

The "I" in Identity
Intern Minister Israel Buffardi and the Worship Committee
February 26, 2017
Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Chalice Lighting

The chalice is a symbol of our Unitarian Universalist values.
Its flame a symbol of the unique and sacred light inside each and every one of us
But the fire also reminds us of the power of our coming together
We warm each other's hearts with our fires
We fan the flames of compassion, justice, and love
May our flame burn bright and strong, illuminating who we are, and the community we
are building together.
Opening Words
Tell me whom you love, and I will tell you who you are.
-Louisiana Creole Proverb

HYMN

Come, Come Whoever You Are #188

Card Carrying UU:

Keith P 1/31/17

I've been thinking about identity as it comes time to renew my driver's license later this month and a bit about what all the cards and IDs and papers we carry mean. I see my driver's license expires in about 2 weeks so I better get cracking. A card I recently got in the mail says there are new identity verification hoops to vault through. It says I need to bring a birth certificate or passport if not previously submitted and immigration documents if I'm not a citizen. Do I have anything that says I am in fact a citizen?? But I read on and there's an exception if you are older than 53 or have had your Maine license for more than 28 years. I'm off the hook – well I still need to go to the Department of Motor Vehicles and wait in line but wait – I read further and it says I may be eligible to renew on line.

This time renewing my license reminds me that my parents are both living and doing pretty well for being in their late 80s. But Mom this past year had to give up her driving privileges and Dad is restricted to driving in the daylight hours and only on not so busy roads. I'm saddened that these two pillars of transportation and independence are not so independent anymore. I am also relieved for their safety as the last few times I have been a passenger with one of them I was somewhat uncomfortable. And I wonder how many more times I will be renewing my license before I am no longer safe.

Online now, I move through the process and it asks my driver's license number which I've had since I was in college but haven't quite memorized. So to my repository of personal identity and financial data I go. My wallet. First for the license number the DMV has me listed under. It also asks for my SS # which is a number I've had locked in my brain since before college and the federal government uses to track me. And in walking through the process it tells me I cannot use this service as I need to get a vision test. OK so it will mean a trip to the DMV.

Some of the other things in my wallet are fairly generic. Things like cash and the plastic that lets me spend when and where I might. I used to have pictures but they have mostly migrated to my phone. Some people identify themselves as card carrying member of something. I don't seem to have a card for it but consider myself a card carrying UU. After all I have been attending UU churches since I was quite small, well before I had either a driver's license or a SS card. I've had connections to churches since 1st grade. What that card would mean to me is all people have inherent good in them and most will choose

a path of respecting others as they would want to be respected. We pick and choose what fits from the world's libraries and religious leaders, but ultimately need to choose for ourselves. I also think there is something akin to reincarnation, a kind of cosmic reset where souls have a look at the lives they have lived and have a redo to examine lessons learned and not learned and to try again and be better. I read further and I see I need to prove my residency. I wonder if they will accept a photo on my phone of me standing in front of our house. Probably not! It says a lease, deed or utility bill is required. I can lay my hands on any of these. As a landlord I could bring in a lease I've signed with the Iraqi couple downstairs. Sihab has the misfortune to be back in Iraq visiting friends and family and even though he has the proper identity papers and green card, he may have trouble returning. There is no doubt having been born in this country gives me an easy path down many roads in life. When I think of that, I think I will take the documentation I need and just go get the renewal done.

Please note since I penned this I have renewed my license and Sihab has been able to return.

Blessed be – Allahu Akbar

J&C Prayer

It is love that fashions us

By Daphne Rose Kingham

It is love that fashions us
into the fullness of our being of our identities –
not our looks, not our work,
not our wants, not our achievements, not our parents, not our status,
not our dreams.
These are all the fodder and the filler, the navigating fuels of our lives;
but it is love: who we love, how we love, why we love, and that we love
which ultimately shapes us.
It is love, before all and after all, in the beginning and in the end, that creates us.
Today, remembering this,
let us acknowledge and remember the moments, events, and people
who bring us, even momentarily,
into a true experience of love,
And allow the rest,
the inescapable mundanities of life, be like a cloud, and in due time, to quietly drift
away.

