



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

The need for identity

Clay Nelson © 12 May 2019

When the man stopped for the amber light as he legally should instead of gunning through the intersection trying to beat the red light, the woman behind him laid on her horn, opened her window screaming abuse at him while giving him the universal finger of outrage for preventing her from running the light. While waiting for the light to change there was a knock at her window. It was a constable inviting her out of the car. He put her under arrest. At the station she was finger-printed and put in a holding cell.

A few hours later the constable released her with apologies explaining that with all the bumper stickers on the car that said things like honk if you love Jesus and what would Jesus do and the little chrome fish stuck under the back window, I could only assume the car was stolen.

This story came to mind when I read a recent interview with the President of Union Theological Seminary, America's oldest seminary, that boasts former faculty such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr. I attended America's second oldest seminary and was taught by a faculty who had largely studied at Union under such progressive Christian luminaries. What struck me about the interview with Dr Serene Jones, its first woman president, was her acknowledgement that she did not believe the Bible was the Word of God or in a physical, bodily resurrection or a virgin birth or the recorded miracles of Jesus or an interventionist God that answered your prayers but not those of your neighbour or a heavenly afterlife or that Jesus was the Son of God. New Zealand's Lloyd Geering, author of *Christianity without God*, would label her a non-theist.

What struck me was the interviewer's asking if she still identified as a Christian considering she rejected all the historic tenets of Christianity? This reminded me of all the times I've been asked if I was a Christian, often while I was wearing my clergy dog collar. As Dr Jones and I are reading from the same theological page I had to ask myself the question. Considering Christian support of Trump's behaviour even going so far as to put up billboards suggesting he is the second coming of Christ, as well as their blatant misogyny, homophobia, islamophobia, racism and opposition to immigration, I have to ask if I even want to identify as Christian, progressive or otherwise? The answer, not particularly. The Jesus I know wouldn't either, in fact he never came close, being Jewish. He certainly didn't identify as the Messiah.

After a life time of self-identifying as a Christian, letting go of it still isn't easy. Identity is such a critical part of who we are. More correctly I should say identities, as we are a collection of them gathered over time. We start out as a child in a particular whanau. We may have siblings. Later we may be parents. If fortunate, we might become grandparents. To confuse it more we might lose some of them over time if a parent, sibling or spouse dies or if we are divorced. Who are we then?

We gain or lose identity by what we do, where we live, how old we are, our economic or social status or class, and our political leanings. Some identities are more permanent, such as our gender or the colour of our skin. But even these have a transitory nature, as they come to be viewed differently by society. For instance, gender has become viewed in a much more fluid way than when I was a child when there were just boys and girls, so far as we knew. For example, I'm apparently now a cisgender, an identity I didn't even know existed a year ago. It means I identify with the gender I was assigned at birth. That identity doesn't have much impact on how I see myself, but it impacts others greatly. It gives those who do not identify with the gender assigned them at birth alternatives they didn't have before. It allows them an opportunity to validate who they are when they had no place to fit in before. In other words, my claiming the identity of cisgender gives those who do not share it, an identity they can now claim. This is a case where my identity empowers others, but there are many more instances where my identity oppresses or discriminates against others.

For some, the experience of being a particular sex or sexual orientation, from a particular racial or ethnic group or socio-economic class, involves recurring and even systematic or institutional prejudice. This prejudice can manifest in unequal opportunities, rights, or wages, as well as being stereotyped, marginalised or persecuted. Recognising that my identities have privileged me to the disadvantage and at the expense of others who do not share my identities is also part of my identity. Since I did not choose those identities, it is not a source of shame unless I choose to continue blindly to benefit from them. Adding oppressor to my multiple identities hardly benefits my spiritual well-being. It is certainly not one I want to claim. However, not claiming it doesn't magically make it untrue unless I acknowledge and disavow the power being an oppressor has given me. In other words, I need my identities but not all of them if I am to be my best self.

Understanding that identity is highly fluid over time gives us multiple opportunities to explore the question, who am I? It is highly likely the answer will keep changing. This is not only true for individuals but for nations, institutions, and religions. What the answer is can bind us together or tear us apart.

So, the answer to who I am cannot be fully answered unless I ask who I am with. My repeated questioning over time has led me to be with Unitarian Universalists, a faith movement made for these times.

Ronald Engle, Unitarian professor of social ethics at Meadville/Lombard School of Theology for 30 years, called Unitarian Universalism the Democratic Faith. Now, by that he didn't mean the faith of the democratic party – he meant that we are a faith of the people, by the people, and for the people.

Unitarianism and Universalism arose in a world that was oppressive. It was a world in which humanity was seen as debased, degraded: incapable of choosing good without the threat of punishment. In spite of or in resistance to that, there were visionary folk who believed in the human capacity to choose good and to have empathy. William Ellery Channing wrote in his sermon *Likeness to God*, “the likeness to God... belongs to [our] higher or spiritual nature... In ourselves are the elements of the Divinity. It is the resemblance of a parent to a child, the likeness of a kindred nature... divinity is stirring within the human breast, and demanding a culture and liberty worthy of the child of God ...”

Instead of seeing humanity as lowly, inert clay, Unitarians advanced a belief in a creature who required guidance, education, freedom, and respect to reveal the better angels of our nature. The Universalists rejected the idea of a vengeful, punitive deity and, instead, testified that in the presence of guidance, education, freedom, and love humanity would choose the good. 18th century Universalist and signer of the Declaration of Independence, Benjamin Rush, wrote: “A belief in God’s universal love to all his creatures, that he will finally restore all of them that are miserable to happiness, is a polar truth... It establishes the equality of [humanity].”

These are remarkable and deeply religious assertions.

This is not a faith about God or not God; an afterlife, kind of afterlife, or no afterlife; not one teacher or another teacher; not about any one book over all others – all of those things help us to understand faith in individual ways, but each is only a finger pointing to the moon and not the moon itself – they’re the clothes upon the body of spiritual understanding.

This is a movement I can identify with. My spiritual journey has led me here. Our UU principles are not imposed on my identity, I am simply invited to live them out with you and in so doing they become my identity. They connect our individual identities into one. In that connection you and I become a faith movement the world desperately needs.