

Who Are You?

A Sermon offered by Rev. Kathleen Rolenz
Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
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fvuuf.org

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Authors note: Because of time, I had to edit out many paragraphs from this sermon while I was speaking. So, if you heard the sermon live, you will not find that this sermon corresponds word for word with the oral presentation. This is the sermon that I wrote, but not necessarily the same one that was delivered. – Rev. Kathleen Rolenz

It's really good to be back with you, after having some time away these past two weeks. For those of you who don't know, I was in Costa Rica on a long ago planned family vacation. We left after the service on January 15th and got back on the 30th. I'm so grateful for the incredible staff at the Fellowship and my colleague, the Reverend Leah Hart-Landsberg, who kept things humming along in my absence.

One of the things you may not know about is why I'm walking around with a limp and my ankle in a boot. The short story is that on the very first full day in Costa Rica my family and I arranged to go whitewater rafting. I got bounced out of the raft twice, and in the process of trying to save myself from being thrown out of the raft, I sprained my ankle - it turns out, badly -- but not so bad that I couldn't walk on it. However, I went from being what I thought was a strong participant in an active vacation to a moderately disabled one, all within the span of an hour. So my identity changed from walking confidently to painfully. Our young guides referred to me as Madre in deference to my age and disability. I realized that they were not seeing me as I see myself; as a person temporarily disabled; some Ticos were young enough to call me their abuela or grandmother.

My sudden change in status started me looking ahead to this month's worship theme: Tell me a story about a time when you knew who you really were? It's a theme that ties well into the Soul Matters theme being used by our Journey Groups and many other Unitarian Universalist congregations this month, the theme of "Identity." The question of who we really are is not simply one for anthropologists, psychiatrists or sociologists; the

questions asked by these professions intersect with the larger questions that are known to the fields of philosophy and theology as *ontological* questions – the study of the nature of being itself; in other words, what makes us who we are? What are the markers and identifiers that we use to describe ourselves? Can any description fully encapsulate the totality of our being? Walt Whitman famously declared in his poem *Song of Myself*: "I contain multitudes," and never has that statement been truer than in the 21st century. The question of identity - of how we choose to identify ourselves both to ourselves and others is an issue that is writ large on both the public sphere and in our own, private wonderings as we ask ourselves the deeply religious and spiritual question: Who am I? What defines me? What limits me? And what frees me?

Those of you who serve in academia may remember a trend; perhaps it's still an expected practice, that all presenters needed first to establish their "social location." That means that before attempting to present your opinion, you must first name your implicit biases or perspective.

So, you would say "my name is Kathleen Rolenz, I am a cis-gender (meaning that I identify with the gender assigned to me at birth) euro-American, middle-class, heterosexual, mostly able-bodied, female, Unitarian Universalist, humanist inspired Christian, feminist, married with no biological children by choice, clergy person who loves black coffee, the blues and Bach." There, now you know everything about me, right? You can start making decisions and judgments about me based on your own relationship to those categories. Think about it – if you had to dig deeper into each one of those statements, we'd never get past any one of them.

We want to put people in simple categories because it's expedient; because we lack the time, or the energy or the will to look beyond the categories and to see more deeply into each other's essential humanness. This morning I'm going to look at the issue of identity using the lenses of politics, religion and personhood.

There's a lot we don't know about each other. That's become abundantly clear with the election last November and the state of the country in the last two weeks. Much ink has already been spilled about how the biggest wall that exists right now is the invisible one between liberals and conservatives; between two seemingly conflicting value systems. The reading, taken from a November article in the *Sunday New York Times Review*, is a sharp and uncomfortable critique of an opinion that I've held and always believed to be important, and true – that diversity is not only good, but it is a kind of end in itself...that this grand American experiment in diversity is in and of itself enough of a reason to hold a country together.

Just as we like to say that Unitarian Universalism is a collection of individuals held together by common values. Mark Lilla, the author of the article says “the standard liberal answer for nearly a generation now has been that we should become aware of and celebrate our differences, which is a splendid moral pedagogy – but disastrous as a foundation for democratic politics.” He calls it “identity liberalism.” I want to make it clear that I don't necessarily agree with all of Lilla's article but I offer it to today because of the central question he asks: can we name and claim our identity and at the same time hold a vision of the common good – whether that common good is represented by the country, by a faith tradition, or simply by our own daily encounters with other human beings?

I also want to acknowledge that for those whose identity is subject to scrutiny on a daily basis; particularly people of color, Lilla's idea that one's identity is not as important as the common good is offensive. I don't mean to minimize his critique, or the ways in which such an article can affect those of us in the struggle for liberation for all. At the same time, I think he raises some provocative questions about what makes us unique and what can we hold in common.

