

Whose Am I?

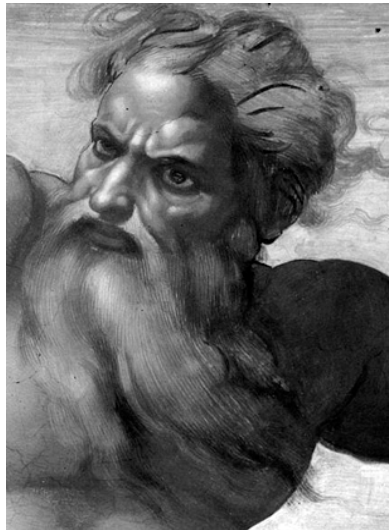
The Rev. Duane H. Fickeisen and Dot Everhart¹
Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley
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“I will walk with you and be your God,
and you will be my people.”

— Leviticus 26:13

Opening Words Dot Everhart

When I was a student at Lycoming College in Williamsport, my parents came to visit for Parent’s Weekend. We got separated from each other at the football game, because I sat with the band to play my piccolo and they were in the general seating area. We made plans to meet at a specific time near the food stands, which were mobbed. I wondered how in the world I was going to find them, when all of a sudden I heard a piercing whistle. I walked towards it and listened. There it was again. I made a slight correction in my direction and continued on. There it was again. After the third or fourth whistle, I found my parents standing side by side, with my Dad grinning from ear to ear and my Mom shaking her head. She said, “I told him not to do that. I



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said you'd never realize it was him. He wouldn't listen!" I hugged my dad and said, "Of course I recognized it! I'd know that whistle any where!"

My Dad's whistle was his way of calling us in from playing in the neighborhood. When I heard it, I knew immediately that all I had to do was to listen and follow. Without a doubt, like the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, I would soon find my parents.

This morning, as we worship, we ask the question, "Whose are we?" Or, if you prefer, "To whom do we belong?" Psychologists and sociologists claim that we, as modern human beings, tend to experience social alienation and estrangement. In spite of all of the technologies we use to connect us to each other—Twitter, Facebook, Email, texting, PDA's and cell phones—many of us continue to feel disconnected and lonely. In our frenetic pace to keep up, we're not sure if we belong or where we belong. Does anyone really care if we're here or there or not here at all? Perhaps as we reflect on this question this morning, we'll hear a familiar whistle or voice calling to us; we'll see a friendly face across the way gesturing to us in a welcoming way; we'll place a pebble in the bowl with a joy or concern—and we'll find that we do know whose we are and to whom we belong. Come, let us worship together.

Sermon²

Duane Fickeisen

My favorite story as a kid was the Little Golden Book *Mister Dog: The Dog Who Belonged to Himself* by Margaret Wise Brown. It was about Crispin's Crispian, a dog who was named that because he belonged to himself. He lived in his own two-story

house, and at least in my image of it, there was a picket fence around it. It was a perfectly normal 1950s house, except that it belonged to a dog.

The dog in the story did his own shopping and cooking — pork chops and green vegetables as I recall — and liked to sit back and relax with his pipe after dinner. (In fact, reviewers of the recent re-release of the book comment that on almost every page the dog and other animals are shown smoking and they wonder how to explain that to a kid.)

In the story, the dog met a boy who had no family and was alone. He took him in and they lived together. It was a reversal of the usual rescue role, but if the dog could talk, shop, cook, smoke, and own a house, who's to question taking in a homeless kid?

Upon reflection, I suppose the story appealed to my desire for independence, to my enjoyment of cooking which began at an early age, and to my introversion. One of the sessions our Small Group Ministry program includes is the invitation to recall a favorite childhood book and reflect on its significance to your adult life. What was one of your favorite books from childhood?

Perhaps you'll want to talk with each other about that after the service.

I suspect that each of us has at least some streak of the independence that Crispin's Crispian enjoyed. Independent thinking is, after all, a core value that brings people to Unitarian Universalism. The opportunity and encouragement to discover and embrace a theology that works for you without the coercion of creedal test of faith draws many of us here.

But the inherent danger in that approach is that we can become a little too smug and enamored of our own unique be-

liefs. Perhaps even intolerant of the beliefs of others that may be religiously more orthodox or conservative. And perhaps you are in danger of becoming inflexible and unwilling to consider other possibilities that might threaten your entrenched belief systems. In your quest for the truth, have you brushed aside the complexity, the ambiguity, and the mystery that offer rich and powerful sources of meaning?

Every once in a while I enjoy a few days on silent retreat, usually alone in a cabin with limited access to the outside world. The independence and freedom that come with it are sources of renewal and inspiration for me. My introversion craves that recharge. But even on retreat I'm not fully independent — I owe even the air I breathe to the work of plants and the power of the sun. I eat foods I didn't grow, harvest, preserve, or transport. Even Henry David Thoreau walked back from his cabin at Walden Pond to the Concord Town Center and his family's home to have his laundry done and to the Emerson's where he exchanged chopping and carrying wood for dinner.

