

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
Arlington Street Church
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Who you?

“He was a black man in his sixties – very cute, very mischievous, and very sick.” A doctor is speaking of a patient. “I remember [him] distinctly – [he] was altogether different. I think this guy changed my life....

“What brought us to him repeatedly was the utter complexity of his illness, condition on top of condition, and the mystery of why he was still alive. It was so strange. We were visiting not to find out what was wrong with him, but why he was still here at all.

“I had the feeling he could see right through us. When [the interns] came in, he'd say, 'Hey, boys!' – the way you might when a gang of ten-year-olds come barging into [the] house for a snack in the middle of an intense game outside. He was so pleased, and so amused. It made some people nervous. I was intrigued. But for some weeks, I never had a chance to be alone with him.

“Now and then, he'd get into very serious trouble, and he'd be moved into intensive care. Then, to everyone's amazement, he'd rally, and we'd move him back. And we'd visit him again, and he'd say, 'You boys here again?' – pretending to be surprised that *we* were around.

“One night, there was an emergency, and I ... went to see him alone. He looked pretty bad. But he [was alert]. He gave me a grin and said, 'Well...,' sort of like he'd expected me. Like he'd known how much I'd come to love him. That happens in hospitals.

“I imagined I looked a little surprised at the 'Well...,' but we just laughed..., and I stood there just so taken by who he was. And then he hit me with a single remark, half a question and half a ... something else.

“*Who you?*” he said, sort of smiling. Just that. ‘Who you?’

“I started to say, ‘Well, I’m Doctor...’ And then I just stopped cold. It’s hard to describe.... All kinds of answers to his question started to [surface]. They all seemed true, but they all seemed less than true. ‘Yeah, I’m this, or I’m that ... and also ... but not just ... and that’s not the whole picture; the whole picture is...’ [I was undone.] Nothing remotely like that had ever happened to me. But I [felt ... elated].

“It must have shown, because he gave me this big grin and said, ‘Nice to meet you.’ His timing killed me.

“We talked for five minutes about ... nothing in particular.... At the end, I ventured to say, ‘Is there anything I can do for you?’ And he said, ‘No, I’m just fine. Thanks very much, Doctor...?’ And he paused for the name, and I gave it to him this time, and he grinned at me again. [He just lay there, sick as he was, with a big smile on his face]. And that was it.

“He died a few days later. And I carry him around today. I think of him now and again in the midst of my rounds.... ‘*Who you?*’ For years, I’d trained to be a physician, and I almost got lost in it. This man took away my degree, and then gave it back to me with ‘and also? ... and also? ... and also?’ scribbled across [it]. I’ll never forget.”¹

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Remembering *who you* – remembering who you are – is at the heart of living a spiritual life. In Unitarian Universalism, we don’t talk about conversion. We talk about *becoming*. We don’t talk about checking your religious baggage at the door. We talk about opening it up; lovingly sorting through what still fits and what is of use; bringing along what you like; and laying the rest to rest. We say, *Everyone has inherent worth and dignity*. We say, *Come as you are*. Mary Chapin Carpenter sings,

Come broken, come whole,
Come wounded in your soul
Come any way that you know
Allelujah

Come doubting, come sure,
Come fearful to this door,
Come see what love is for

¹ Anonymous, in Ram Dass and Paul Gorman, *How Can I Help?*, pp. 29-31

Allelujah²

Asking *Who you?*³ is a way of getting to what Yeats called “the deep heart's core,”³ what author Thomas Moore calls *original self*. He writes, “Far beneath the many thick layers of indoctrination about who we are and who we should be lies an original self, a person who came into this world full of possibility and destined for joyful unveiling and manifestation. It is this person we glimpse in another when we fall in love, or when we idealize a leader, or romanticize an artist. This is the person who comes to life in us briefly [when] we ... start a course in school, ... try on a new job [or anything new, really] – before worry and cynicism have set in. Chronically trying to be someone other than this original self, persuaded that we are not adequate, ... a cool distance gradually [separates] us from that deep and eternal person.... [Ultimately,] we may forget both who we were and who we might be.”