Since identity is not a permanent thing, but composed of a combination of changing characteristics from both the past and the present, what happens to our sense of the common good when we either adopt an identity that we weren't given at birth, or change the markers that identify us as we grow and mature?

Earlier in the service we focused on the fact that my ankle boot is not the only new piece of clothing I am wearing that sets me apart, marking me as someone with a hopefully temporary disability. In support of World Hijab Day, I also decided to wear a hijab to the service today. Of course, unlike this boot, this is something I can take off and put back on at any time without pain or inconvenience. Wearing this hijab does not mean I want to pretend to be a Muslim woman. To be a Muslim requires something more than just the outside trappings.

For me, it's a choice I'm making as a simple act of solidarity. Even if you are a woman who identifies as Muslim, however, it's not a requirement of the faith to wear a hijab. To wear the hijab is a choice that some women make. For many it is a daily reminder of the desire to be in a constant relationship with one's faith; and as a side-effect, it has provoked the prejudices of many Westerners towards the Arabic-speaking world. There is an inevitable risk and frustration for anyone who chooses to publicly and symbolically represent him or herself in a way that runs contrary to the majority culture. Assumptions and projections will quickly be put upon that individual.

We know there is enormous diversity of beliefs in Islam just like in every faith tradition. We like to say that about Unitarian Universalism too; and of course it's true, but we're not the only faith tradition that enjoys and supports a pluralism of opinions, beliefs and spiritual practices within their communities.

So when a Muslim woman wears a hijab, this does not define all of who she is. It shows that she is a woman of a particular faith, and she also may be a business woman, a physician, a wife, an athlete, a mother, an aunt, a veterinarian. Wearing the hijab today, on a Sunday when we reflect on the larger issues of what identities we choose to put on and take off, raised for me a question about what I

might be doing to identify myself with my faith or values.

What identifies me, as a Unitarian Universalist? What are the markers of our chosen faith? Sure, we can choose to wear buttons, and wrist bands and chalice necklaces, and Standing on the Side of Love shirts (which incidentally never mention Unitarian Universalism) but I'm more interested in whether there is anything else that we do in the public sphere on a daily basis that says "I am a Unitarian Universalist and I stand for these values." Our identity as Unitarian Universalists can remain in hiding, if we choose, which makes our ability to speak out about the values we cherish all the more important.

I would suggest that these times will demand even more intensively our ability to answer the question "who are you?" as a person of faith.

Who are you? is a question that has been found in all religious and spiritual traditions throughout millennia. Abraham and Moses and Job ask God "Who are you?" Christians continually mine the New Testament to see "who was Jesus and what made him so special?" For Muslims, the question of personal identity is intimately connected with their relation to Allah and of submitting to the will of Allah as revealed in the noble Quran. Buddhism asks its Zen students a koan – which is a kind of teaching riddle – "show me your original face, the one you were given before you were born" The purpose of this koan is to engage the Buddhist student with the deepest possible meditation on the very nature of the self. In other words, like the peeling away of the proverbial onion skin, the koan asks: who are you at your very core?

That core is a mystery to most of us, and it requires a level of knowing that most of us don't possess. We are in fact, hidden from one another, seeing only glimpses and shadows of our true self. But many of us go through identity transitions throughout our life, in an attempt to align our own intuitive knowing of who we are with the way the rest of the world perceives us. Recently we have come to have a larger understanding for and public recognition and accommodation for those whose gender identities are undergoing a transformation. Beyond discussing the politics of gender identity in society, questioning or exploring a new gender

identity is an attempt to connect with and reveal, our truest self – the self we had before we were even born. How do we all do this within ourselves? And how do we do this with others? In order to be able to greet another human being as their true self, we have to become comfortable with the fact that everyone's identities go through changes over time. Let me give you an example of what I mean.

About ten years ago, the church I served in Cleveland hired an intern or student minister, who was genderqueer. Until ghe came into our community, I had no idea what gender queer was. For those of you who may not know what that is, it's a person who doesn't subscribe to conventional gender distinctions; who doesn't wish to be identified with either gender. So, our intern asked us to use gender neutral pronouns, like ghe and gher instead of him or her. I have to confess that at the beginning of gher's internship, I was annoyed with having to check my pronouns all the time. "Why can't you just make up your mind?" I thought at the time. But as I learned more about gender identity I realized the ghe was being completely authentic and that it was I who had to change my mindset; and expand my comfort zone to meet our intern where ghe was and not where I thought ghe should be. Thankfully, since then, there has been much more media attention to not only those who are transgender but also to people who identify as gender queer, or intersex, or simply questioning.

