

**“Who Are We? – A Theology of Connectedness”**

**A sermon by Jim Coakley**

**Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**

**Appleton, Wisconsin**

[www.fvuuf.org](http://www.fvuuf.org)

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**Video:** [Virtual Choir 2.0 “Sleep” by Eric Whitacer](#)

Text by Charles Anthony Silvestri

*The evening hangs beneath the moon  
A silver thread on darkened dune  
With closing eyes and resting head  
I know that sleep is coming soon  
Upon my pillow, safe in bed,  
A thousand pictures fill my head,  
I cannot sleep, my minds aflight,  
And yet my limbs seem made of lead  
If there are noises in the night,~  
A frightening shadow, flickering light...  
Then I surrender unto sleep,  
Where clouds of dream give second sight.  
What dreams may come, both dark and deep  
Of flying wings and soaring leap  
As I surrender unto sleep  
As I surrender unto sleep.*

**Sermon**

I'd like to begin today with an expression of deep gratitude. Last March the Fellowship Governing Board unanimously endorsed my sponsorship to the ministry of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. It wasn't publicized at all, because in my case it's little more than a required formality. I have felt supported by this congregation since the moment my family walked through the door almost 20 years ago and I have felt sponsored for ministry since I became a lay minister here over 10 years ago. In many ways, you have been my most important teachers on this long journey and I am so grateful for your willingness to do that.

In recent years, my journey has taken me away from being as involved here as I once was and many of you have found this community during that time. Once upon a time, I used to walk into our worship space and knew the name of everyone present. Now it's so exciting to see so many new faces, but I realize I probably know only a third of you well.

So to get connected quickly, I'd like to play one of those ice breaker games. This one is called "Who Are You?" Normally two people sit across from each other and one starts by asking the question "Who are you?" repeatedly for 2-3 minutes. Each time the question is asked the other needs to respond with the first thing that comes to mind. They can't sit and think about it or edit it. Then they switch roles and do it again.

Have any of you played this game? Did you find the responses changing as the time progressed? The first answers are the usual superficial stuff like name, address, and physical characteristics. Then it leads into relationships, occupations, and hobbies, that sort of thing. Ultimately, when the person has exhausted the "safe" stuff usually prepared for dinner parties, they have to start revealing deeper things about themselves. What they truly feel about themselves, their relationships or sometimes even negative thoughts about the game! It's a great way to quickly get to a deeper place and build relationships.

I'd like to begin today with this ice breaker. Since I think it might feel a little awkward for one of you to keep shouting up at me "Who Are You", I'll ask Cyndi to keep asking me the question and I'll respond. But I'm warning you, your turn will come. I'm expecting the more extroverted of you to shout out answers when I ask who you are as a congregation.

So let's begin.

(Cyndi asks, Jim responds)

1 - Who are you?

My name is Jim Coakley, a 53 year old bisexual male of northern European descent living in Appleton, Wisconsin who has been married 27 years to my best friend, Margit.

2 – Who are you?

I'm starting my 6<sup>th</sup> year as a part-time seminarian at Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago and I'm in the middle of my two year internship at the First Universalist Unitarian Church of Wausau. At seminary I have been active in student government including the student representative on the board of trustees.

3 – Who are you?

I am the father to two children. A 22 year old daughter named Christiana, who lives with us and whom we continue to support as she figures out her next stage in life. She takes classes at the local technical college and tries to find a job she can handle. My son is a 20 years old. He attends UW Madison and is considering going into neuro-biology someday. Both grew up in this Fellowship.

4 – Who are you?

When not in school, I work full time at Kimberly Clark as a mid-level manager. I love to sing and am a member of newVoices, a semi-professional community choir - which basically means we have to try out to get in. Over the years I've had small parts in a few summer theater musicals. I love to cook and eat.

5 – Who are you?

I grew up in northern Illinois, but left to go out of state for college to St. Olaf in Northfield, MN. I graduated with a BA in Economics and German and later went on to get my MBA in Marketing from the University of MN.

6 – Who are you?

I was raised in a conservative branch of the Lutheran church, but became Congregationalist during college and then Unitarian Universalist 19 years ago when my family moved to Appleton. Through the years, we have been very active members of this Fellowship. Those experiences, especially as a lay minister, led me to my calling to the ministry. Simply put, I feel there is a need I can fill. I feel called to provide professional ministry to the emerging lay led congregations in NE Wisconsin.

7 – Who are you?

