

# "I Am..."

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a sermon by Dan Lillie  
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I know this sermon is called "I Am..." but perhaps the question, "Who am I?" is more appropriate, because the topic of identity seems to raise more questions than give absolute answers. Welcome to Unitarian Universalism in a nutshell.

And on the marquee outside, "I Am..." looks more compelling than "Who am I?" which just makes it sound like the church is having an identity crisis.

Last week, I talked about identifying our needs so that we can ask for help in meeting them. And part of being able identify our needs means knowing ourselves. The better we know ourselves, the easier it is to know what we need.

So this is how we arrive at our question, for each of us to consider: Who am I?

## **Questions for Me**

Since I brought it up, I'll have a go at it: Who am I?

I am... Dan.

I am... a Unitarian Universalist.

I am... the ministerial resident here at First Unitarian.

But if I changed my name, would I still be me?

If I became a Baptist, would I still be me?

And if I were to leave this church and become a senior minister somewhere else, would I still be me?

## Questions for You

Let's turn it back on you, and ask: Who are you?

Show of hands:

How many of you know your Myers-Briggs Type?

How many of you know your Enneagram Type?

How many of you know which Hogwarts House you would be sorted into?

How many of you know your religious identity?

How many of you know your political identity?

Now who would you be if any of these things changed?

What if you suddenly became an extravert after identifying as an introvert your whole life?

What if you changed political parties?

Are you still the same person? Which of these identifiers is so essential that without it, you would not be you, but someone else?

The answer is, none.

There is something that is fundamentally, essentially, YOU, even when all identifiers are stripped away. And yet, it is by these identifiers that we know one another- and it is by these identifiers that we *think* we know ourselves. But we can change these. Not easily, and some of them may be so ingrained as to *seem* unchangeable, but

ultimately all the things that we use to *identify* who we are is not the *essence* of who we are. They are not our soul.

So how do we know ourselves? How do we recognize our souls? By listening.

In his book, *Let Your Life Speak*, Parker Palmer says: "Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen to what it intends to do with you. Before you tell your life what truths and values you have decided to live up to, let your life tell you what truths you embody, what values you represent."

So, if we heed Parker Palmer's advice, then we should understand that identity comes from within. It is not bestowed upon us from outside. It is not determined by how others see or label us. It is not earned by performing a certain way. We can earn titles, we can change characteristics, and we can wear descriptors. But our identities, who we *are*, is beyond the ability of language to fully describe.

### **Exodus 3:13-15**

We see an example of this in the Hebrew Bible. In Exodus chapter 3, God takes the form of a burning bush to speak to Moses. Now, if a bush, burning or not, started speaking to me, I'd be a bit confused. I'm not sure I'd immediately just know it was God. So I think it's pretty reasonable that Moses inquired about God's identity. And here is where we get God's answer about the insufficiency of language. Exodus chapter 3 verses 13-15 reads:

<sup>13</sup> But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is [God's] name?' what shall I say to them?" <sup>14</sup> God said to Moses, "**I am who I am.**" [God] said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I am has sent me to you.'" <sup>15</sup> God also said to

Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, '[YHWH], the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you':

**This is my name forever,  
and this my title for all generations."**

So, in this story, God explains identity as that which we are- "I am who I am." - simply all that we are and nothing that we are not. Our names are insufficient to fully identify us in our entirety as human beings.

But when pressed, God does offer some other identifiers: Yahweh, which means "Who brings into existence whatever exists". So from this, I learn that my identity is expressed through what I do and how I live. And then, as another identifier, God goes on to describe God's self as "the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." This tells me that Who I am is shaped by who I am in relationship with.

## **We Are the Experts**

Now, while this is helpful in understanding some aspects of identity, ultimately words can only be said *about* us- whereas, the living of our lives, our very existing, is the only true and full expression of our identities. And we, who know ourselves inside and out, are the foremost experts on ourselves.

No one has spent more time with us than us. In fact, we have never spent a moment apart from ourselves. We are the only ones who have done everything that we have done.

And we are the only ones who know every thought that goes through our heads. Some of us may have stronger verbal filters than others – I'm sure we all know someone

who, it seems like they just always says the first thing that pops into their head – but I'd be willing to bet that even these folks have had thoughts that went unspoken. And we are each the only person who sees and knows all of this about us, who knows every unspoken thought, every feeling, and every sensation we've ever experienced.

Because of our own unique perspectives about ourselves, we are certainly the most qualified to speak about our own identities; and it would serve us well to learn how to listen to our selves. This is what Parker Palmer means when he says to "listen to your life speak."

