

“A Unitarian Universalist’s Inquiry Into the Nature of Personhood”

or, “What Makes You, You ?”

or, “Knock, Knock.....Who’s There?”

I’ve gotten some interesting reactions to the title of my presentation. It does kind of go on and on, doesn’t it? I just want you to know that there are very good, logical reasons for the title I chose, and with any luck, I’ll come up with some of those great reasons at some point real soon....

When I first thought about speaking about Personhood, for some reason, the thought of “melodrama” popped into my mind. I’ve learned to cautiously trust those odd impulses, at least long enough to explore a bit. Of course, most melodramas have more than one title, such as “Polly Purebred VS Garment Sweatshop Work Hours, or, A Stitch in Time”....

So, the triple title for my talk evolved. I can picture it on a large card, up on the stage at the Atlas Theatre in Cheyenne, where I watched many a melodrama in my youth. I steadfastly deny having thoughts that real life resembles melodrama in any way.

“A Unitarian Universalist’s Inquiry Into the Nature of Personhood” comes right out of my time as a Philosophy major at U.W. Richard Howey, the head of the department in the late 60’s, would have loved this title. Formal philosophical inquiry is rigorous, objective, logical, and defensible. It’s a lot like math at times. Can be pretty consuming. I enjoyed those classes, and also liked the fact that the headaches and voices went away soon after I was no longer a practicing philosophy major.

Thoughts on Existentialism and Phenomenology went into this process. Seriously, a good topic deserves a balanced treatment, and formal philosophy can often provide a good part of that balance.

“What Makes You, You?” is the same question, with less pomp and circumstance, and a bit of whimsy and subjectivity, that encourages us to apply our UU principles to the issue of personhood. Another good title would have been, “What Makes Me, Me?”, but then I would have had to do the presentation to a group at Mechanics Illustrated, the magazine company who, when I was a teen, actually featured a buxom spokeswoman named “MIMI” in every issue. I digress.

Finally, “Knock, Knock....Who’s There” is about the “bottom line” on personhood. To me, theorizing and speculation and mulling over past and future intricacies are all well and good, but personhood truly comes down to you and me, here and now, being the persons that we’re being, with each other. THAT’S where we really live. Also, conveniently, “Knock, Knock” is the title of a song I wrote that’s part of this presentation.

So, this title's a reflection of my attempt to approach the subject with logic, openness, personal investment, here-and-now awareness, and humor.

Imagine a single point in the vastness of the cosmos. How might we describe that point? It has no weight, volume, or substance in and of itself. Just a point. However, we can assign coordinates to it that identify it spatially in relationship to its surroundings, in three dimensions. It can be point 1-A -Alpha. And it's absolutely unique. No other point exists with those same coordinates.

A nice example of uniqueness emerges if we think of point 1-A-Alpha as a point of VIEW. At any given time, any observation made from this point will differ from observations made at any of the innumerable other points in the cosmos. Just considering a simple visual observation, the surrounding "neighborhood" of the cosmos literally looks different from this point, than from any other.

Let's think for a moment about complexity. How many points in the tip of my finger? An infinite number. How many in this room? A much bigger infinite number? Unlimited points of view, endless combinations, incredible complexity. Even at this very simple and basic level of exploration, the potential points of view dramatically exceed our mental capability to comprehend them numerically. More beans than we can count, even using all of our fingers and toes. So how can we humans deal with levels of complexity at which our rational, analytical vehicle loses traction? We have different vehicles.

Let's continue our inquiry, then, with a brief exercise, using one of those different vehicles, that will also serve as our moment of silence for today's service. Close your eyes, if you wish, as you imagine a single point.....the point that happens to be at the very center of your physical body.....just quietly focus on that point for a moment, and breathe,....and focus.....

And now let your awareness expand slightly, visualizing the small cluster of points closely surrounding your central point.....