I am an avid bicyclist – even to the point of commuting the 20 mile round trip to my office throughout the winter – with studded snow tires and a lot of layers of clothes! I also love to run in the woods and play water polo over lunch with co-workers. I have to do all this exercise to counter my love of eating!

8 – Who are you?

I am very interested in social action issues focused on the environment, equality for lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgendered people, and disadvantaged youth. I tend to express my activism by modeling appropriate behavior. For example, we have never owned a dryer, we have three composters and we rarely use our garbage can, but the recycling containers are overflowing. We were the first and probably still the only house in Appleton to have photovoltaic cells attached to a metal roof. I am a member of the Pride network at my company and a leader for diversity and inclusion recruiting with this employee resource group. At the age of 45 I took life guard training so I could be a life guard and camp counselor for an autistic boy from our congregation.

9 – Who are you?

The only television I ever watch involves sport - Packer games, the Tour de France, soccer games, or the Olympics. If you talk about tv shows or pop culture with me, please excuse the blank stare. I'm not having a stroke; I just am not familiar with the content. But I love to experience pop culture vicariously through others, so please tell me about it!

10 – Who are you?

I am an extrovert who loves to meet people. I'm pretty straight forward. I don't have hidden agendas. I feel I show everyone the authentic me which unfortunately includes a bad memory for names. So please, if I call you the wrong name, be nice and correct me.

Congregation's turn:

Now it's your turn. I'm going to call out "who are you" and I want you to respond as if you speak for the Fellowship. Cyndi will repeat the answers into the microphone so we can make sure everyone can hear.

Ask 10 times..."Who are you?"

1. Welcoming everyone - Inclusive
2. Eclectic
3. Growing in mind and spirit
4. Vibrant
5. Leading in social justice
6. Active in the community
7. Growing in numbers and influence
8. An oasis of liberal religion in NE Wisconsin
9. Well established and respected – almost a 60 year history
10. Unique

Why does all this matter? Because finding out who we are is the beginning of connection and I believe connection matters very much.

Margaret Wheatley, an expert on organizational behavior, puts it this way. "When we seek for connection, we restore the world to wholeness. Our seemingly separate lives become meaningful as we discover how truly necessary we are to each other." (Quotation #38957 from Laura Moncur's Motivational Quotations)

And Oprah Winfrey once said, "What we're all striving for is authenticity, a spirit-to-spirit connection." (Quotation #31123 from Laura Moncur's Motivational Quotations)

It's all about connections. Connectedness is what we Unitarian Universalists seek as a community of faith. Within connectedness lies the deeper understanding of inherent worth and dignity of each of us. Or some would say that connections are where we discover and celebrate the spark of the divine or the sacred in each of us. Community is so central to our worship, and I'm purposely using the word worship. Here we don't worship a supreme being – we don't even worship ourselves as some from outside our faith would argue. We worship the connectedness we have with each other and the holiness of the journeys we are on, both as individuals and as a congregation. This is what makes us a people of faith gathered together here rather than a lecture series, a book club, or just a bunch of friends who like to hang out together. By introducing ourselves to each other, we have taken the first step towards a deeper community.

I am drawn to ministry and this community because of my theology of connectedness. Now that sounds pretty academic, so let me explain. I'll start with what I mean by theology. Historically, theology has meant the study of God or a supreme being, but a more modern interpretation is the study of what it means to be religious. I like the definition of religion provided by one of my theology professors. He said "Religion is that which helps us find meaning in life and orientation with our universe". So, a theology of connectedness is the study of how I find religious meaning through connectedness to others or in community. This is also not a static theology, meaning a set of creeds or dogmas one must believe, but a dynamic theology, ever evolving as the connectedness evolves. Theology is a verb.

To illustrate levels of connectedness and the relationship to this theology, I'd like to use the video of the virtual choir we just watched. A former choir director here once told me that she believed singing was a portal into one's soul. She felt singing was such an intimate act, that the listener could learn much about the person just by watching and hearing the singer. I agree. Each of the 2000 singers in the video voluntarily laid open their soul for this endeavor. They didn't do it in the company of other choir members in a rehearsal space, but rather in front of their own camera with headphones on, apparently all alone. The visual images we saw reminded me of the title of our reading "We Arrive Out of Many Singular Rooms." Eric Whitacer and his technicians took each individual's contributions and almost magically created the virtual choir you just experienced. Through technology they created the connection.

