

Preparation for *Who Am I?*

As human beings, from birth to death we experience the world around us in the inner, immaterial realm of consciousness. Not only that. Unlike other beings with whom we share the planet, so far as we know we alone have a deep, highly complex consciousness of *self*, a distinct individual identity that may lead us to ask **Who am I?** When we try to answer that question, we find ourselves led to other perplexing questions, questions about what we mean by “I” and how we arrive at a sense of self. What qualities most tellingly define the person we feel ourselves to be, and from where do they originate? *Are these qualities acquired or inherent? In what are they rooted?* are the next questions that present themselves.

The Romantic poet William Wordsworth wrote that every baby comes into the world “trailing clouds of glory” but is immediately plunged into a mundane human community by whose values and lifeways the child is inevitably shaped. Certainly it’s true that we learn how to behave, how to evaluate ourselves and others, what to aspire for, how to earn respect and be of worth in our community – in short, learn how to be human – from our families and from the society of which they are a part. Since *homo sapiens* has always survived by banding together into loyal groups, our natural need to belong is a very powerful determiner of the public identity we forge as we grow up. At the same time, there is in each of us an elusive but unique presence that meets the outer world and interacts with it yet remains quietly unaltered. When we dig down and become aware of this inner presence, we can’t help but see that we live in a zone of dialogue between our inmost being and the outer, social realm our culture both provides and imposes.

Who am I? challenges us to investigate how this dialogue manifests in our lives, and to what end. Unitarian minister Lilli Nye invokes the first and last principles of our UU covenant as exemplary of the challenge, beginning with “the inherent worth and dignity of every person” and ending with “respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.”

In Nye’s words: *Although together the seven principles form an integrated whole, I would suggest that the first and last express a tension in which the others play out. That tension is between the supreme value of the individual person on the one hand, and on the other hand, the sacredness of our connection, the sacredness of the community of life to which we belong and to which we are responsible.* She concludes, “*To fulfill our human life spiritually and ethically we have to somehow balance these two energies – autonomy and interdependence.*”

You are invited to reflect on this challenge as it applies in your life.

It takes courage to grow up and become who you really are. *e. e. cummings*

Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive. *Dr. Howard Thurman*

My mother always told me, “hide your face, people are looking at you.” I would reply, “It does not matter; I am also looking at them.” *Malala Yousafzai*

I slip among classifications like water in cupped palms, leaving bits of myself behind. I am quick and deft, for there is no greater fear than the fear of being caught wanting to belong. I am a chameleon. And the best chameleon has no center, no truer sense of self than what he is in the instant. *Andrew X. Pham*

She is both hellfire and holy water. The flavor you taste depends on how you treat her. *Sneha Pal*

It took me quite a long time to develop a voice and now that I have it, I am not going to be silent.
Madeleine Albright

It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.
Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

The world's great spiritual teachings tell us over and over we are not who we think we are.

Emptiness refers to the underlying nonseparation of life and the fertile ground of energy that gives rise to all forms of life. Our world and sense of self is a play of patterns.

Any identity we can grasp is transient, tentative.

We are a changing process, not a fixed being.
Jack Kornfield, passages from A Path with Heart

Perhaps it's impossible to wear an identity without becoming what you pretend to be.
Orson Scott Card

I'm Nobody! Who are you?
Are you—Nobody—Too?
Then there's a pair of us!
Don't tell! They'd advertise—you know!

How dreary—to be—Somebody!
How public—like a Frog—
To tell one's name—the livelong June—
To an admiring Bog!
Emily Dickinson

Questions to Ponder

1. How do you experience your core being or innermost sense of self?
2. Consider some of your identities: for instance, woman, spiritual seeker, life partner, family member, professional, skilled tradesperson, crafts maker, artist, writer, meditator, caretaker, US citizen, UU congregant.
3. Is there a difference between your inner and outer selves? If so, can you describe the difference? How do these two versions of you relate to one another?
4. As a child, what did you find most engaging? What did you most want to be when you grew up?
5. How has your sense of self changed over time?
6. What (if any) role have other people played in creating the self with whom you genuinely identify?

Words of the Day

Consider the “Who Am I?” question in a deep way. Think of a word or phrase to complete this sentence: “What I most want to bring forth into the world from within is”