And notice the gentle and subtle energy within this cluster of points.....as your awareness slowly expands.....slowly expands.....to include all of the points within the entire physical space of your body..... be aware of the shape and substance, and the energy encompassed within this space of your body.....this is you.....energized, having shape and substance, unique.....in a few moments, when you wish, not speaking please, maintain your awareness of that gentle energy within as you slowly open your eyes.....and notice the physical sensation as you very gently take the hand of the person to your left and to your right.....what happens at the exact moment your hands touch?

And so here we are, each of us unique, yet joined by the subtlest of touches.....and then releasing each others' hands....and thinking about this experience....

Our experience leads us to believe that we possess, or perhaps we ARE, energy and substance that we may not fully understand, and more “points” than we can comprehend. Because there must be someone doing all of this observing, we possess, or perhaps we are, AWARENESS....whatever and whoever we are, we have awareness, through our physical senses, both within and outside of our bodies, and through the workings of our thinking process.

So, we are unique, thinking, sensing, living, aware beings of substance.... characteristics, by the way, that we share with ALL other living creatures. That’s an incredible connection. As we inquire into the nature of personhood, perhaps those shared characteristics are as far as we need inquire. Is there MORE to personhood, something that makes us different from, not better than, other creatures? I believe there is.

Thinking back to the “point” experience that we just shared, what do we humans do almost immediately after we bring something into our “here and now” awareness? Right away, we think about it...we REFLECT. We ask ourselves, “What is this experience? What does it mean? What are the implications? Is it good or bad? Do I want more of it? What do I believe about what just happened? What’s in it for me?”

We seem to REFLECT a LOT. Is that how we make logical sense out of the infinitely complex phenomena that flood our awareness? I think (!) that reflection is a relatively new skillset for us as creatures, that modifies our old-brain, hard wired stimulus/response, fight or flight roots. By assigning more complex meaning and value to the content of our awareness, we give ourselves time to respond, rather than always just reacting. It’s interesting to think about our reflection more literally, like a mirror. We see reflections of ourselves and our behavior in others, and vice versa. Our reflection is imperfect. Even a mirror image is affected by the the type of glass, the play of light, imperfections in the glass, and of course, the point of view.... Similarly, our reflections always affect that which we reflect upon. As we reflect, and analyze, and assign meaning to phenomena, we always add something of ourselves to the process, call it spin, or clarification, or contamination, or censoring....

So, we are aware, we reflect on the content of our awareness, and then, based on our reflection, we form INTENT, determined by what our reflection deems good, or positive, or “right”, or necessary. We create preferences, desires, goals, needs. While awareness is here-and-now, and reflection focuses mostly on the past, intent is future-focused. In the “ready, aim, fire” of life, intent is the “aim”. Intent is a powerful set of tools that helps us to get what we want or need,.....or, often, what our imperfect and unique reflections lead us to BELIEVE that we want or need.

REFLECTION and INTENT are, I believe, part of what makes us different from other creatures. It’s “new brain” activity. We seem to spend more conscious time on reflection and intent, than on here-and-now awareness, even though it’s our awareness that provides the raw data for us to consider. I wonder if we are sometimes too focused on the reflection and intent, and fail to make use of our awareness to inform and temper our

other thinking processes. Could reflection and intent relate to the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden story? If these powerful and seductive thinking processes are our toolboxes, could they sometimes be Pandora's toolboxes? Perhaps it's a question of balanced use of all of our capabilities.

Moving on to one final characteristic of personhood: we are aware of phenomena from the world around or within us.....we reflect and assign meaning to those phenomena we form intent based upon what we desire..... and finally, of course, we ACT.

Our culture and our species place great value on ACTION, and the action of humans is potent.... especially considering our population numbers, an incredible multiplier of individual action....and our technology, exponentially extending the reach of our vision, our voices, our hands, our fists....

