



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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## “Becoming Who You Are”

© by the Reverend Alison W. Eskildsen

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At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

### Centering Thoughts

*When I let go of what I am, I become what I might be.* Lao Tzu

*We are constantly invited to be who we are.* Henry David Thoreau

*Know what you want to do, hold the thought firmly, and do every day what should be done, and every sunset will see you that much nearer the goal.* Elbert Green Hubbard

### Sermon

“For each child that’s born, a morning star rises and sings to the universe who we are.” What a beautiful image of celebration for a new birth. How wonderful that the universe welcomes who we are with song.

We *are* the breath of our ancestors, the dreams of our grandfathers, the prayers of our grandmothers. We are lovers of life, makers of peace, keepers of faith, and holders of wisdom.

We are what conception merely begins – a lifetime of becoming. In this moment who are you becoming? What new name or identity is emerging from within you?

This morning we welcomed several new members to our Fellowship. I believe becoming a member of this or any other group involves a process of adopting a new name or identity. In Jewish and Roman Catholic traditions, upon reaching adolescence and the completion of a faith formation process, your new identity is reflected by the actual addition of a new name.

Here, new members keep their name, but I hope when you join you add Unitarian Universalist to your set of identities. Some feel this more deeply than others, but I think membership moves one from being a ‘me’ in the pew, to being a ‘we’, part of this particular UU community. Like arms and legs join with other parts to form a whole body, together our individual membership forms our collective Fellowship.

If you say, “I am Unitarian Universalist,” you proclaim that identity and acknowledge you *chose* to belong. No one forced you. Paraphrasing the Unitarian and Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, what you choose is who you are. Whether you are a newcomer, someone who joined long ago, or someone who may be moving on, each of us is in some stage of Unitarian Universalist identity formation. And like many other identities we hold, we must choose over and over again whether to keep that identity.

Being a Unitarian Universalist minister is a continuous process of identity formation. Education and ordination provide some ingredients in the making of a minister, but until I actually put on the mantle, figuratively and literally, and stood before a congregation, I wasn't fully a minister. I'm still in the process of becoming a minister because every day offers me a chance to learn and grow into all the responsibilities of this role, and to reaffirm my calling to serve Unitarian Universalism.

I expect this resonates with many of you. I know you're in some process of becoming who you are or want to be. Graduation offers new opportunities to become something new. Giving birth to a child by definition makes you a parent, but only through parenting day after day do you fully come into that identity. The same is true for becoming a teacher, doctor, spouse, lover, student, or daughter.

Less welcome events in our lives present a time for new identities, too. Retirement means shedding a work identity and creating a new identity in its absence. The death of a loved one, divorce, and similar losses also require new identities.

When my younger son stopped playing soccer in middle school, I suffered an incredible loss. This may sound insignificant, but I had been a soccer player and I vicariously enjoyed a soccer identity through him. I was the assistant coach of his travel soccer team, so when he gave up soccer for basketball, I also ended my connection to his team. That meant losing the community of parents I traveled with, spent hours on the sidelines with, and shared our kids' successes and defeats with.

I grieved this loss, but I slowly learned to live without soccer as a central part of my identity. My husband and faith community were particularly helpful in that transition. I know this community has been supportive to you when life events force changes in you.

Identity issues frequently fill the headline news. For those whose gender identity differs from that of their birth certificate, the state of North Carolina recently became unwelcoming. Politicians there decided to deny some people's truth that God or biology mismatched who they are. As justification, lawmakers claimed a concern for the safety of children who might be molested by someone in the 'wrong' bathroom. Frankly, when my two boys were young and Paul wasn't around, I worried about the possibility they would be molested in the 'right' bathroom. I think North Carolina legislators should be more concerned about the harm to a child entering a men's restroom who identifies as female and dresses as a girl.

As this controversy shows, our personal identities have significance in the world. When culture or individuals press us to be something we're not, it has consequences. Spiritual writer and philosopher Mark Nepo calls it 'spiritual suffocation.' When we are not authentic to our true

selves, we suffocate. This may bring about unhappiness, dis-ease, depression, and even the death of our true selves.

Often our culture, parents, and even peers tell us we should be something we may not be. If we're not beautiful, we should diet, go under the knife, or feel bad about ourselves. If we're not accomplished, we should do whatever it takes to be successful, wealthy, and admired. Heaven help the child who wishes to be an artist, mechanic, or waitress instead of a doctor, lawyer, or banker. Heaven help the person who must choose to live a lie over being who that person really wants to be.

Maybe we are heaven-sent. Many of you say you come here because you can be authentic. Here, you can be openly gay or lesbian. You can be openly an atheist or mystic. You can be rich or poor, a curmudgeon or angel. You can be known and valued for who you are.

I admit, some identities challenge some of us more than others. We are not perfect in our welcome, but we work to be more so. We aspire to be better than we are.

One area we're working on concerns racial identity. We know all lives matter. Our First Principle affirms this truth. But sadly, some lives don't seem to matter as proved last month when Marques Gaines was punched after exciting a 7-Eleven store in Chicago. He was knocked down and left unconscious in the street. A camera captured dozens of people walking by, ignoring him. Two men picked his pockets. A store employee called 9-1-1, but didn't offer other assistance. No one pulled Gaines from the street until after he was run over by a passing taxi. He later died. His assailant remains unknown and at large.

What does this say about who we are? What is it that allows us to turn away from people in need? I wonder what I would have done. Would fear for my own safety have kept me from helping this stranger? Would I, or you, have been the Good Samaritan who might have saved his life? I wish I felt more confident that I would have taken the risk to help another.

The increased use of smart phones and security cameras show us how little some lives matter. Voices aligned with the Black Lives Matter movement express outrage over the unequal rates of incarceration and deaths of black men. Remembering the names of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Lequan McDonald, and many others, is one way we affirm that their lives mattered.

To affirm that black lives matter does not mean police lives don't matter. To affirm that black lives matter does not mean that white lives don't matter. To affirm that black lives matter recognizes that black lives haven't mattered throughout our history, but it's time they did. They didn't matter during enslavement, segregation, or the new Jim Crow now because the white dominant culture privileges whites. But however we self-identify racially, together I believe our Unitarian Universalist values call us to respond to racial injustice as well as the economic inequality and lack of opportunity that are at its root.

We cannot be who we truly are or wish to be when some part of our identity is kept in chains. As Unitarian Universalists who affirm that all lives matter, I believe we must act by standing beside

the Black Lives Matter goals. With that in mind members of the Social Action Committee hope to engage you in dialogue to better understand what that might mean for us individually and congregationally. We'll begin this coming Saturday at the Leadership Council meeting.

Whoever you are, whomever you love, however you vote, whatever your name or identity, we welcome you to join us on this journey of becoming. Together, may we become more authentically who we are and become more loving and generous, than we are in this moment. May it ever be so.

### **Questions for Reflection or Discussion**

1. Is there a positive new aspect of yourself struggling to emerge? How might it be encouraged?
2. Have you changed your self-identity over time and what influenced these changes?
3. Do you feel you are living authentically for who you are? Why or why not?