Why should we consider it a religious experience? How could we label it theologically? I would argue the act of so many people coming together and applying such creativity is certainly something to celebrate, even to the point of being awestruck. To me this is classic Religious Humanism, which has been the dominant theological perspective of our Unitarian roots throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The religious meaning comes from the connectedness of human beings from across the globe and many cultures creating a combined work of art which is unique, powerful, and beautiful. Using my professor's definition of religion – the virtual choir brings not only inspiration and meaning to our lives, but also helps us orient ourselves with our universe, in this case the other peoples on the globe.

Personally, I take this religious experience further. In the tradition of Emerson and our transcendentalist Unitarian ancestors, I am transcended spiritually by this endeavor. Somehow the beauty of the music and the visual imagery lifts my spirit and I transcend this place and this time. This is experiential theology, finding religious meaning in one's experiences. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Emerson found this in nature, but this seems to be a 21<sup>st</sup> century adaptation.

Although my theology of connectedness is closely related to both Religious Humanism and Transcendentalism, in my mind it goes further. One of the criticisms of both theologies is that they overstress the importance of the individual. If you think about it, this whole virtual choir is just the sum of individuals. Until the entire piece was put together, none of them ever heard how they sounded as a whole. None of them were ever influenced by the others to create a different sound. Those of you who have sung in choirs know that you blend your voice to complement those around you. A good choir is not made of individual soloists. In fact, the premier choir at my alma mater holds hands during performances to physically stress blending vocally. Think of what this choir might have sounded like if

they had heard each other; if they had known each other. This is what I mean by a theology of connectedness. It's not just about finding transcendent religious meaning in human endeavors. It's finding religious meaning in the deeper relationships with others and transcending the every day.

Many who have never experienced Unitarian Universalism first hand really struggle with comprehending how so many people with so many individual theologies can come together in a place like this. That's probably because their concept of connectedness is based on like-mindedness. It is natural for humans to seek out those like themselves because it makes us more comfortable, it's easier to understand where the other is coming from, and we mutually reinforce our point of view. We do the same thing here. By all the standard characteristics - ethnicity, cultural background, social class, etc. – we are more similar than different. But how we each find the sacred in our lives may be quite varied. Our mutual point of view is that the journey is what is sacred, not the destination. Continuing with the music analogy, I may be singing a humanist tune, while someone next to me is chanting a pagan ritual, and I may be in front of someone singing "What A Friend We Have in Jesus." This works as long as I can find my place here and those around me don't assume my journey is there journey and vice versa.

I'll give you two recent personal examples. On Monday morning, I became aware of two deaths that moved me deeply. First I heard that long-time National Public Radio reporter and Wiccan priestess Margo Adler died. Two summers ago I took a course on contemporary paganism from Margot and I found her to be one of the most spiritual, articulate, and intelligent people I've ever known. In class her story telling drew me in and I found transcendence in the chanting we did for hours. I don't happen to share the supernatural beliefs that many in the Wiccan community hold dear, but I feel very connected because the beauty and powerful metaphor of earth based theology and ritual does speak to me. Upon hearing of her death I posted a photo of Margot and me on Facebook in remembrance. I noticed that the first thirty "likes" came from people with which I had only one mutual friend – it was Margot and this was the worldwide pagan community. At that moment, I felt connected in our grief for the passing of Margot across the globe, across theology, gender, social class and age. Our grief for Margot was a sacred connection.

On the same day within the same hour I learned that the mother of a good friend died. This friend is a fundamentalist Christian who believes that God has a plan for every single one of us on this planet and our sole purpose is to strive to fulfill the expectations of a specifically defined Christian life. She and I have had multiple long talks about our faith and she knows I'm an atheist. We have agreed that neither of us could possibly convince the other to convert and we accept that. Yet years ago when I was in need of a listening ear she was there and likewise I passed on my condolences to her this week. We speak different religious languages. She prays to God on my behalf that he will heal my sorrow. I tell her I hold her and her family close in my heart and wish her peace. In my mind both of us are saying the same thing, "I care about you and I want you to know that," yet we each do it in our own way. This is a theology of connectedness. The connection between us is the ultimate, not the language we use or the religious principles we uphold.

As I said when I started, I am so grateful for the connectedness we share. Although we may speak many religious languages and hold a wide variety of beliefs here at the Fellowship, we need to always

remember that it's our journeys that matter and it is our connectedness across these journeys that is sacred. Let us always honor the spirit within each of us that makes this community so strong and vital. Namaste!

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