Thomas Moore is speaking of losing touch, being out of touch, with our *soul*. We lose our soul, he says, “in our everyday lives, whenever we try to force ourselves to fit some norm of ... 'correctness....'”

“In many subtle ways, ... we [are required to] trade in [our] desire and joy for economic success and social approval.... [but] if we suppress [our] deep vitality and lose touch with our original self – *who you?* – we might well fall into a depression.... [This depression] is not just personal, but ... is the characteristic emotional malady of our time... [It] reflects the failure of this society, for all its praise of the individual, to nurture and support the wide-ranging, [wondrous] possibilities of a human life.”

Alternatively, Thomas Moore concludes, “When the ever-creative soul is allowed to rise up from the deep reservoir of life that is its home, we ... [are] not easily squeezed into narrow expectations of what [we] should be. In the flush of the soul's vitality, we become ... “the kind of person ... who lives from the burning core of the heart, with the creativity that comes from allowing the soul to blossom in its own colors and shapes.”⁴

This choice – the spiritually life-saving choice – is to walk the pilgrim's path on which we find ourselves through compassion and hospitality: love and service. We *are* society; as we answer with our lives the question *Who you?*, we inspire and uphold one another, and others, as they, too, choose the courage to walk a path with heart.

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2 Mary Chapin Carpenter, from *Come Darkness, Come Light*

3 William Butler Yeats, *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*

4 Thomas Moore, *Original Self*, pp. v-vii

I've shared this last story before; the speaker is anonymous.

“If you love animals, come volunteer at the zoo.’ [It all started with this ad in the newspaper, and my willingness to try – which was enough.]

“We started an outreach program, to bring animals to people who could never come to us.... Two birds, two mammals, two reptiles. The snake we'd show next to last. We'd end with a dove.

“We'd take them to nursing homes, ... children's wards, burn units, [psychiatric] hospitals. Places where people are very sick, or lost, or dying. [Maybe] they'll never go anyplace else again. They've lost interest, given up on life itself. I was ... shocked by that. It hurt me.

“But I witnessed things I'd never dreamed of when I answered that ad.

“In one ... hospital, we went to a group known as 'the boys.' 'The boys' [were] aged eighteen to forty-eight, ... with a mental [capacity] from infant to two or three years.... I had a ferret. One boy came running, yelling, 'Touch! Touch! Touch!' I said, 'You can touch him later.' But when we got around to it, the feeling had left him. I just wanted to die. Tears streamed down my face. I'd missed it. Oh, did I miss it! But I've never missed it again.

“In a cancer ward, a man refused to come out of his room. He was angry and bitter.... He heard there were animals.... He was just a little curious. So this time, right away, I said, 'Would you like to touch?' 'Oh, sure, sure,' he said sarcastically. 'With these hands?' ... [His hands hung useless at his sides.] Then he just looked down at the floor. I felt terrible, but I said, 'Here, then – with your palms,' and [somehow,] he began to let us help. With each animal, he became softer. For once, there was something beside his illness. He began to cry. 'This is so beautiful,' he said. 'I will never forget this.’”⁵

Who you?

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Mary Oliver writes,
 You do not have to be good.
 You do not have to walk on your knees

5 Ram Dass and Paul Gorman, *op cit*, pp. 238-239

for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
 You only have to let the soft animal of your body
 love what it loves.

Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.

Meanwhile, the world goes on.

Meanwhile, the sun and the clear pebbles of rain
 are moving across the landscapes,
 over the prairies and the deep trees,
 the mountains and the rivers.

Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
 are heading home again.

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
 the world offers itself to your imagination,
 calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting –
 over and over announcing your place
 in the family of things.⁶

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Beloved spiritual companions,

Who you?

And also? And also? And also?

Did you forget?

Let's walk together, this path with heart:
 walk fearful, doubting, wounded, broken,
 walk each other home to sure and whole:
 our original self.

Allelujah!

Never forget!

Let's remember.

Touch, touch, touch!

Yes to the tears that remind us we missed it.

Yes to missing,
 and *yes* to longing;
yes to seeking;
yes to beauty,
 and *yes* to love.

6 Mary Oliver, *Wild Geese*

