

The Lone Ranger in Beloved Community
 A sermon delivered at the
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by The Rev. Suzanne Wasilczuk

“You’re not the boss of me!” Lia’s seven-year-old voice rang out in the tiny religious education classroom. Lia had been asked to put away her fine collection of Yu-Gi-Oh cards, cards she had been sharing with her seven-year-old compadre Andrew.

“You’re not the boss of me!”

Years ago, when I was young, the Lone Ranger and his “faithful Indian companion” Tonto rode across the western plains. Righting wrongs. Facing down hatred and greed. Making the neighborhood “safe” for community. A white community, yes. But, work with me here. Stay with the Meta-story – the Big Picture. The big ideals of Peace. Justice. Community.

I imagine Tonto, riding up on his equally fearless steed, calling: “Kimo-sabe, you must put away your poker hand. We must ride for Truth and Justice!” I wonder if the Ranger’s reply would ever be: “You’re not the boss of me!”?

What is the “boss” of me? What is the “boss” of you?
 What are the constraints on our individual autonomy?

Just how much of an individual am I? And, how much of that individuality do I wish to forfeit for the sake of something else?

I am no longer a member of the church of my birth. I have deliberately chosen this faith, one out of many choices. I have chosen to take a different path. I am my own unique self, affiliated with a more liberal faith tradition, one where I can think my own thoughts, come to my own conclusions, be my own me.

Now, I am not – well, maybe more accurately – I am no longer, a member of the “me generation.” Maybe I am in recovery from being part of the “permissive society.” I try to put some reins on the number of self-improvement books I read, the number of lattes I consume, the gallons of gas I burn. Well, maybe not exactly. But I have my needs. And I try to think of the environment. And justice. And fair trade prices for coffee beans.

How much of an individual am I, I ask myself? How much of that individuality do I wish to forfeit for the sake of something bigger than myself?

Is there something “bigger than myself”?

The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor writes: “People used to see themselves as part of (something bigger,) a larger order. In some cases,” he continues, “this was a cosmic order, a ‘great chain of Being,’ in which humans figured in their proper place along with angels, heavenly bodies, and our fellow earthly creatures.

This hierarchical order in the universe was reflected in the hierarchies of human society. People were often locked into a given place, a role and station that was properly theirs and from which it was almost unthinkable to deviate. Modern freedom came about through the discrediting of such orders.”

(Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991, 3)

Surely, I am not “locked into a given place,” a given “role,” a given “station” in life. I want to deviate. I want to be deviant. I want to discredit that hierarchy of givens.

And yet, there is plenty that does seem to be the “boss” of me. Bills outstanding. Sermons to write. Time limits. The usual bodily aches and pains. My fears of failure. Dealing with real failures and real loss.

There is plenty that bosses me around. But, at least I have me. My mind. My individuality. I can think what I want.

I want to be the authentic me, the one and only best “me” I can be. Is this notion of self-fulfillment a sort of self-indulgence? ‘What about me??’ a part of me cries. What about me?

My “inner voice” faintly echoes the latest opinion of some talk-show pundit, the current ideas on an email blog, maybe the version of “happiness” seen on a Pepsi or a Budweiser commercial, a Botox or a Peppid ad.

Am I selfish in wanting to go my own way? Think my own thoughts? Be my own me – well, as much as I can with all these voices in my head?

Well, yes. I can think what I want. But, some of my thoughts are just plain dumb. Shooting out the tires of the car that just cut me off would not only distract me from my super-safe driving, but it might not convey quite the message of peace, justice, equity and proper driving etiquette that I hope to make. Some of my thoughts are just plain dumb. Often I don’t know how dumb, until I mention them to someone else.

Some of my thoughts are pretty fanciful. I will never walk through walls, something I saw Superman do, again in my childhood, and a talent I continue to envy. I will never win the 7.2 Billion Dollar Lottery – The Biggest Single Prize Ever Awarded! – and donate scads to, of course, my dear house of worship, and a dozen other causes and people that are close to my heart. I will never win the 7.2 billion dollar lottery, not only because of the reality of statistics, but also because of the reality that I never, ever buy an actual lottery ticket. Some of my thoughts are fanciful, and not that important.

Some of my thoughts are downright wicked. These thoughts have been expunged, for the sake of prudence and undue embarrassment. But, not-nice thoughts join dumb thoughts and wishful thinking in my very own, unique and wonderful brain.

