

"WHOSE AM I?"

A Service by Fritz Hudson & Chelsea Maitland
Presented April 17, 2011

Chalice Lighting

Come into this place
Come in, with all your vulnerabilities and strengths, fears and anxieties, loves and hopes.
Here you need not hide, nor pretend,
nor be anything other than who you are and who you are called to be.
Come into this place. Together, we make it a holy place

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Song #15 "The Lone Wild Bird"

Story: **The Pebble**, written by Susan Milord, told by Chelsea Maitland

There once was a pebble on a rocky shore. It was small and round and nearly smooth. Each morning the seabirds sang to the pebble, and each afternoon the ocean breezes gently teased it. The pebble was warmed by the sun and bathed by the rain. On clear nights, it was dazzled by the stars. Sometimes a storm pounded the shore, and the sea threw itself over the pebble. That was exciting, even a little frightening. Then the winds would die down, and the sea would retreat, and the pebble would return to its small and round and nearly smooth life.

But the pebble longed for more.

"If I were a part of a boulder," the pebble said, "I might be part of a stone wall or the foundation of a great building"

"You will never be part of a stone wall or building," the other rocks pointed out. "You are too small for that."

"If I were a grain of sand as part of this beach," the pebble said, "I could be shaped into a sand castle. Or melted into a piece of glass for a fine window."

"Not in a million years," the other rocks said with a laugh. "You are too big for that."

"If I had flecks of mica," the pebble said, "or a blaze of shining white, maybe then I would be part of something special."

"Stop dreaming," the other rocks advised. "You are what you are."

The pebble tried hard to accept what the others said. Still, it felt a longing it could not put a name to. "There must be more to life than this," the pebble thought. "But I don't know what."

The pebble gave up trying to understand. Life was good, after all. The sky was often a brilliant blue, and the air tasted of salt. Scuttling crabs tickled the pebble, and there was nothing so beautiful as the full moon dancing on the water. But the empty feeling would not go away.

One day, a boy walked along the shore with his mom and momma. The boy let the seawater swirl around his ankles. He watched the gulls swoop overhead, and he laughed as the shell he was reaching for started to move. Warmed by the sun and by everything around him, the boy was filled with a sense of wonder. When it was time to leave, he asked his moms if they could wait.

“It won’t be long,” he told them. “I just need to find something.”

The boy wandered down the beach. He noticed a smooth shard of beach glass. “This will remind me of the color of the sea,” the boy said to himself. But it wasn’t quite what he was searching for, and he put it down.

A little farther along, he spotted a white feather. “This will remind me of the noisy gulls,” the boy thought. But the feather wasn’t what he had in mind either.

The boy picked up a shell, “This will remind me of the creatures on the shore,” he said. He turned the shell over and over in his hands, pondering...considering...

And then he saw it. It was small and round and nearly smooth. It fit perfectly in his palm, and the boy knew at once. “This will be my pocket friend,” he said. “It will remind me always of this wonderful day. I have found what I was looking for!”

The pebble felt the warmth of the boy’s hand all around it. It glowed with delight as the boy ran his fingers over the pebble’s smallness and roundness and nearly smoothness. The pebble, too, knew at once.

“I have found what I was looking for. I have found where I belong”

Meditation Music: Alash Ensemble – Tuvan Throat Singers

Sermon – Rev. Fritz Hudson

Tuva? A month ago, I didn't even know Tuva existed. I've visited Japan and I've visited Nepal. Which is closer? Next spring I hope to visit China. That will be closer still. The culture of all three of those areas have been influenced by both Buddhism and Christianity, as I understand Tuva has as well - Tibetan Buddhism, which I experienced in Nepal.

"Whose am I?" That's what I want to talk about today. That I'm doing so with the assistance of the Alash Ensemble is purely accidental or providential – both are beyond my planning or control. But my answer will be strongly influenced by both Buddhism and Christianity, as well, as you will see.

Let me first introduce you to Father Anthony DeMello. Does anyone here know his writings? Father DeMello was born in India, in Mumbai. There he entered the Society of Jesus, the Jesuit priesthood. He also received training as a psychotherapist, and he began writing and speaking on spirituality. He received widespread acclaim, speaking all over the world, until his premature death, at age 56, in 1987.

One of his books is called Taking Flight. And in it appears this story:

A woman is in a coma, near death. She experiences being taken up into heaven and standing before the Judgment Seat.

