

Who Am I? Gifts 1©

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Most folks who are on a mature spiritual journey have been shaped by four questions. Beneath the stories of our past, beneath our joys and sorrows, we have within us an essential nature that is whole and unbroken. This is reflected in both our Unitarian and Universalist heritage and theology that proclaims original goodness rather than original sin. What does this whole and unbroken nature of ours look like and how do we find it? If we can access it and take nourishment from this inner strength, wisdom, essential nature, this wholeness, we will find great peace, enduring courage, and contentment.

- The first of these questions is: “Who am I, what is my essential nature?”
- The second question is: “What do I love?”
- The third question is: “How shall I live, knowing I will die?”
- And the final question is: “What is my gift to the family of the earth?”

Many of us, distracted by the rush and pressure of our days, manage to suppress or ignore these fundamental questions - until we are confronted with something that wakes us up, and we begin to listen to how things really are in our lives. Perhaps we face a divorce, or a change of employment, a move, some inexplicable spiritual experience, a grave illness, the birth of a child, or the death of a loved one. Or, perhaps something that used to feed or satisfy us now seems strangely thin, finished, and no longer engaging. We may feel pulled in a new direction because one phase of our life has ended; and even if we have begun on a new journey, we don't know where it will lead us. We don't have a one-size-fits-all map, but we do have access to time-tested wisdom about living in this deeper, more luminous aspect of our nature.

Over the next few months, I will address each of these four questions in the hope and belief that these questions will reveal crucial insights to us on our spiritual journeys. When we meditate upon these four questions, they reveal the true nature of our love and strength, our courage and our wisdom. They enable us to gently awaken the four fundamental realms of the inner life: identity, love, daily practice, and kindness.

Who am I? Am I spirit, or am I just a physical body? Am I sacred, or secular, profane or holy? Am I irrevocably shaped by my genetics, my birth order in the family, the circumstances of my personal history, or the time and culture I find myself living

in? Or am I still free to move and grow and uncover a new world, a truer, brighter more authentic path for myself? Am I fragile or am I strong? Am I broken or am I whole? When I listen deeply to my inner life, what do I hear? What is the substance of my soul, the core of my being, my true nature?

The Buddha said, "Be lamps unto yourselves; be your own confidence. Hold to the truths within yourselves as the only truths." We are, he said, all Buddhas, filled with divine nature. How do we find this nature? Many people have looked deep inside of themselves and the first things they find are their own imperfections, their own character imperfections and their own personality imperfections. They encounter doubts about their worthiness. Many people begin their spiritual journeys by trying to get rid of all their weaknesses. They think they have to try to cleanse themselves of all that is wrong with them, try to purge all the negative qualities, to become saints.

But this is not a gentle path, nor is it the most fertile path to our inner garden and our inner hidden wholeness. When we ask ourselves who we are, we already begin with a lot of material. When I ask myself, I see that I am a daughter, a sister, a wife, a mother, a minister, a friend and a colleague. But then we can take this deeper. Am I an angry person? Am I an ill person? Do I have a chronic illness or a terminal illness? Am I a successful doctor? Am I a famous musician? Am I the adult child of an alcoholic? Am I a veteran with PTSD? Am I homeless?

Am I defined by illness and tragedy, or by success and relationship? Every time we asked this question, it can take us a little deeper, and each time the answer reveals a little more about the complexion and complexity of our lives. When someone defines him or her self by illness or tragedy, they tend to feel small and afraid. When someone defines themselves by the depth of relationship and interconnection, they can feel caring and grateful and sometimes overwhelmed. Personally, when I define myself as a parent, I feel patient sometimes, protective often, and responsible. When I define myself as a minister, I feel exuberant most of the time and overwhelmed some of the time. Each name, each identity, brings a different way of seeing and responding to the world.

When I am able to listen carefully, I find that in prayer and meditation, my inner identity is always changing. I may feel tired or hungry. I may feel sadness or joy, fear or peace. None of the sensations remains, and none of them remains the same. It is possible that we are constantly changing, and with every breath the possibility of a new aspect of ourselves arises. It is possible that what we call the self is fluid and elastic. It points the way toward evolving with each new breath. We cannot hold on for too long to any idea of ourselves, because our selves are always in flux. If we do not listen for how we are changing, we may find ourselves feeling more and more

alienated from our true nature and farther from the garden of things that we really love.

Here is what we don't want to happen. We don't want to find ourselves trapped in a single facet of our lives -- neither a great tragedy nor a great ego success. We don't want to feel smothered by the smallness of who we have become, or even trapped by success. If we limit ourselves to a certain identity -- a cancer patient, a child of divorce, a manager, a mother - we compress ourselves into a narrow rut. One of the ways to expand this compression, and become more attuned to its dynamic nature, is to keep asking the question, "Who am I right now?" and listen for multiple answers. Listen without fear or judgment; instead, listen with curiosity. By recalling the plurality of our identities, we can increase our flexibility and move more easily through our roles and responsibilities in life. Because those roles and responsibilities don't go away, but our ability to hold them more lightly, with less ego, and to create more spacious living inside of them, can increase.

Freud and the therapists that followed him gave many names to our inner conditions. People say, "I am a child of a dysfunctional family. I am an alcoholic. I am a survivor of violence, or as we see in the #metoo movement, a survivor of sexual assault." These names are worn like shields, psychological coats of arms. They are solid like an epitaph. But sometimes these clinical diagnoses can prevent people from living into their own deeper wisdom. Just to clarify, it is not my intent to disrespect or downplay the effects of violence upon us as human beings; rather my intent is to invite us to continually expand our identities and capacities. Sometimes these identities prevent people from opening to the unfolding breath of their spiritual evolution. The way we name ourselves colors the way we live. If we think we are fragile and broken, we will live a fragile, broken life. If we believe we are strong and wise, we will live with enthusiasm and courage.