And yet, I can choose to think “better,” “higher,” “deeper” thoughts. I can choose to do “nobler” things. The very ideas of “better” and “deeper,” and the very idea of choice implies that I am choosing something more important than my often centered-on-self wishes.

Is there some thing or some things that demand my attention, that ask “What about me?” Some things that are more important than my usual thoughts about myself, and how I want my life to be? Are there some things so important that I am called to choose them instead of doing my own “thing”?

I return to those “days of yesteryear,” the Lone Ranger and Tonto, and their lives as a crime-fighting duo.

The Lone Ranger and Tonto had a covenant. They made a promise to each other. Together they would right all the wrongs they encountered. Together they would teach the villains that greed and prejudice would eventually fall before a bigger Truth, and a finer Justice.

Kimo-sabe is what Tonto called the Ranger. Was Kimo-sabe a term of endearment, or a mark of respect? Maybe Kimo-sabe translates into something more complicated, something like this:

“Yo! You person,
you white guy,
the guy whose life I saved (in the
first episode of the story),
you, a member of an
imperialist people,
a people who have systematically killed my people,”
Maybe Kimo-sabe goes on to mean:
“Yo! You with whom I have linked my fortunes in the
fight for something larger, you with whom I
strive for something called justice.
Let’s go kick some righteous butt together”?

Somewhat like Tonto and the Ranger, each Unitarian Universalist church covenants with every other church to walk together for something larger, something as important as, something more important than, each of its unique and worthy members. Over three hundred and fifty years ago the Unitarian branch of the family came up with the granddaddy of agreements.

Called the Cambridge Platform, this document tried to balance the principle of autonomy and the principle of fellowship, the idea of how to be an individual in a community. In part it reads: “Although Churches be distinct, & therefore may not be confounded one with another; & (Churches be) equall, and therefore have not dominion one over another; yet all the churches ought to preserve *Church-communion* one with another...” (quoted in Wright, *Walking Together*, 67)

I wonder if we might say, too, of individuals that each is “distinct, & therefore may not be confounded one with another; (each individual is) equall, and therefore ha(s) not dominion one over another; yet (each of these individuals ought) to preserve... *communion* one with another...”

“You’re not the boss of me!” Lia’s seven-year-old voice rings out in the tiny religious education classroom.

What is the-boss-of-me? What is so demanding of my attention that I must listen and respond? What in this world truly matters?

Philosopher Charles Taylor tells us: “Just because we no longer believe in the doctrines of the Great Chain of Being” – the idea that each of us has a pre-ordained place and role in this world – “We don’t need to see ourselves as set in a universe that we can consider simply as a source of raw materials for our projects. We may still need to see ourselves as part of a large order that can make claims on us.” (89)

Taylor argues for what he calls “horizons of significance” – the idea that some options, some choices, some attitudes, some demands, some activities are more worthwhile, more worth pursuing or adopting or working at – more significant than others. (38-39) I do not choose what is to be of significance, Taylor argues. Rather, significant issues present themselves to us, and we choose to acknowledge them, or not.

Taylor tells us that we “can define (our) identity only against the background of things that matter.” (40) To choose insignificant issues as a focus for my life is to trivialize my life. My life matters. And what I choose to do with my life matters. My one wild and precious life, my individuality, is made authentic by my choices.

And what is it that matters? Taylor asks. What are these inescapable horizons of significance? Taylor gives us a short list of “self-transcending issues”

History that calls me to a vision of a loving and just society. A global history, or a personal history – that demands of me reparation, reconciliation, for past, or for present, wrongs.

What truly matters in this world?

The demands of Nature, used and abused to the breaking point.

What truly matters?

The duties of citizenship.

The demands for solidarity with others – *La Lotta Continua* – the Struggle Goes On.

Perhaps the call of God –whatever that may mean to an individual.

The cry of my neighbor – the call to feed the hungry, cloth the naked, care for the widow and orphan, visit the imprisoned. “Some of the most precious gifts we receive are those we receive when we are giving.”

What matters? What is truly the-boss-of-me?

Is institutional religion one of those things that matter? Is this religious community worth the hours of committees meetings? The pledge drives? The getting up earlier than you would care to, getting showered, the kids up and dressed and fed, everyone in the car, Sunday after Sunday?

What matters here? Here, at Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship. What feeds us here? Which boss-of-me is bringing you here?

“You’re not the boss of me!” Lia’s seven-year-old voice rang out in the tiny classroom.

