who Am I

I am married to Adam Webber

Whose am I?

Adam Webber is my partner in life, we have decided to overcome and celebrate what this world has for us together, supporting one another through the challenges, and reminding each of other of our strengths. Adam is my best friend, my confident, and my hero.

Let me tell you some more:

I don't hold much belonging with my astrological sign, which is Aquarius, nor with a sports team, even though many from my family would claim Roughrider fandom having come from a prairie family. I call Calgary the city of my heart. But I now live in and call Westbank (and Kelowna) my home. I do put a lot of value on my religious identity, as well as being a knitter, and crafter. Belonging to these groups has contributed vastly to my identity, and I would not be the person I am today if it were not for these groups of belonging.

I spoke a few weeks ago about my theology, of relationships. Perhaps you remember the image of 2 people holding hands, made of pipe cleaners. Our identities, my personal identity being wrapped up in and intertwined with our relationships has long been an

important part of my theology, and my understanding of the sacred. Just as a tiny recap when I was in seminary one of the art project, slash, assignments that we were asked to do was to take home several pipe cleaners, and to create an image that for us would reflect God/Spirit of Life/The More/Ultimate Reality, I will share it here again, however. To create God out of pipe cleaners. I am not a theist; I don't think I ever have been. I grew up a Unitarian, in a Fellowship church, listening to the story of Jesus and God like it was a fairy tale. And I learned some of the stories from the bible, but they held the same symbolism of love and morals that Winnie the Pooh stories held. I believe that GOD is relationship, a verb. The concept that holds my moral obligations – is relationships.

This to me is what it means to be part of the interdependent web of existence. Because I do not exist unless I am in relationship to other things. Whether it is my individual relationship with each of you, or the special relationship, the congregational relationship, that is us here on this zoom screen together and apart, or the relationship that I have with myself, or with the earth, or animals. The relationship - that is what is important.

And while trying to understand how I was going to make an image of this concept of god for my assignment I created two people holding hands, to show the space between them, the relationship that I see as god.

You see, my belonging, my relationships with others, with myself, with the wider world, is all part of my understanding of the divine.

The God that interweaves itself though our lives, that is the verb (God as Verb not pronoun) the active part of my being, and doing, is intricately connected to my belonging, it can only be defined by relating.

Whose I am therefore necessarily leads to the statement whose are we. And when we have many different layers of our human beings, many different areas from which we belong, than how do we belong completely and wholly together?

Researcher and social scientist Brene Brown offers a really interesting perspective on this. She states that “Belonging is the innate human desire to be part of something larger than us. Because this yearning is so primal, we often try to acquire it by fitting in and by seeking approval, which are not only hollow substitutes for belonging, but often barriers to it. Because true belonging only happens when we present our authentic, imperfect selves to the world, our sense of belonging can never be greater than our level of self-acceptance.” Brown goes on to say “True belonging is the spiritual practice of believing in and belonging to yourself so deeply that you can share your most authentic self with the world and find sacredness in both being a part of something and standing alone in the wilderness. True belonging doesn’t require you to change who you are; it required you to be who you are.”

This is a funny juxtaposition – but let’s break it down.

The person who is willing to brave the wilderness of being alone {{OF Being Alone}} will then know the fullest form of belonging.

This feels so accurate to me. I have never felt more at ease with myself and those around me, then when I am not trying to hide any of my flaws. Which sounds weird, because that is exactly what we usually do. Withdraw from challenging situations, don’t share the embarrassing stuff. Don’t talk about how you are struggling or why you are sad, angry or burnt out. We are told to keep everything together, to show off our best selves, to answer “fine,” or “okay” when someone else asks us how we are doing. And yet, this has brought us further apart from those around us.

There is a wisdom tale – from one of the Tapestry of faith curricula, that talks about a prince, who is looking for new land to conquer, he was far from home, when he sees a castle, that is glistening in the sun, on top of a beautiful hill, he climbs the hill, and sees the most beautiful princess, and instantly falls in love.

As he tries to win her affection, he brings out his soldiers, and his armies, but she denies him – he leaves them behind, and comes back, riding his horse alone. But she denies him once more. He comes back without his horse and his sword. Once again, denied... it isn't until the prince comes without any of his armour – without any his protection, but just as his true self that love can flourish.

Brene Brown argues that It is not until we are able to let go of all of our armour, our need for control, our perfectionism, our humour in uncomfortable silences, let go of all those barriers – and truly listen to the wilderness within ourselves that we will truly get to be together. To belong.

When I can let down all of my guards, and you can let down all of your guards, and we can meet one another in each other's presence, that is the divine.

In his book “Community: The structure of Belonging” Peter Block articulates that most of societies communities are fragmented and at odds within themselves. Each entity- the businesses, the social services, the citizens, and the public sectors, are all in their own silos, each arguing for their own interests. He argues that by bringing people together to talk about their struggles, to talk about the things that are not working for them, and for their families, that we have the capability of fixing our own silos, of tearing down our barriers and finding the support that we need to create belonging within our neighbourhoods.

Peter Block and the work that he did in neighbourhood design was very influential for me while working on my thesis in community

engagement. Bringing together organizations that have different needs and different assets allows for more collaboration, and more sustainability. When communities and neighbourhoods communicate – and bring their whole, needy, and lonely beings together – we can create better together, we can collaborate on more, and become sustainable, I know first Toronto wants to be more connected to the community when the new building is ready.

Another way of looking at this concept is through the words of Rachel Naomi Remen – she states “Perhaps the most important thing we bring to another person is the silence in us. Not the sort of silence that is filled with unspoken criticism or hard withdrawal. The sort of silence that is a place of refuge, of rest, of acceptance of someone as they are. We are all hungry for this other silence. It is hard to find. In its presence we can remember something beyond the moment, a strength on which to build a life. Silence is a place of great power, healing and belonging.”

Think about a time when you tried to keep a secret from someone. Perhaps it's not in a malicious way, or it might have been. Perhaps it is a birthday present, or a surprise party. Perhaps you have spent money on something that your partner wouldn't approve of, and you don't tell them. Maybe it was a secret from one person. Maybe it was a secret from the world. But do you remember that discomfort that sits in the pit of your stomach when you are made aware of the withheld information. Sometimes we are excited about the secret. Often we are not. For me, the discomfort feels overwhelming at times. I find ways to distract myself, to sooth myself, to hide my knowledge over the other person.

Now think of a time when you have told somebody something you have been keeping secret. A truth that you were not sharing, that you had withheld, but were finally ready to reveal. Stomachs unclench, the weight is dropped. Truth out in the open, made public. For me, the sense of relief has been palpable. To put the secret out

in the room, and to be freed from the burden of holding so much feels liberating. Opening up, accepting the wilderness within ourselves, allows us to find belonging without. In one way this is what therapy can look like, being given the silence to be able to find ourselves. Or perhaps being given the silence so that we can roam our wilderness. To figure out that we belong. When we are able to figure out who we are, when we are able to find our identities and discover our truth, we belong.

As we lean forward into our belonging, our identities, I wonder how will you make space for other people to belong. How will your leaning into your own sense of belonging allow other to find theirs? If my sharing from the pulpit gives you permission to share your own experiences, then perhaps you could offer the same permission to others.

When I focus on whose I are, rather than who I am I are able to find more commonality, I am able to discover my belonging, and perhaps if we all do this, we are able to grow in community.

And so I invite you to being to ponder: Whose are you?