We are coming to understand that gender identity is a critical part but a singular part of a person's identity. All by itself, gender identity cannot contain the multitudes of the self that live within us.

Our identities change over time, and none of them are wrong. I know for my friends and colleagues who have undergone a transition from one gender to another, it is their families who often have the hardest time with this change of identity. Because our identity is intimately connected with who we have been as well as who we are becoming, sometimes it's hard for those who have known us a long time, to adapt. I experienced this first hand with my own family.

I was born Kathleen Celeste Rolenz, but from childhood all the way through college beyond, my family knew me as Kathy. When I became

ordained as minister, Kathy didn't fit me anymore. I didn't feel like a Kathy; so I reclaimed my birth name of Kathleen. With occasional exceptions, my birth family cannot get used to calling me Kathleen. They don't do it out of malice, but it's just that their understanding of me is intertwined with the Kathy that they knew and loved a long time ago now. Although I'd love for them to embrace my chosen name, I understand it's difficult to let go of one identity to allow a new one to emerge.

To answer the question "who are you" can be a long and complex journey. Is it enough to simply say "I am a human being." June Jordan's poem asks: "why can't I go out without changing my clothes, my shoes, my body posture, my gender identity, my age, my status as a woman, alone in the evening...the point being that I can't do what I want with my own body because I am the wrong sex, the wrong age, the wrong skin...and who in the hell set things up like this?" Ah – here's the rub and the answer to Jordan's question – we human beings did. We somehow came to believe that to some ways of asserting one's identity – whether wearing a hijab or choosing the bathroom that reflects your understanding of your own identity; or deciding to change your gender – was not acceptable in this culture. Some believe that the cost of living together in community is cultural uniformity - a kind of Pleasantville existence, where all the women are strong, all the men and good looking and all the children are above average.

This is where the personal and the political intersect; and this is the point at which I must come back to the "end of Identity Liberalism" article we started with today. Mark Lilla rightfully suggests that liberal fixation on expressing their individual identity can be at the cost of community building. I've seen it happen in our liberal religious churches. It's what my colleague Fred Muir calls "the ichurch" (like the iphone, only the ichurch) which is all about me, my individual freedom, the full expression of my personality which can include behaviors that make it difficult for others to be in relationship with me. The worst case scenario of free wills run riot is when our identities become so important to us that we can't give equal time to being in relationship with others and with, as Lilla's suggests, the body politic. The problem is not that we declare ourselves gender queer or feminist or

Muslim or pagan - these and all the other identities we claim are not destructive. What Lilla is arguing is that we must balance our unique identities with other claims that call us to risk building community together. My colleague Rev. Ken Hurto wrote: "One of the major shifts in human understanding has been a move away from seeing ourselves as solitary, independent agents in charge of our destiny toward a more complex awareness that who we are is a direct function of who we are with. We are relational creatures. Everything about us is shaped by our connections (or disconnections) with those around us. When your "who are you" and my "who am I" is not constrained by politics or by societal "should" then we can embrace a democracy that is worthy of all of our uniqueness."

One of the most important purposes of religious community is to create a space where you can be known, fully and intimately. Through the process of spiritual exploration and practice and worship, you slowly drop the false self and begin to recognize the face you had before you were born. Why does it take so long? It's strange; we're born with a personality which becomes an ego, which can become a shell, polished to perfection to show to the world.

And then we realize that shell has become a prison and it suffocates us, and so we begin the slow and arduous process of dismantling all the falsehoods we've adopted as truth – that we're too fat, or not smart enough, that transitioning to another gender is wrong, or being an atheist will get you to the hell you don't believe in, or that loving God makes you weak.

Here's your challenge for the week ahead. Each person you encounter, check your assumptions and judgments before you speak. Notice the dozens of judgments and assumptions you've already made before you even speak. Notice how you've classified them male/female; attractive/unattractive; shy or gregarious. Each time one of these arises, let it go, and imagine a completely blank slate. Let your interaction be guided by what happens between the two of you in that moment. Do it again and again and again, and you'll be astonished with the collection of judgments and assumptions that you've been able to accumulate. On the rare occasions when I've been able to do this, something

astonishing happens; you see into another's personhood; their soul; you grasp their pain, their ignorance, their wisdom their beauty. You see a naked human before you – just like you. Wow. It's a beautiful thing. Only then can you begin to answer the question "who are you" for yourself, only then can you watch your carefully constructed identity shift to allow for something new to emerge – right there, in the moment. I think that thing is called – love.

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