Because we are inextricably interconnected with each other and with the rest of the world, our EVERY action impacts the entire web of existence. EVERY action changes the balance in some way. We can't not act. "Well, I just won't do ANYTHING..." Of course, even our inaction IS action. And among all creatures, because of our capabilities for reflection and intent, don't humans have the highest responsibility to choose and direct our incredibly potent actions wisely? Every day, we have an incredible opportunity to bring about life-enhancing outcomes. How are we doing?

We've considered characteristics of personhood.....discussed the "toolboxes" of awareness, reflection, intent, and action. We have a sense of the power of those tools. We've touched on how we choose to express our personhood. Here's another vehicle for that expression.

"Awareness, Reflection, Intent, Action." It's a bit contrived, but kind of interesting, that the first letters of these words spell, "ARIA" . In opera, (melodrama on steroids) an ARIA is a solo musical performance, usually vocal, that expresses the essence of a character, a situation, or of life. It's a powerful, personal, unique statement. I think we all have opportunities every day to perform our "ARIA", whether musically, artistically, or through other actions. If you were to choose your ARIA for this day, what would you present as a compelling statement of your personhood?

"Knock, Knock" is a song I wrote and sang at fellowship about a year ago. Janet asked me to do it again, and I think it fits our topic of personhood. For me, it's a reminder to myself of how I want my awareness, reflection, and intent to inform and infuse my everyday actions in a life-sustaining way. I've attached a sheet with the lyrics, and a few interpretive comments, and you're welcome to sing along. It's a bit irreverent, as hymns go....

“KNOCK, KNOCK....”

Even if he may not be the one ‘n on-i-ly Lord,
Love to cruise to town wit’ Jesus in my flatbed Ford.
We could stop at the lake, take a walk or a swim,
On the beach or on the water...that’d be up to him.
But, is he God? Is it verifiably true?
Well, of course he is, honey baby darlin’ Just like me and you.
(“Look What They’ve Done To My Song” interlude)

Is there life after death? How ‘bout Heaven and Hell?
That’s some pretty dandy questions, and it’s real hard to tell.
But there is life during life, that we don’t want to miss,
While we’re fussin’ and discussin’ bout what comes after this.
You’ve got your shamans, Brahmins, healers, and the heavenly host,
Ol’ Mohammed, momma nature, and the holy ghost.
Bokonon and brother Buddha, Isis, Vishnu, and Ba’al,
Pretty healthy wealth of spirit shared among them all.
But are they God, with a capital “G”, or just delightfully wise?
Sometimes we find the best messiahs just a’ hangin’ out like one of the guys....or gals...
(“Cocaine” interlude- reference to Karl Marx’s comments on religion)

Well, religion’s no joke, as we can easily see,
A most essential fact of life is spir-i-tu-al-i-ty.
And a gentle cosmic chuckle cures a whole lot of ills,
In those awkward social settings where serious...religion...kills..
What can we believe? What’s our “true truth” to be?
How ‘bout “I’ll believe in you, if you believe in me!”
(Warm and Windy interlude)

So, there is Godness in me, and there is Godness in you,
And when we keep that in mind, we do the best we can do.
I guess I’m pretty near done, but I’ve just gotta sing,
That every person’s every action changes everything!
A doot ‘n doo doot doo.....da doot ‘n dutily dee,
Baby, I DO believe in you....won’t you believe in me?
And deet ‘n dee deet dee....da deet ‘n daintily doo....
Sure helps me to believe in me, if you believe in you.

amen

We are unique clusters of energized points, each having our own perspective. We are AWARE, and from an infinite universe of phenomena, we choose what to bring to our conscious awareness. We REFLECT, assigning meaning, evaluating, seeing ourselves in others, and others in ourselves. Out of our reflection springs INTENT, based upon what we value, what we desire, what seems best. Finally, we ACT. Whether a tiny pebble rippling an infinite pond, or a tipping-point intervention causing a tsunami-like, sweeping upheaval, our action always causes change. May we express our personhood with grace and awareness of our highest values.

Cal Furnish May 2012