So: *What do you know to be true about yourself?*

### ***What do you know to be true about yourself?***

Now, this is a big question, worthy of a lot of time and reflection. However, it comes with a caveat: Although we know more than anyone else about ourselves, we will never know *all there is to know* about ourselves. We are veritable endless wells of discovery. So while we can become more secure in our knowledge of ourselves as we grow, we will never stop learning and discovering, and there will always be parts of us that remain a mystery, even to ourselves.

I think we were designed and created with such depth for a reason. We're not supposed to ever know everything about ourselves; and this is because it relieves us of the need to *try* to know everything about ourselves.

If we can accept the immensity of the task, we can shift from seeing it as "a challenge to be conquered", to seeing it as "an opportunity to be pursued." If there is no "end" to get to, then we can just continue on as far along as we want to go.

Now, back to why we were designed and created this way: Accepting that there will always be undiscovered aspects of our identities means that we don't have to be like

Narcissus, forever gazing at our own reflection, infinitely fascinated with ourselves. If we could know everything about ourselves, we could also become consumed with achieving a complete and total knowing of ourselves.

But if we accept the open-ended infinitude of our identities, then we can look away from our reflection in the pond and look at the pond itself. We can look through the surface of the water to see the fish swimming below. We can contemplate the world and our place in it. In short, we can become spiritual beings, because we can acknowledge that something greater than ourselves exists, and that we have a connection to it.

## **A Hard Lesson**

This work of self-discovery and identity-forming is hard. It requires intentionality. Upon reflection, one thing I've learned is that often, what bothers us about other people is something that we don't like about ourselves.

This came as an ah-ha! moment a while back when an acquaintance of mine picked me up from the airport. It was very kind of him to give me a ride, and as we rode along, he made small talk by asking me how my trip was. And many times as I was giving my answer, he would try to finish my sentences. Sometimes, he would guess right, and say what I was thinking, and sometimes he would guess wrong; but whether he was right or wrong didn't matter: 100 percent of the time, it was incredibly annoying.

And then it hit me. I knew exactly why he was doing it: He was doing it to show he was engaged in my story. He was doing it to be sympathetic and convey that he could relate to me. He was doing it to show me that we were "on the same page."

And I knew all of this, because those were the reasons that I finished other people's sentences. Yep, this was a habit of mine.

And I had no idea how annoying it was until I saw it in somebody else.

Folks, this is why we need each other. This is why we need community. We are mirrors unto each other. And may we reflect the best and worst in us, that we may appreciate the best and work on the worst.

### **Pride in Our Identities**

Again, this difficult and intentional work. And it should be recognized and appreciated.

As we discover more about ourselves, we should be take pride in who we are. If our identities come as a result of deep discernment and reflection, then ultimately, how we present ourselves to the world is a result of that discernment- that internal wrestling. And so, when we make a discovery about ourselves, and put that out to the world as a statement of "this is who I am" we should be able to do so without shame.

Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Perhaps some people are not secure in their own identities because they haven't done the intentional reflection work, and perhaps they are seeing something in others that they are afraid to admit about themselves; but sometimes, people try to shame others for their identities. And this goes from being just "not a nice thing to do" to a justice issue when dynamics of power and privilege come into play.

When someone has power, especially from unearned privileges like being straight, white, male, cisgender, and able-bodied, and uses shame to marginalize and oppress people who are "different", and do not have those same privileges, then this becomes especially troublesome.

Not only should shame not be imposed upon anyone for their authentically-held identities, there should certainly not be laws, regulations, or even casual social contracts that say “this is just how things work around here” that prevents anyone from living fully and proudly as their authentic selves.

There is great power in our right and ability to name ourselves- in short, to determine our own identities. And there are some who would try to deny that power. I think about this in the labeling of undocumented immigrants as “illegal aliens” or calling their U.S. citizen children “anchor babies.” I see it in the refusal by some to use pronouns that match the gender identity of trans and genderfluid folks. I hear it in the response, “All Lives Matter” when Black Lives attempt to point out injustice and declare their inherent worth and dignity.

This is wrong. We all have the right to name ourselves, to claim and shape and own our identities. And we all share the responsibility to ensure that that right does not get trampled on for anyone; that it exists for each and every one of us.

Because as Unitarian Universalists, we know that there is nothing anyone has to do to earn their worth and dignity; it is inherent. And likewise, there is nothing, no amount of shame, marginalization, or oppression that can take it away.

And so it is our job to affirm again and again that all souls are sacred and worthy; until we live in a world where every person, when facing the question, “Who am I?” can answer themselves honestly:

“I am... beloved.”

May we make it so.