“No,” replied her teacher, “but I am the boss of bringing together today’s class. And, I am the boss of today’s snacks.”

What brings us here?

Our understanding of the good things in life is transformed by our enjoying them in common with people we hold dear.

Being part of a community of love and learning is worth the sacrifice and commitment. The worth is in the learning how to walk together. The worth is in that eventual communion of cookies. And coffee. And conversation.

True community is painfully constructed by people who have struggled to learn how to live together. Unitarian Universalists as a religious community are bonded not by creed, or by confession of faith, or by common prayer.

We are bonded together by covenant, by a promise to each other to stay at the table long enough to listen to one another and understand one another. (not necessarily to agree with one another)

We are bonded together by covenant, a promise to walk in ways of peace and fairness, kind words and deeds. (No running around the sanctuary – or the Board meeting – with metaphorical scissors, cutting to shreds the fabric of community. We promise to love each other; but not to condone ill behavior.)

Unitarians are bonded together by covenant, a promise to each other to walk together, to weave a living and loving community.

As Unitarian Universalist theologian and minister Tom Owen-Towle reminds us: we're talking ecclesiology here – the nature and function of the church. "Ecclesiology," Owen-Towle writes "raises important questions about with whom and how to practice a maturing faith. (Our Unitarian Universalist ecclesiology) maintains that the growth of a soul is the work not of an individual but of a community. It charges our independent wills to serve the interdependent web." (*Growing a Beloved Community*, ix)

Unitarians are bonded together by covenant, a promise to each other to walk together, to weave a living and loving community.

Our Unitarianism charges us with seeking the unity within our diversity. Our Universalism calls us to set another place at the table, a place in which each unique voice can be heard, each distinct personhood can be welcomed, listened to, challenged, and supported. We are called to gather together at this table of beloved community.

In Lakota the word Mitakuyasin means "we are all related." Mitakuyasin recognizes the individual's place within the larger society. We are sisters and brothers, called to mutual respect and cooperation.

In the African American community there is a saying: "**I am** because **we are**." The individual can only thrive within a thriving community.

When we are all related, when we are part of covenantal beloved community, none of us need carry our heavy load alone, none of us need face the storm unaided. We ride together for life; we ride together for love.

I am the boss of me,

inextricably interwoven with thee.

May it be so. May we make it so. Blessed be. Amen.

Readings: “Organized Religion” excerpt, by Kathleen Norris, in *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*

Many say these days they can't find God
(they can't find truth and meaning) in church,
in “organized religion.

I don't find that surprising.

Churches can be as inhospitable as
any other institution.

What does surprise me is that
people will often claim that
sitting alone under trees or on a mountaintop is the
ultimate religious experience,
much superior to being with other people at all.

It may be pleasant, if a bit lonely.

It may even be private,
if you happen to own the mountaintop;
otherwise you have to worry about what happens when
someone else shows up.

Joining a church is not like joining a hobby club;
you will find all sorts of people there,
not all of whom will share your interests,
let alone your opinions.

But there is a vast difference between the
giant abstraction called
“Organized” Religion and
religion as people actually live it.

Essayist Ruben Martinez states, “I am a
practicing Catholic because I believe in the
strength of communities of faith and,
especially, in the
role of ritual as a unifying force that
allows people to transcend narrow individualism and
reach out to the strangers who
mirror our own visage:
that moment of the Holy Mass when we
turn to our neighbors and
offer
‘Peace be with you.’”

“The House of Belonging” by David Whyte

I awoke this morning in the gold light

turning this way and that,

thinking it was one day like any other.

But the veil had gone from my darkened heart.

And I thought:

It must have been the quiet candlelight that filled my room.

It must have been the first easy rhythm with which I breathed
myself to sleep.

It must have been the prayer I said speaking to the otherness of the night.

And I thought:

This is the good day you could meet your love.

This is the black day someone close to you could die.

This is the day you realize how easily the thread is broken
between this world and the next.

And I found myself sitting up in the quiet pathway of light,
the tawny, close-grained cedar burning around me like fire.

And all the angels of this housely heaven were ascending
through the first roof of light the sun had made.

This is the bright home in which I live.

This is where I ask my friends to come.

This is where I want to love all the things

it has taken me so long to learn to love.

This is the temple of my adult aloneness.

And I belong to that aloneness as I belong to my life.

There is no house like the house of belonging.