

The Work of Being The Light

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All Souls Church, New York City

The Caterpillar and Alice looked at each other for some time in silence: at last the Caterpillar took the hookah out of its mouth, and addressed her in a languid, sleepy voice.

‘Who are YOU?’ said the Caterpillar.

This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly, ‘I--I hardly know, sir, just at present-- at least I know who I WAS when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.’

‘What do you mean by that?’ said the Caterpillar sternly. ‘Explain yourself!’

‘I can't explain MYSELF, I'm afraid, sir’ said Alice, ‘because I'm not myself, you see.’

‘I don't see,’ said the Caterpillar.

‘I'm afraid I can't put it more clearly,’ Alice replied very politely, ‘for I can't understand it myself to begin with; and being so many different sizes in a day is very confusing.’

‘It isn't,’ said the Caterpillar.

‘Well, perhaps you haven't found it so yet,’ said Alice; ‘but when you have to turn into a chrysalis--you will some day, you know--and then after that into a butterfly, I should think you'll feel it a little queer, won't you?’

‘Not a bit,’ said the Caterpillar.

‘Well, perhaps your feelings may be different,’ said Alice; ‘all I know is, it would feel very queer to ME.’

‘You!’ said the Caterpillar contemptuously. ‘Who are YOU?’

We begin this morning with the theological musings of an oversized hookah smoking caterpillar, spouting wisdom as ancient as time. The caterpillar asks Alice, a few times, ‘who are you?’ And Alice responds by where she has been and what sizes she morphed into... and finding herself befuddled, is ultimately unable to answer the question. In an attempt to refocus the conversation, she points back to the Caterpillar’s natural progression in the world and attempts to draw similarities to her own transfiguration. The sage caterpillar is unfazed... it’s not confusing, it doesn’t appear queer to him. The bodhisattva upon the mushroom knows who he is at his essence and therefore, asks again of Alice, ‘Who are you?’

Let’s just sit with that eternal question... *who am I?* Ponder for a moment the varieties of ways we respond to this probing... I am a woman. I am spouse to xx. I am a parent to xx. I am the child of xxx. I am a child of God. I am a teacher, I am a neighbor. Or maybe it’s more situational, I am a survivor, I am an American. I am working class.

In part, we come to worship together here in this space to affirm, I am a Unitarian Universalist. I am a person of faith, a progressive faith that strives to live our shared principles in our daily lives and we are a covenanted people.

This morning we shared the reading by Rev. Olympia Brown, the first woman to be ordained a Universalist minister in 1863. Rev. Brown, a contemporary of Susan B. Anthony, devoted tremendous efforts towards women's right to vote and in 1920, with the ratification of the 19th Amendment, became part of the first wave of women able to vote. Faced with discrimination and challenges all her life, Rev. Brown still emphasized the aspirational nature of Universalism: "stand by this faith. Work for it and sacrifice for it."

So we return to the question - *who are you?* Olympia Brown knew who she was - despite being told that she shouldn't pursue academia because she wouldn't understand, she fought to be educated. Despite being told that women weren't called to ministry, she asserted her calling to our movement. Despite decades of women not having the right to vote, she used her oratory gifts to inspire women and allies to agitate for change. Olympia Brown knew her vocation - her faith pervaded every step of her journey.

She wisely penned, "Fortuitous circumstances constitute the souls that shape the majority of human lives, and the hasty impress of an accident is too often regarded as the relentless decree of all ordaining fate." What is she saying here? That too often, we take as what may be our given circumstances in our lives as our unquestioned fate - when we are often called to something greater - something beyond our wildest, or even the wildest dreams of those around us.

So who are you? This question is vitally important now - not only in the world as we commit ourselves to serving in the cause of justice, offering sanctuary to those who seek our safe harbor and perpetuating resistance as a spiritual discipline. This question is vitally important now - as we each consider how we will support this congregation and foster its growth.

But ultimately this question is important in the depths of our being, both inwardly and outwardly. We are not an evangelizing people - similar to the reminder from St. Francis of Assisi, "Wherever you may go, preach and use words if necessary." We live our faith in the world as an orientation of heart and spirits. How we treat our neighbors, our coworkers... how we drive in traffic and respond to hardships.

A friend told me a story about being down-range in Afghanistan with a group of Marines. Austere combat environment is what they call it. What that means is no running water, food out of bags, sleeping in tents and dirt, filth and funk everywhere. Long hours and non-stop work. And oh yeah, people shooting at them... a lot. Nathan decided on a lark to bring a pair of clippers so he could keep at least his hair neat. Then he started doing haircuts for a few Marines. Then it was an hour once a week... the next month, he decided to turn an entire day over to cutting hair for his Marines. After a particularly long week, he dragged himself beyond tired, drained of all energy to cut hair. A young Marine came in and sat down - stinking to high heaven and dirtier than all get out. Nathan, looked at him, and remembered the simple gift he was about to offer him and felt better. He could take a moment to touch the Marine on the shoulder, be kind - talk to him about his life. Remind him of his humanity, that he has a family, that he is loved and cared for.

What transformed this moment for him though, he told me with tears in his eyes, is when he grabbed the clippers and put the oil on the blades so it could cut this Marine's greasy hair. In Nathan's tradition, they anoint the followers with oil to bless them and pray over them. As he placed the oil on the blades, Nathan connected with who he was - a humble servant, a man of great faith - embodying the holy in his daily life.

So, who are you? Does the legacy of brave forefathers and foremothers like Olympia Brown touch your heart? Or the compassion of a chaplain like Nathan? Or are you Alice, finding her place in a strange world? Or the caterpillar - wise and content, offering mischief and advice along the way?

Along within our worship theme for the month of vocation, comes an inwardly focused destination. *Who are you as a Unitarian Universalist?*

Now, don't feel badly... not even for a second, if you are hard pressed to rattle off a pre-packaged statement of identity and vocation as a UU, you're not alone and that's okay.

Today, as we consider how we will stand by this faith... we sit with this inward query while also affirming 100%, a thousand times over that we are a covenanted people. You belong here should you elect to be encircled by the warm embrace of your kin to your left and right.

I do ask you to ponder this question... and seek words that resonate in your heart that reflect your gifts, your calling... your way of being in the world.

We are all better for it. I know this in the depths of my being.