Three elusive words

Rick Kimball

I show you a photo of a stranger, and ask for a three-word description of the person you see. How do you respond?
With skin color? That smacks of racism.
With gender? You're an incorrigible, inflexible sexist in a gender-fluid world.
Do you guess and give the subject's age? Sounds like ageism to me.
Describe by body shape and dimension? Who asked you to judge?
All of which tells you why we use nametags at this church. To avoid having to identify each other by any other means. Maybe we should use numbers instead of names, which can hint at ethnic and even religious background. But if we used numbers, who would get 13?

I stand at a mirror, as naked as I can get, searching for three words to describe myself so I would know me if I met me at a party. But I fail. I don't know me when I see me in a mirror. I am larger, more complex, than any three words. But also less than those words. They may live for centuries. I will not. The mirror glares at me. I see wrinkled white male. Peering through the shell, I find traces of writer and photographer, pieces of Unitarian Universalist, taglines of father and husband, a whole lot of want-to-be's and should-have-beens, dreams, remembered actions, and bloody fragments of soul.

Yes, Walt Whitman, I am large. I contain multitudes. But Walt, you forgot the other part. The multitudes also contain me. I shape them and they shape me, concurrent forces twisting me into confused pretzel of being that struggles to know itself.

Who am I? Why is this identity thing so difficult?

Well, I tell the mirror. All I can say is this: I am who I am. I is what I is. I am me.

The grammarian lying somewhere near my pancreas awakens, reaches out, and slaps me on the cheek.

Okay. Okay. I'll say it right. I am not me. I am I.

And I stand there staring at the mirror, back and forth, eye to eye, in endless search for identity of self.

Finally I shrug, turn away and dress. I head downstairs, my brain still unsettled. I eat a light breakfast, grab a winter coat, and drive off to church. There I find my nametag and pin it to my chest.

* * *

So I sometimes struggle with identity – along with others in this service, and still others who are listening. That's good to do, I think – but not to overdo. Perhaps we could use a lesson in self-identity from Huckleberry Finn, as portrayed in the musical *Big River*. "I, Huckleberry, Me," he sings, in a wonderful solo of self-knowledge and description. This morning, our own Finn, Finn Dierks-Brown, is with us to perform that song. Here's Finn doing Finn.

MUSIC

I, Huckleberry Me

Reading

Identity

by Julio Noboa Polanco

Let them be as flowers,
always watered, fed, guarded, admired,
but harnessed to a pot of dirt.
I'd rather be a tall, ugly weed,
clinging on cliffs, like an eagle
wind-wavering above high, jagged rocks.
To have broken through the surface of stone,
to live, to feel exposed to the madness
of the vast, eternal sky.
To be swayed by the breezes of an ancient sea,
carrying my soul, my seed,
beyond the mountains of time or into the abyss of the bizarre.
I'd rather be unseen, and if
then shunned by everyone,
than to be a pleasant-smelling flower,
growing in clusters in the fertile valley,
where they're praised, handled, and plucked
by greedy, human hands.
I'd rather smell of musty, green stench

than of sweet, fragrant lilac.
If I could stand alone, strong and free,
I'd rather be a tall, ugly weed.

How do you do

Michael Crosby

How do you do.

My name is....

let's see now, I know it's here somewhere.

Ah. Harris Tweed. That doesn't sound right.

Strauss? Levi Strauss?

Here it is! Michael.....pig?

Oh, who cares what my name is, it's not who I am.

Juliet, you know, Juliet. She said it real good.

What's in a name? that which we call a rose

By any other name would smell as sweet.

Let's see if she's right: English, rose. German, rose. French, rose. Armenian, rose. Danish, rose. Spanish, rosa. Ah, here we go.