Life has never been about isolation, but rather it is about relationships. We live in a complex web of relationships with each other and with the world around us. And that implies some reciprocal obligation.

Even Crispan's Crispian had some responsibility and accountability to the boy he took in. He depended on the butcher and the grocer for his meat and vegetables, and presumably on a tobacco farmer and merchant to fill his pipe.

The seven principles we espouse move in a progression from the individual to whole systems — from the emphasis in the first principle on the inherent worth and dignity of every person to that of the last one on respect for the interdependent web of existence *of which we are a part*.

Taken to the extreme, our individualism fuels a narcissism that starts to think the whole universe revolves around “me.” When we affirm that we are a part of something vast and interconnected, we offset our independence with the humility of recognizing our interdependence.

So I am calling us to that humility; to consider the possibility that we don’t belong just to ourselves, but that we are in relationship with something bigger than our individual selves, something that we are responsible to and that holds us to account. That in a sense we belong to that something bigger.

While I named the question, “Whose are we?” I hope you’ll consider it personally — “Whose am I?” It is intended to be a deeply theological question, and I suspect the response will be complex and nuanced, never quite completely satisfactory for seekers on a spiritual journey of discovery.

The question is very different from “Who am I?” although they are related, of course. We can hardly know who we are without knowing whose we are. But the response to “Who am I?” has an inward focus while “Whose am I?” is relational and outward focused.

The answer for the people who wrote the Hebrew scriptures was put forward as a simple one. They belonged to God and the terms of the ancient covenant provided that as long as they obeyed the law they would be protected. They wrote that God said, “I am your God and you are my people.” And that seemed to settle the question.

Actually, of course it was not so simple, or they would not have needed to put so much emphasis on it in their scriptures and laws. The followers of Moses and Abraham lived in the context of a culture that was pantheistic. The monotheism they espoused and that became the basis for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, was a major departure from the prevailing culture.

The seemingly simple answer to “Whose am I?” was a novel way of imagining the deity and the relationship between God and humankind.

The God they belonged to looked something like Michelangelo’s art, which is reproduced on the cover of your Order of Service. Or at least that’s how *we* imagine they imagined Him, though perhaps with a more middle-eastern appearance. Strong and fierce, the object of awe and fear. The way God is described in the Hebrew scriptures is meant to inspire fear, to threaten reprisals and disaster if one didn’t believe and to promise profits and advantages to those who did.

But that image of an angry and vengeful God is one that many of us struggle with. Our Universalist religious ancestors rejected it in favor of a loving and forgiving God whose mercy and grace would restore every person to God’s love. The early Universalist preacher, John Murray, exhorted his colleagues not to “give them Hell,” but to preach “the everlasting love of God.”

Many of us look at Michelangelo’s image and, while we may be impressed by it, we don’t find it representative of a God we believe exists. Anytime we seek to make a concrete image of God, we lose the abstract mystery and complexity of the divine presence that is at once imminent, relational, and transcendent — within us, among us, and beyond us.

While the ancient Hebrews answered “Whose am I?” with the God of Abraham and Moses, and that remains the orthodox response in the Semitic religions, other people had very different responses. In the well-known words attributed to Chief Sealth, he said, “The earth does not belong to us: we belong to the earth.” Presumably that reflected a common belief among at least some of the native peoples who were present in the New World when Europeans began to arrive.

Belonging to the earth implies a very different set of behaviors, ethical imperatives, and responsibilities and accountability than does the covenant with the Hebrew God, who has promised his people to protect them from natural disaster — there would be no more floods that would require an ark if the descendants of Noah kept to the covenant.

But belonging to the earth tells us we can expect to experience the natural world — the seasonal cycles of renewal, growth, and decay — and the inevitable cataclysmic events — storms, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions — without divine intervention to protect us. We can only partially protect ourselves from disaster, so we ought to anticipate how we will respond and care for survivors.

What I'm trying to say is that how we respond to the question of "Whose am I?" has implications for our values, ethics, beliefs about nature, responses to crisis, and even daily behavior.

Most likely your answer will hardly be as simple as either of the examples I've given. Like the dog of my childhood story, you may belong to yourself, be responsible to yourself, and be held accountable by an inner voice or expectation.

But we also enter into covenants with each other in which we have made promises and perhaps have identified consequences for failing to keep them. Some of those are explicit statements, while others are implicit expectations. In a sense, you belong to your covenantal commitments.

If you're in one of our Small Group Ministry groups, you may have entered into a covenant with the other members of your group — one in which you've promised to make participation in the monthly gathering a priority, to practice deep listening, and to maintain confidentiality.