A voice says to her

“Who are you?”

“I am the wife of the mayor,” she replies.

The voice responds:

“I did not ask whose wife you are but who you are.”

“I’m the mother of four children.”

“I did not ask whose mother you are, but who you are.”

“I’m a school teacher.”

“I did not ask what your profession is but who you are.”

And so it went. No matter what she replied, she did not seem to give a satisfactory answer to the question, “Who are you?”

“I am a Christian.”

“I did not ask what your religion is but who you are.”

“I’m the one who went to church every day and always helped the poor and needy.”

“I did not ask what you did but who you are.”

As it happened, however, the woman did not die. When she returns to consciousness, however, her experience in heaven remains clearly before her. She feels as though she's been denied entry to heaven because she's failed the entrance examination. She's been given another chance, though, to better prepare herself for the test when it comes again. The rest of her life is a quest – to learn who she is, in herself, unrelated to any other person. (p.140)

Who am I? This is a particularly Christian question. Even Jesus asks it. "Who do men say that I am?" as the gospeler Mark records it from his mouth. (8:27) In an exercise often used for spiritual deepening, a group of people are asked to arrange yourselves in pairs, facing each other. One partner in the pair asks: "Who are you?" The other responds with whatever comes first to mind. "I am Fritz." The questioner responds with some ritualized words of acceptance, encouragement: If it's a god-oriented context, the words might be: "May you feel God's mercy." If it's a human-oriented context, the response might be: "Thank you for this trust." And then the questioner asks again. "Who are you?" As responder then you must come up with a different answer. "I am a Hudson". The responder gives the same ritual response: "May you feel God's mercy; Thank you for this trust," and asks again. "Who are you?"

It goes on like this for five minutes. For this experience, let me tell you, that's a really long time. (It goes much faster when you switch to become the questioner.) As the responder though, after the first minute or so, the responses don't come as quickly or easily. I often end up surprised with what comes out of my mouth, or at least comes to mind. And I sometimes stop myself before saying some things, either wondering "Is that really who I am," or "Do I really trust this person, or in even God, to accept or understand this part of me?" I think I may have even engaged you here in the beginning of this dialogue, in a sermon perhaps a year so ago? Does anyone remember that? It would have been as part of relating my experience with it in a workshop at our area UU summer camp, Camp Star Trail.

Time out for a commercial: Camp Star Trail

- a week with 200+ real UUs of all ages from all over Kansas, Nebraska, Iowa, the Dakotas, Minnesota, Western Wisconsin;
- right down the road at Carol Joy Holling Center on the Platte River near Ashland, NE;
- theme presentations, workshops, outdoor games, hikes, swimming, campfires, singing, dancing;
- good food, and a full range of accommodations;
- reasonably priced;
- this year, July 31 through August 5, Sunday evening through Friday morning.

Who's going back: The Enersen family? Lois Hansen? Tim Johnson? Ed Long and Linda Ruchala? Kathy Johnson & Nelson Potter? Other veterans?

Think about it. Talk about it.

Registration is open now at psduua.org/camps

End of commercial.

The "Who Are You" paired exercise, as I experienced it at Camp and elsewhere, involves no judging of the responses. The questioner's task is to communicate acceptance, even forgiveness, to encourage further exploration. Father DeMello's story, however, takes place at the Judgement Seat. And the woman's responses are judged lacking, insufficient to gain entry into heaven. She doesn't yet know who she is apart from her relations to others. But, actually, that doesn't sound like something that would be rejected from a Christian heaven, does it? It really sounds more like something that would prevent one from entering a Buddhist nirvana. I recall Zen master Dogen's words: "To study Buddhism is to understand the self. To understand the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by everything."

Father De Mello was influenced in his thought by the [Thai Buddhist](#) teacher and founder of monasteries [Ajahn Chah](#). In fact it was those tendencies in his thought that led the Roman Catholic "[Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith](#)" to review his writings a decade following his death. The congregation's conclusion was written by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now [Pope Benedict XVI](#). In Father DeMello's writings, it said, "one notices a progressive distancing from the essential contents of the [Christian faith](#)."

Oh I DO love it when Roman Catholics let their internal fights out into the open. It makes them Unitarian Universalists. And in this fight, our Unitarian Universalist tradition would mostly side with Fr. DeMello and the Buddhists. Our gospel has been

- individual freedom of belief, and
- a direct experience of transcendence, unmediated by relations with others, *ala* Ralph Waldo Emerson.

