



## Passing

BY NELL NEWTON, MINISTER, Amarillo Unitarian  
Universalist Fellowship, Texas

Have you watched any of those shows on PBS that trace the genealogies and DNA of famous people? They take whatever stories and records the person might have, get a DNA sample, and then do the research. At the end they sit down with the person and show them what they've found. The names, the ship manifests, the marriage certificates, the little bit of genetic code that points to a specific branch of human migration.

I love those shows. And I especially love the one with Dr. Henry Louis Gates Jr., because he really addresses the complexities of families, secrets, and the history of race in this country.

A year or so back, my family got up our courage and money and started that line of investigation. We were hoping to sift out fact from fiction, because our family holds a lot of dubious tales from less than reliable narrators. We wanted to find out if a great-great aunt really came from Damascus, or if our great-grandfather came from India, or if our great-great grandmother was full-blooded Mayan. We were curious and hoped our DNA would fill in the incomplete stories. It might answer some questions. But in the end I knew what it would show: I'm a post-colonial mutt in 21<sup>st</sup> century America.

As a multi-racial person, I am supremely ill-suited to speak on the experience of white or black or brown. I am all and none of these. But I can speak from my own experience—and I've had some interesting experiences! And I can speak as a person whose family contains the whole palette of human coloring. Mine is a calico family with blonde and brown and black hair, hair that is smooth and curly and frizzy. Brown and green and blue eyes, freckles, dimples, and when we grin our cheeks rise high. We have broad shoulders and wide feet. Our complexions range from fair to deep and our babies are especially beautiful.

Some of us identify as white, and some of us identify as people of color. While you'd think that we would be completely comfortable talking about race and identity, we don't do it. We can—we have—but in general, we don't. Recently I tugged on one of those loose strings and realized that we don't talk about race and identity because some of us are still struggling with *passing*. Passing as white. Passing as not colored. Passing as acceptable.

So, here's where I can speak from—from the experience of passing, becoming acceptable, striving to be measured by my conduct and brilliance while wearing an indeterminate skin. I can speak from the weird place of holding white privilege *and* being seen as not-one-of-us. It is a strange place, indeed.

Here's the awfulness of passing: knowing that your father, your grandmother, your ancestors, sacrificed some of their own identity to make it easier for you to go forward. Now, plenty of our ancestors sacrificed for us to be successful. But denying one's own identity tends to leave odd scars on the family tree.

As a mutt I'm already used to complexity, and find the white/black racial labels to be both woefully limiting and dangerous. Because those labels allow for convenient boxes, and people don't live in boxes. There will be many ways we will dismantle the systems of racial oppression, but we're not going to do it all rationally, or all at once.

This is our work. To start this work I'll invite you to journey with me a while. I can't ask you to fully understand the weird place that is my identity, but if you

# Quest

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When I discover  
who I am,  
I'll be free.

— Ralph Ellison

A monthly for religious liberals

### THINKING ABOUT IDENTITY

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would accept my invitation, as we journey together we might begin to see where you are weird too. I'm going to be bold and suggest that there are plenty of us who are quietly *passing* in different ways.

Perhaps there are parts of your family that were not acceptable, not spoken of, not included in the family's history—oral or written. In the work of becoming acceptable, our families routinely edit these histories—sometimes consciously, sometimes out of fear.

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### Was there a time when any part of your family was unacceptable?

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Maybe the family name was changed to make it acceptable to English ears. Maybe alcohol or drug addiction twisted limbs of the family tree. Mental illness, violence, poverty, illegitimacy, abandonment or adoption can all get filtered out of the stories we tell.

For some immigrants to this country, the upheaval and culture shock left them weak and unstable. I know that my own immigrant grandmother never quite got used to being *colored*, and it warped her life in America. I know that my other grandmother was fiercely intelligent and had to slide sideways through a world where women's lives were circumscribed by domesticity.

As part of this journey together, I would then invite you to go back into your own family and look closely at any gaps in the story—pull on those loose threads and see what knots tighten or come undone with gentle tugging. Was there a time when any part of your family was unacceptable? How did you manage to finally pass? And what was the cost to your grandfather, your mother, your aunts?