Psychologists aren't alone in looking at us with limited eyes, seeing only a small part of who we are. Neurologists see us in terms of chemical and electrical impulses. Biologists focus on structure and function in the evolutionary processes that shaped us. Politicians see us as voters. Economists look at us as producers and consumers. Yes, we are all of these things, and more. We are electricity, chemistry, matter, energy, consumers, citizens, patients. However, each of these models is limited in its capacity to accurately render our essential identity. There is something deeper, something that names more deeply and carefully the way our spirit inhabits our bodies, our hearts, and our minds.

Like Buddha, Jesus also said, "You are the light of the world." He did not say you are the light of the world if you grew up in a loving, supportive, two-parent

biological family and had no sorrow in your life. He did not say you are the light of the world if you were never violated or harmed, if you've never had any illness or grief. No, regardless of the shape of the sorrow or victory, the grief or ecstasy we have experienced, there is a potent inner luminosity that is never extinguished and is alive in us even at this very moment. Buddha and Jesus tell us we are the light of the world.

There is a place in us that is deeper than our wounding. There is a place in us that is always free and never broken. This is our Buddha nature. We develop and strengthen our relationship with this nature of ours through deep listening, deep questioning and patience; patience and trust. Being willing to experience sorrow, to get underneath the sorrow, because beneath the sorrow - which hurts - there is that luminescence, there is the music of the spheres, there is a place inside, below our names, our stories, our injuries, a place that speaks to us about what is true and right. There is a presence, a sense of well-being, that is always available to us and is powerful enough and indestructible enough to help us live through pain and sorrow.

I can evoke this inner place, but it is not easily named or scientifically described. Like the first words in the *Tao Te Ching* so aptly put it: "The Tao that can be named is not the eternal Tao." But it can be evoked and courted, in worship services, during prayer and meditation, in nature, in music, dance, loving embrace, in poetry, in art.

Let us move away from naming ourselves only and authoritatively by our ego successes that create the illusion that we are better than others and immune to our humanity. And let us move away from naming ourselves only and authoritatively by our wounding and hurts. It creates the illusion that because we suffer we are broken, defective, less than -- that we are handicapped human beings. These things simply are; they happen to everyone, but they do not define us.

We will all suffer; we will all die. There is nothing wrong with us because these things are true. We are only damaged and weakened when we futilely try to deny and escape these realities. Yet these realities, all of us suffering and all dying, in no way diminish our inner loveliness, our inner luminescence, our inner Buddha nature.

The more deeply we explore our true nature, the more quickly we come to feel that there are things in us so powerful, so deep that they cannot really be named at all, but they can be evoked.

While it is true that sorrow alone is incapable of defining our essential spiritual nature, we must acknowledge that our sorrows invariably give shape and texture to our existence. Whenever I become aware of someone else's suffering, I almost always

feel myself in the presence of something both sacred and deeply human, something fundamental and true that offers a glimpse into the nature of all things. And it is with those who have suffered, in their journeys of healing and courage, that I have perceived most clearly the miraculous, breathtaking resilience of the human spirit. Within sorrow there is grace. When we come close to those things that break us down, we also touch those things that break us open. And in that breaking open, we uncover our true nature.

Here is a story that the Buddha told:

A man is on a journey. He comes to a vast stretch of water. It is dangerous on this side of this shore, but on the other side it is safe and without danger. No boat or ferry goes to this other safe side, nor is there any bridge for crossing over. The man thinks, "It would be good if I gather grass, wood, branches and leaves to make a raft, and with the help of that raft cross over safely to the other side." Then that man gathers grass, wood, branches and leaves and makes a raft, and with the help of that raft crosses over safely to the other side, exerting himself with his hands and his feet. Having crossed over and arrived at the other side, he thinks: "I love this raft. It was of great help to me. With its aid I have crossed safely over to the other side. It was so good and so useful, now I will carry this raft on my head, or on my back wherever I go."

The Buddha asks his disciples, "Yes, the raft has been good, but wouldn't it be better to let the raft go, as it has completed its usefulness? This is true of my teachings," he said. "Use them when they are useful and then let them go."

The same is true with our stories and our identities. Yes, we all have stories, we all live mythological lives. We are all shaped by our stories, our work, our childhood, our family identity, our diagnoses. These can carry us part of the way into adult spiritual development, but our story then becomes more limited in value. Once our story has helped us pay attention to our history, name it, claim it, mourn it, celebrate it -- then, it is time to let it go. It is like any teaching. Once we let go of these aspects of our impermanent identity, we can begin to explore our deepest, truest, most luminous Buddha nature.

Who are you? How many ways can you define yourself, and how many characteristics can you access? How do your words, hopes, dreams, or posture change when your identity shifts? Which words, which actions, which feelings, reflect more precisely your sense of your deepest nature and your luminous light? Just keep listening, letting go, and being curious.

Blessed Be.

Amen.

Note: This sermon is based on the work of Wayne Muller *How Then Shall We Live?: Four Questions that Reveal the Beauty and Meaning of Our Lives*.

Reference

Muller, W. (1996) *How then shall we live?: Four simple questions that reveal the beauty and meaning of our lives*. New York: Bantam.