

**“Coming Home”**  
Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval  
Unitarian Church of Montpelier  
September 25, 2022

*The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Video recordings of sermons can be found online at <https://ucmvt.org/category/whats-new/sermons-and-podcasts/>.*

## **Reading**

“A Few Words on the Soul,” Wisława Szymborska<sup>1</sup>

We have a soul at times.  
No one’s got it non-stop,  
for keeps.

Day after day,  
year after year  
may pass without it...

## **Sermon**

“Who are you?”

I gazed sincerely into the eyes of my partner. A church member who was still a stranger - unknown to me except through a few passing conversations.

“A father, a member of this church,” he responded.

Following the instructions of our facilitator, I asked again, “Who are you?”

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<sup>1</sup> Full poem available at: <https://agnionline.bu.edu/poetry/a-few-words-on-the-soul/>

Eight years ago, as your brand new minister, I sat in the living room of a church member. It was the first meeting of the 2020 Vision Task Force. I was feeling kind of nervous to be sitting among a group of, what I could already tell, were long-time, esteemed members of the congregation with a big task ahead of us, creating a vision statement for the next five years of ministry together.

Our facilitator started things off with an activity that would allow us to get to know one another better. We were to pair up, and as we looked into each other's eyes, we would take turns asking our partner one simple question, "Who are you?" The person would answer. And, their partner would take in their response in silence, and then repeat the question, "Who are you?" This would go on for one full minute and then we were to switch roles.

We spread out into a couple different rooms and began the exercise. Already feeling quite nervous, I had the good fortune of being the question asker in the first round rather than the respondent. And so it was that I found myself listening as intently as possible to my partner over my quaking nerves. "Who are you?" "A lover of baseball, a husband." "Who are you?" The responses continued until it was time to trade the hot seat.

"Who are you?" my partner asked. The obvious answers came easily. "An ordained Unitarian Universalist minister, a wife, a mother," I replied.

"Who are you?" "A daughter of immigrants, a sister."

"Who are you?" "A lover of books, an amateur photographer."

"Who are you?" I paused for a while as I settled more fully into the question.

"Someone who is always trying my best and wondering if my best is good enough."

Who are you?

Such a simple yet incredibly complex and challenging question. One that I believe is at the heart of the religious quest and human journey.

In the Jewish tradition, Rosh Hashanah begins today at sundown. This marks the Jewish new year which is timed with the cycle of the moon. It begins a period of ten holy days of observance, the Ten Days of Awe, concluding with Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

In Judaism, it is said that on Rosh Hashanah the Book of Life is opened and the Angel of Life writes each person's destiny for the coming year. Over the ten days of teshuvah, Jews are called upon to return to themselves and examine their lives and to make amends with those they have wronged or who have wronged them. The Book of Life is kept open until the last sound of the shofar on Yom Kippur when it is then sealed for another year.

This ten day period is a holy time - a time of remembrance, a time to be in community, and a time for individual reflection and deepening of religious practice.

The call to return to ourselves, to the very home of our souls is shared across religious traditions. As Unitarian Universalists, we affirm that the spiritual journey is a search for truth and meaning grounded in personal experience and shared within a community. And that journey is centered in each of our individual questions, ponderings, and proddings of the spirit.

We support one another in discovering and re-discovering who we are, our truest self.

As I said last Sunday, here in this congregation, we aspire to welcome all - to nurture a sense of belonging that is expansive so that each of our truest selves feels welcome, accepted, and beloved. Just as we affirm that we are each welcome,

accepted, and beloved within all that is, all of life, the universe, the mystery beyond our understanding, the divine wholeness.

We seek to create conditions for belonging for one another within community, AND the path of belonging also involves an inward journey. It involves traveling into that core place inside yourself that holds your own truest identity, your inner light, your divine spark, your soul.

This place inside each of us is where the alchemy of our passions, longings, life experiences, and values forges that sacred part of each of us. And, it is here that we learn and re-learn how to belong to ourselves.

The social researcher, Brené Brown writes, “True belonging is the spiritual practice of believing in and belonging to yourself so deeply that you can share your most authentic self with the world... True belonging doesn’t require you to change who you are; it requires you to be who you are.”

Being who you are may sound easy, but it rarely is. There is so much that gets in the way of us living honestly, authentically, and with wholeness.

For too many of us, society has created conditions in which it is unsafe to be one’s true self.