What stories did they finally tell you to show that they had succeeded? In those stories are also the quiet warnings not to go back, not to ask, not to undo their

work and sacrifice. In those stories you are reminded that being unacceptable is dangerous. And they love you too much to see you go back there.

Now, take those stories, take those fears, and wear them. Breathe into the danger and tension and feel the complexity of benefitting from those sacrifices. Spend time getting used to the complexity.

Did your family benefit from oppressing other people? Go examine that possibility. It's okay to be objective at first. Before we can learn to hold full empathy for another who seems different, we need to resolve the shame or discomfort that we might still be carrying from our own families. By looking at the compromises and sacrifices made in the past, we can better honor them and honor the struggles of others.

Then, once we've looked back at our heritage, the next step is to look at our own selves. There are other ways we might be silently passing, hoping we won't be looked at too closely, or judged too harshly.

Too often I hear that UU congregations are too homogeneous—too white, too affluent, over-educated—and that's an easy stereotype to bemoan. But it's too easy, too simple. And it's wrong. We're more complicated than that.

Just like our families may have been shaped by adversity, all of us have struggled somehow. And some of us are still struggling to be acceptable. We're still struggling to pass by not acknowledging our whole selves, our complicated identities or situations.

Some of us are grappling with economic insecurity—just getting by, and having to make tough choices between medicine and car payments. But we come to church and smile and don't mention these hard choices. Some of us are grieving terrible losses. And the rest of the world seems to think that we should be upright and optimistic. So we come to church and look thoughtful and don't mention that our hearts might

not ever be done being undone. Maybe it's hard staying sober or maybe the medication isn't quite working well enough. Maybe it's hard not crying when you see a mother and baby even though the miscarriage was a long time ago. But we come to church and hope that no one asks us anything too personal.

Someone might have said, "I can't be in community like this; people will see me and think I don't belong there." And so they aren't here with us because they weren't up to the effort it takes to pass, to meet our standards of acceptability, whatever they imagine those are.

And this is why passing for normal, successful or affluent is problematic. It denies the full range of our experiences and prompts us to edit out the problematic parts of ourselves and our identities. It denies us the chance for wholeness and connection.

I often tell people that Unitarian Universalism is a place where we come together to learn new ways of being in the world. One of the things we will learn is how to dismantle racism and other forms of oppression. We won't get it right the first time, or the second. But we have to keep trying. It is the work that will heal our world. And as always, we have to start with ourselves.

When Rabbi Jesus asks us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, the hardest part of that is the second part—loving ourselves fully. But it gets easier if you think about the people who have loved you forward—your family, your friends, your partners, your teachers. Consider their love for you. It might not have been perfect, but it was love. Look at the love that pushed you forward, and see if its momentum can push you a little further to greater love and empathy for others who are working to be accepted, not just acceptable.

This is our work. ■

## Coming Out

BY DIANA MCLEAN  
MINISTER,  
PETERBOROUGH  
UNITARIAN  
UNIVERSALIST CHURCH,  
NEW HAMPSHIRE



I would have told you with complete certainty and utter sincerity that I was straight, right up until the first time I was seriously attracted to a woman. I was 40, and this was new for me. I was perplexed by the idea that I could be raised in a Unitarian Universalist family, and still only discover this significant fact about myself at that age. What reason, I wondered, would I have had to hide this from myself?

I did what I do whenever confronted with something unfamiliar: I researched it. After finding online articles about women coming out as lesbian or bisexual later in life, I discovered the book *Sexual Fluidity: Understanding Women's Love and Desire* by Lisa M. Diamond, a professor of psychology and gender studies. She conducted research with 100 women over the course of a decade. On the Kinsey Scale, which places people on a spectrum from “exclusively heterosexual” to “exclusively homosexual,” most of the women chose a point somewhere between those extremes, and the location shifted for many of them during the study.

I recognized that it was possible that I had not deceived myself, but instead had changed—had shifted my location on the Kinsey scale, for lack of a more poetic way to put it. My newfound attraction to women didn't mean that I'd secretly always been a lesbian and that my past relationships with men were fake or deceptive. It wasn't about past relationships. It was a recognition that my next partner could be of any gender.