If you're in a committed relationship, your vows of marriage are a covenant in which you have given yourself to your spouse, likely promising to love and cherish your partner no matter what until the death of one of you releases the vows. Part of the responsibility and accountability in a committed relationship is to support your partner in keeping her or his vows both within and outside the marriage.

In most weddings I conduct, I ask the gathered witnesses to pledge their support for the marriage. There is an explicit obligation then to honor and support the vows between the partners.

If you are a parent, you may not have such an explicit vow, yet implicitly and legally you belong to your minor children — with responsibilities for their care and support and to show them love. In child dedications within the context of our congregation, the members of the community and the extended family and God parents are asked to commit to supporting the family and particularly to dedicate themselves to the children. Children have a claim on you — you have a responsibility to them.

Of course your familial responsibilities don't end when your children become adults. They shift, but they don't end. And when they have children, your grandchildren have a claim on your heart.

So "Whose am I?" I belong to my spouse, to my children, to their partners, to my grandchildren, to my siblings, to my parents (both my mother who is living and my father who died nearly 14 years ago).

Perhaps you have made a commitment to a professional code of ethics. I'm held to the Code of Professional Practice of the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association. It governs ethical behavior in ministry and provides sanctions for viola-

tions, including potential loss of my ministerial credentials for misconduct, including sexual misconduct. You can read them on the web. In addition to the enforceable code, I am in both explicit and implicit covenants with colleagues. So in a sense I belong to my colleagues in ministry, who hold me accountable along with the denomination's Ministerial Fellowship Committee.

Some of you may also be accountable to a code of professional practice or an oath of office, and you may be held accountable by a licensing or credentialing body. Commissioned officers in the military, police officers, elected officials, attorneys, physicians and nurses, even volunteer Master Gardeners have entered into behavioral covenants. Consider some of the promises you've made in professional and volunteer roles that may be either proscriptive or prescriptive. Are there ways you belong to them? Have particular responsibilities? Are held accountable?

The congregation that ordained me, the Unitarian Universalist Church of Palo Alto, charged me with particular duties as a minister. In the vows of ordination, I made a life-long commitment to serve humankind and our movement. While our polity does not permit the ordaining congregation to revoke an ordination, and the accountability is primarily internal, the charges represent an important claim on my actions.

As members of a community or an organization we have additional obligations. The members of this congregation are responsible for its mission and vitality. As employers and property owners, you have additional commitments to meet, both legal and ethical.

As members of UUCV, you've entered into a covenant to support the congregation's mission. We are here to transform lives and to care for the world. The covenant binds us together

in a network of community to work for the common goals of caring for one another, encouraging spiritual development, and reaching out to work for justice.

But there is another part of the mission that says we're an enduring presence for liberal religion in the Cumberland Valley. Any enduring organization must be dynamic, organic, and growing. We have promised each other that we will support that enduring presence as our gift to the Cumberland Valley.

Your trustees hope to wrap up the stewardship campaign this weekend. They will consider a proposed budget for next fiscal year when they meet this Thursday. It cannot be a deficit budget because we simply don't have substantial cash reserves to cover a shortfall. Your pledges of financial support are our primary source of income. If you have already made a pledge for the fiscal year that starts on July 1, thank you! If you have not, please do so today. And whether or not you've pledged, do plan to join us for a celebration brunch today. You'll find information about it on posted flyers, in the announcements in your bulletin, and on the scrolling announcements on the monitor in the Social Hall.

Perhaps your answer to "Whose am I?" includes a spouse and family, a profession or employer, and a community and congregation. But is there something larger to which you belong? Something that transcends all of those and calls you to larger purpose?

In any reciprocal relationship there are mutual responsibilities and sources of accountability. In a sense we belong to our relationships. But the larger question is whether we are in relationship with the divine, with a transcending spirit of love and life, with what some of us dare to call God.

The process theology that UU philosopher and theologian Charles Hartshorne proposed was predicated on God being in

relationship with us. For any relationship to be meaningful, Hartshorne argued, both parties must be willing to be changed, and thus he rejected God's immutability and omnipotence and embraced a radical free will. The God of process theology calls us to exercise our free will to make things better — to bring more of what Hartshorne labels enjoyment to the world. Now I think that's a God worth belonging to, worth invoking, and worth paying attention to when God lures us to choose love.

The angel invited us to “dig here,” to seek treasure by digging bare handed into the depths of our souls. The answer to “Whose am I?” is already present within you. The act of digging for it may well be transformative. So dig here, in your soul, in your soul.

Whose are you?

Amen.

Image: Detail, face of God, from The Creation of the Sun and Moon by Michelangelo, Sistine Chapel, 1511. Image is in the public domain.