Somewhere there is a child whose family has rejected them because their gender identity or sexual orientation doesn’t fit that family’s idea of what is normal or permissible. Maybe this child was you.

Somewhere there is a girl who is being told not to be too assertive or bossy and that anger isn’t nice. Maybe that girl was you.

Somewhere there is a boy who is being told to be tough and that tears are a sign of weakness. Maybe that boy was you.

Somewhere there is someone being told that their skin is too dark to be beautiful, and that they aren't worthy of respect or praise. Maybe this someone was you.

These kinds of experiences and many others can teach us that it is better to hide who we really are, and so instead, we live in a state of fear of really showing up, of really allowing ourselves to just be.

Based on our own particular psychological and spiritual make-up, some of us may more often seek external acknowledgement and affirmation and attempt to please others, and in this way, are led astray from our truest self.

Too often these voices - some whispering from within ourselves and others clamoring from the outside - pull us away from our true self. There are many ways to mask who we really are, our own soul's most authentic expression.

To lose the connection to the part of ourselves that we know to be true can be painful. You can start to wonder if you'll ever find your way back to that home of your soul. I have certainly felt this way at times.

My path to ministry includes much of this wondering and wandering. I have shared some of this story with you before. It includes me, in my mid-twenties, coming to the realization that I wasn't living from a place of true belonging.

Although things seemed to be going well in my life, I had that nagging feeling that my soul wasn't being tended, and I knew I needed to make a change.

That part of me, however, that sought more recognizable achievement and "success" determined that applying to business school and getting an MBA was the right next direction. Spoiler alert: It wasn't. (And, don't get me wrong, I truly appreciate that for some people, this really is part of living from their core identity and a place of wholeness, which is wonderful.)

I had a hunch that going the business school route wasn't exactly right for me, and I distinctly remember one afternoon sitting in my apartment with a book I had purchased, the title of which was quite literally, "How to Get into Business School."

In describing the writing of the personal statement, the author admonished the potential applicant not to proceed if one did not have a compelling reason to articulate in the personal statement. I gulped feeling the depth of this unwelcome truth.

I proceeded anyways, and thankfully, another part of me followed that nudge, that inner calling, towards ministry and said, how about also applying to seminary. So, I did both.

I think this illustrates how we are so often grappling with these different voices and can be pulled in conflicting directions. We are often faced with the choice between honoring the soul and that "seed of selfhood," as Parker Palmer calls it, or following inauthenticity instead. Trying to fit in rather than truly belong.

As it so happens, I didn't get into any of the business schools I applied to, and I am quite happy to be here more than a decade later doing what I love and am most called to do.

The African American theologian, Howard Thurman, lived from 1899 to 1981. He faced racial discrimination for most of his life. As a theologian, he had a mystical orientation, always seeking the essence of life and the connection among all.

Just one year before he died, he delivered the baccalaureate address at Spelman College, a historically black college, and he encouraged the graduates with these words:

“There is in you something that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself. Nobody like you has ever been born and no one like you will ever be born again—you are the only one.” And so, he challenged them, “What is your name—who are you—and can you find a way to hear the sound of the genuine in yourself?”

Or, as Rabbi Zusya of Hanipol put it, “But what will I say when God asks me, ‘Zusya, why were you not more like Zusya?’”

We each possess a sacredness of self that is yours by virtue of being alive, here, right now. And, beyond any fleeting identity, this sacredness is who we truly are, the genuine in each of us.

Who are you? A child of this magnificent universe.

Who are you? Wisdom of the ages.

Who are you? The dream of your ancestors. Born beloved.

Each of us is called to find our way back to ourselves, to the sacred within each of us, over and over again.

These moments of knowing and accepting our true selves are to be cherished.

We might wrestle with the competing voices and stories within us and outside us and feel just ephemeral moments of true belonging. Hold onto them.

Or, maybe after years of wandering in the wilderness, you have finally come home - ready to be warmed by the deeply burning embers of the life within you. Savor it.

“Who are you?”

That question reappeared a couple weeks ago from the mouth of my eight year-old as we were preparing dinner.

“Who are you?” the small voice inquired.

“What are you asking? I’m your mother, of course.”

“I’m your mother, of course, who are you?”

“It’s time to get ready for dinner,” I impatiently replied.

“It’s time to get ready for dinner, who are you?”

There was not going to be any dodging of this question then, and I have a feeling it’s going to be sticking around for a while.

“Who are you?”

“Who are YOU?”