Greek, Triandafillos. Turkish, Gul (ah my beautiful Gul). She is right you know.

Who am I? The name that I am called is certainly not who I am. It identifies me to others but it does not tell anyone who I am. Does my job description tell you who I am? How about my hobbies or activities that I enjoy. They tell you what I do but not who I am.

While thinking about who me, it occurred to me that, as with the rose, who I am is not what I do but how I do it.

For example, I sing in the choir but that's not who I am. It's how I sing in the choir that defines who I am, at that moment. I sing with enjoyment, with love, with humor and that's who I am, at that moment.

I accidentally turn two pages and wonder where the heck I am and that's who I am. And yes, a couple of times Dale has caught me snoozing in the back row and that is who I am, at that moment.

Here's an interesting thought. If my identity, my "who I am" is dependent on how I do, then I can change who I am by changing how I do. Perhaps not so easy to do consciously but unconsciously we do it all the time. If I am at a concert of Beethoven's ninth symphony and really getting into it and someone asks me who I am I am likely to sing: Alle Menschen werden Bruder, wo dein sanfter Flugel weilt.

Am I a UU? I attend a UU church. Does that give me leave to identify as a UU?

Aah, the principles. How do I do the principles?

1st principle. Worth and dignity. Hmm, I struggle with that one at times, particularly since the November election.

2nd. Justice and equality. Certainly.

3rd. Spiritual growth. Yes

4th. Search for truth. Definitely

5th Democratic process ok except in music, it doesn't work in music.

6th Peace, Liberty and Justice. You bet.

7th Interdependent web. My favorite principle but I could still do better there.

Does the way that I do UU earn me a grade of B or is that too generous?

I wonder who, or rather how we do as a church. Do we really get into this Democratic process bit? I hear that republicans are four times more likely than democrats to call their representatives.

Do we really tread lightly on the earth? I don't see many bicycles out there. Oh, but of course, it's still winter.

How many of us are doing social action? Are we living in the fire?

Do we go back to the fire to turn the world around? I'm afraid that I fail on that count, but it's not too late and the time is right for me to get more involved, to really identify as a UU, to DO the UU principles.

The question of our UU identity is not, who are you?, but How do you do?

Do You Know Who I Am?

Anna Noyes Benoit

Do you know who I am?

Do you know who you are?

Do you know who we are?

See we one another clearly?

Do we know who we are?

You may recognize this as a quote from Harry Belafonte's song "turn the world around."

His answer to these questions comes in the last section of the song. It states: "Water makes the river / river wash the mountain / fire makes the sunlight / turn the world around. / Heart is of the river / body is the mountain / spirit is the sunlight turn / the world around. / We are of the spirit / truly of the spirit / only can the spirit / turn the world around."

The song was written after Belafonte's trip to Africa where he met a storyteller and was told a legend about how all these things work together to turn the world around. It seems to imply that before we can turn things around, we need to know who we are.

I reflected on this while reading Rev Myke Johnson's new book, *Finding Our Way Home*; she suggests that we can trace our connection to sun or spirit in Belafonte's song, by starting with the plants that require sunlight, to the animals who eat the plants, and then to we humans who eat the plants and animals. As she says, quote, "You could say we are the sun. Every fiber of our being is created by sunlight. All the earth sings to light." End quote.

If we are collectively all of us are part of the same body, heart and spirit, then do we also have our own unique identity that's important to understand?

This question makes me think of a different quote on my wall in my kitchen that states:

"Be yourself. There is something that you can do better than any other. Listen to the Inward voice and bravely obey that." Author unknown.

I struggle with my inward voice. Sometimes it speaks more loudly, other times more quietly. I never listened to it during all the years I was unhappily employed.

So I turned to my New Year's horoscope in a newsletter I was browsing.

"LEO (July 23-Aug. 22): "When I look back, I see my former selves, numerous as the trees," writes fellow Leo and poet Chase Twichell. "I'm sure that's an experience you've had yourself. Do you find it comforting? "

Well yes I do.