It was Emerson, you remember, who first brought eastern thought into our sources of inspiration. This spirit has often been interpreted to value independence, even self-sufficiency, *ala* Henry David Thoreau.

Now, though, I need to tell you about an interesting evolution among us. As you undoubtedly know, Camp Star Trail is not the only context within which I find spiritual growth opportunities. In the fall of each year, the UU ministers of our Prairie Star District gather in retreat. For the past several years it has been at a center called Shalom Hills Farm in southwestern Minnesota. Every year, over my now 30+ in our ministry, I've been attending such retreats in each of the four different districts where I've served congregations. And in all of that time the programs for our time together have been generated independently out of the spirit of each collegial group – until this past fall. Here's what happened then.

The story begins two years earlier. In December of that year, the national UU association selected group of ministers and seminary professors for a special conference. It took place in Seattle, Washington. Its focus was on "Excellence in Ministry." The Rev. Jon Luopa is the minister of our church in Seattle, University Unitarian Church. And as the conference's host, John was asked to present a few welcoming words. With no further instruction, as Jon tells it, he decided to tell the gathered colleagues a story.

In Seattle, there's an interfaith organization of clergy. At its gatherings, it has the practice of asking one of its senior colleagues to reflect on the course of his or her life's work. At one such gathering, it came the local Roman Catholic priest's turn to provide the reflection. He was a Jesuit, like Fr. De Mello. He spoke of entering the priesthood in the heady days of Vatican II. He recalled how hopeful he and his generation of liberal priests had been that real change was coming to the church he loved so dearly. But as his career evolved, he said, time and time again he saw the church turning back, retrenching in its prior habits. His ministry, he confessed, had been one largely of unrealized dreams.

Now this priest was highly regarded among his fellow clergy in this group. When he finished speaking, after a heavy silence, one of them said, "But through it all Father, you have always been appeared so calm, so serene. How have you done that?" And, after another long pause, John said, the priests relied quite simply. "I know whose I am. I know whose I am." (Rev. Jon Luopa. "Whose Are We Anyway?" University Unitarian Church. Seattle, Washington. April 10, 2011. <http://www.uuchurch.org/sermon/3263>)

That story, unplanned as it was, turned out to take over our conference on Excellence in our UU ministry. It became perceived as a kind of key, or perhaps can-opener, for piercing through what one colleague called our Unitarian Universalism inclination to follow a kind of "Don't ask, Don't tell policy" on spirituality. (reported by Rev. Sarah Lammert. "Whose Are We?" Unitarian Society of Ridgewood, New Jersey. February 1, 2009). To survive comfortably in our diversity, do we tend to hide our deepest longings and belongings, our vulnerably tenuous connections? Do we do so out of fear, fear that if we expose them we will be drummed out of the independent & self-sufficient corps - as open gays have been drummed from our military service?

Out of this conference our national ministers association leadership moved to create a clergy retreat program to help us all to answer the question "Whose Am I?" - to one another, first, in area retreats, like we held in Minnesota last fall. And then the leadership called on us all to speak our answers to our congregations, from our pulpits at least once sometime this spring or next fall. So here I am on commission from my colleagues to tell you "Whose I am."

Whose am I?

I am my parents'. I am Fred and Jean's boy. I know not all of us enter consciousness as belonging to parents, but many, many of us did, I'm sure. When I've asked myself "Who am I", over my life, I've learned to look most carefully at the choices I make. Choices shape the identity I can claim as truly my own. But among the choices I make every week, I'm still making very important ones as Fred and Jean's boy. Fred and Jean Hudson lived more than 65 years in Chicago. That's where I became their boy. Then they lived almost 20 years in Wisconsin. But six and a half years ago, Fred's doctor refused to discharge him from the hospital back to his home without 24-hour nursing care. And being unable to afford that care, Jean, with help from my brother and myself, chose to move with Fred here to Lincoln, to take up assisted living here. Fred, my father, died a year later. Jean, my mother, about a year after that lost her capacity to make decisions for her own self-care. So for the past three years, I've been making those decisions – medical decisions, financial decisions - as best I can. I am very consciously trying to do for her what my father and mother would have wanted me to do. I am being still Fred and Jean's boy.