I have a forest of former selves and they have labels like student, mother social worker, poet, grandmother, singer, and gardener, cook and bottle washer.

So I looked at some poetry by Chase Twichell and found this one called Self-portrait that speaks to self-understanding. Perhaps it will speak to you too.

Self Portrait by Chase Twichell, from Dog Language can be read at:
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/detail/42310>

Hidden Identity by Erica L. Bartlett

When I think about hidden identities, some things that come immediately to mind are religion, sexual orientation, gender, and political affiliation. But my own experience of it relates to something else entirely: my weight.

Admittedly, in my adolescent and young adult years, this was a very obvious part of my identity – it's hard to hide being fat. At the time it made me feel ashamed and stigmatized, but looking back, I recognize that this aspect of my identity was, in some ways, freeing.

Even now, it feels a bit counter-intuitive. But in those years, since my default assumption was that people would reject me based on my weight, it didn't matter if they also rejected me for other reasons. I felt like if someone could get past my weight, they would be less likely to judge me for other aspects of my identity.

This meant I was fairly open about being interested in paganism, liking sci-fi and fantasy, playing Dungeons & Dragons, being concerned about the environment, and spending much of my free time writing – none of which were considered particularly cool for a teen in the late '80's and early '90's. But things changed when I lost weight in my mid-20's. For the first time, I had the ability to pass as "normal" – whatever normal might be. This was a radical concept and gave me hope that I would no longer be immediately and negatively judged on my appearance.

It was exciting but also strange. Should I tell people about my earlier weight issues? Did I want to risk the judgment that I expected to come with that? Should I pretend that it was never part of my life, that I had always looked as I do now?

It was during this time of internal questioning and tension that I had cosmetic surgery on my arms to remove loose skin, clearing away the most obvious signs of my younger self. I did not, however, go so far as to have a tummy tuck or thigh lifts, because much as I liked the idea of smooth skin, I was not willing to chance the greater risk of complications with those surgeries.

In a way, this split approach only made things worse. Most of the time I looked like someone who had never been obese, but wearing a bathing suit, for instance, made it immediately obvious that I did not have a "normal" body. It made me sometimes feel like an imposter in my own skin.

My new weight also made me more cautious of expressing opinions or thoughts that might not be popular. I did not want to risk the tacit acceptance that seemed to come with my thinner appearance. That didn't truly start to change until 2014, when I decided to publish my memoir about my journey with food and weight. Once the book came out in January 2015, my internal dissonance – between wanting to be accepted and being my whole self – started to heal. I had owned up to and claimed my past.

This wasn't easy, but it was very important to me to be comfortable with who I am. And I'm intensely grateful that I didn't go to extremes to erase my past, like one woman I heard of who destroyed all of her younger fat pictures and didn't even tell her fiancé about her weight history until well after they were engaged.

Of course, I still want to be accepted. I'm lucky that being a geek with interests in sci-fi and fantasy has somehow become popular – I'm still not sure how that happened. Similarly, it's become more in vogue

to be environmentally conscious, including having a focus on sustainable food choices, recycling, and composting.

But admitting to other truths can still be scary, especially these days, like saying I'm an atheist, or sharing some of my political views at work.

Even so, I'm now much less inclined to stay silent simply out of a desire for acceptance. It's too important to me to integrate both past and present, without shame or hiding parts of my identity, so I can be proudly and authentically me.

HYMN

O What a Piece of Work Are We

#313

Closing Words:

Invite the congregation to join hands.

The hand in yours belongs to a person
whose heart is sometimes tender,
whose skin is sometimes thin,
whose eyes sometimes fill with tears,
and whose laughter is a beautiful sound.

The hand that you hold belongs to a person who is seeking wholeness,
and trusts that you're doing the same.

As you leave this sanctuary,
may your hearts remain open
may your voices stay strong
and may your hands remained outstretched.