If you were my responder in the dialogue as we practiced it at last fall's retreat, you would now say to me: "May you feel God's mercy." or "Thank you for this trust." And then you would ask, again "Whose are you."

I am Ginny's, by wife's. I could go on to tell you in many ways how I am accountable to her, even perhaps how she possesses me. I may hesitate with some responses, wondering what is true and with what I can really trust you, without threatening my trust with her. If you're married too, use your imagination – you'll get close to my answers, I suspect. My simply telling you her name is enough self-exposure for you to respond. "May you feel God's mercy," or "Thank you for this trust." Then you'll ask again. "Whose Are You."

I'll name my children, Eric, Sally, and beyond them to other family, but five minutes will be far more than I can spend on just family. I'll probably get to you next, the members of this congregation, and the members of other congregations I have served. I am yours too, and theirs,

as I have given myself to you, however partially, however imperfectly. And you'll say "May you feel God's mercy," or "Thank you for this trust."

Eventually though the road will get tricky. The question is "Whose am I" not "What's am I". We're talking personal relations here. I could say "I'm Unitarian Universalism's." But is that a personal relationship? Well only if I'm thinking of the people who've lived under this flag. I'm unsure that I can give myself to our principles or our sources with the same warmth, the same sense of connection the question "Whose are you?" demands. Can I say "I am Justice's" or "I am Compassion's?" How personal is that relationship?

In other contexts, I have known myself to say "I'm the Earth's." Indeed we'll come close to saying that, or singing it at least, at the close of this service. With Earth Day coming this Friday, and Earth's new life all around us, it's a relationship I think we can make personal. That's why I like to name Earth as Gaia. Gaia, as you know, is the Greek image of Earth as Goddess, as a living being. It's part of my making this relationship personal, intimate, like that to a mother. I'm accountable for my human mother Jean's life, but not to make it immortal. With Gaia, however, that is my accountability – to do whatever I can to help her live forever.

And that leads me to ask, what about the "Who" who gave that Seattle priest such calm, such serenity. What about the God, as embodied in Jesus, or for Unitarians as proclaimed by Jesus? Am I God's.

I don't know. Perhaps.

I don't know if I have quite the longing the story in Chelsea's story did - to picked up and warmly pocketed – to be connected in that way. Alongside her story I have to place the poem an unnamed 12 year old native American once wrote:

*Rivers flow.
The sea sings.
Oceans roar.
Tides rise.
Who am I?*

*A small pebble
On a giant shore:
Who am I
to ask Who am I?*

Isn't it enough to be?

(From Robert Coles. The Political Life of Children.)

In my reading of Christian scriptures, it's not even clear to me that Jesus felt fully personally connected to his God.

In Lent, Christians often meditate on what they call the "seven last words of Christ." They are the seven phrases the four gospels record Jesus saying as he hangs from the cross. But not all seven phrases are attributed to him in all the gospels.

Luke records Jesus speaking with God from the cross, saying
"Father forgive them for they know not what they do."

Then, speaking with the criminals hanging there with him, he says,

"Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

And finally, again to God, he says,

"Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit."

John records different words from the cross. First Jesus speaks to Mary and "the disciple whom he loved." He says,

"Woman, behold, your son;"; "Behold, your mother."

In those words he attempts to create an earthly, very human connection of loyalty, perhaps to supplant the relations he himself is now leaving.

Then Jesus simply says, "I thirst," and later "It is finished"

And Matthew & Mark join in recording still other words from Jesus on the cross. They're in Aramaic, Jesus native tongue:

Eli, Eli, la'ma sabach-tha'ni. They translate

"My God, My God why hast thou forsaken me?"

They ask: In the end is Jesus himself even whether sure he is god's?

In this end, here's what I am sure of:

I'm sure that who we are, in any life-transcending way, is whose we are;
and

I'm also sure that whose we are is a choice, in fact many choices.

Each choice of whose we are can make us more than who we are alone, or one it can make us less than who we are alone.

It depends on into whose keeping we choose to give ourselves.

Whose are you?

Whose are you?

May you feel God's mercy.

Thank you for this trust.

Song #317 "We Are Not Our Own"

Chalice Extinguishing

A man asked the early Christian ascetic Abba Joseph,
"How can I become a whole, authentic human being"

Abba Joseph replied,

"To attain this goal, both here and hereafter,
ask yourself on every occasion, "Who am I?"

And beyond this, replace judgment with humility & compassion"