I kept quiet about that realization for a while. Not exactly in the closet—I came out to my parents and some

trusted friends—but under the radar. My “Midwestern Modest” upbringing meant that I was inclined to think that because I was happily unpartnered, there was no need for anyone other than my closest circle to know who I was attracted to.

I let it slide when a coworker said: “Well, since you were married, at least we know if we're going to set you up, it should be with a man.” My response was something about not wanting to be set up at all. That was true, but avoided the issue.

After a few years of that strategy, I realized that if I kept it up, I faced a couple of potentially challenging possibilities.

Waiting to come out until I was in a relationship with a woman or non-binary person would put a lot of pressure on that partner. People who had only ever seen me as straight might assume the new partner caused the change in me, thinking (incorrectly) that someone can be “converted” to a different sexual orientation. That's hardly a fair thing to do to someone you love.

While any such partner was then purely hypothetical, my calling to ministry was not. When I began to struggle with the decision to come out (or not), I was in the process of applying to theology school. I hoped that in a few years I would be searching for a congregation to serve as their ordained minister. Unless my sexual orientation came up during the interview process, it was likely that members of the church would just assume I'm straight, as so many people do. If I later revealed a serious relationship with a woman or non-binary person, I worried that there could be some shock, some anxiety about what this means for the church, and possibly some anger at being deceived—even though I wouldn't have intentionally deceived anyone.

The first time I felt really uncomfortable with my choice to remain silent

was the first time my religious leadership felt compromised by that silence. For many years, Unitarian Universalist congregations in the Boulder-Denver area had held a worship service on the steps of the capitol building in Denver focused on LGBTQ+ rights, including marriage equality and gender identity and expression.

The first time I attended that service I had to make an unexpected choice. In the service, those who identify as LGBTQ+ were invited to stand and receive a blessing. I wasn't out and wasn't ready to make that decision in that moment, so I remained seated. It made me uncomfortable. It made me feel ashamed...not of who I was, but of not being willing to literally stand up and be seen *as* who I was.

I did have one good reason not to be visibly “out” that day. I was with my son, who was ten years old at the time, and I wasn't out to him yet. When we got home that day, we talked about it, and I explained that I had wanted to stand up, wanted to be brave enough to do that, but couldn't because that wasn't how I wanted him to learn that about me.

He said he would have been surprised but otherwise fine with me standing up, but I realized that day that unless I was fully out, every time I was in a situation like that I would have to think about who was there, who might see me, who might learn in that moment that their assumptions about me were incorrect, and what negative ramifications that choice might have.

I also thought about the positive ramifications coming out might have. What difference might it make in my ministry if, instead of people assuming I'm a straight ally to the LGBTQ+ community, they understood that I'm a member of it?

Who might see me, and know that there are people like them serving as clergy in a faith tradition that honors the inherent worth and dignity of all

people? That there are people like them raising happy, healthy children? Who might learn that their assumptions about me were incorrect, and take from that a broader lesson about assuming who people are?

If I remain silent, I wondered, what does that do to the people I minister to? It doesn't silence them, because they don't know the choice I'm making. But it doesn't help them find their voices, either. It doesn't allow me to be among those who say, "It's okay. I've been there. Look at me—I'm out, and I'm glad, and my life is good."

These were all important considerations. But neither a theoretical future relationship nor my career in ministry were the most important reason for writing my "coming out" blog post. The most important reason was that continuing to be silent felt, for the first time, like I was actively hiding part of who I am. Unlike the moment of remaining seated at the public worship service, this was an ongoing act of hiding, and the internal pressure I felt about it was increasing. The metaphor of "the closet" was making sense in a visceral way it didn't before.

In February 2015, when many of my fellow Unitarian Universalist bloggers participated in a #SexUUality blog project, my desire to come out publicly grew. The explanatory paragraph we all put into our #SexUUality blog posts included this statement: "Unitarian Universalists have a long history of courage in tackling issues around human sexuality—from campaigning for human rights to the pioneering innovative work in the Our Whole Lives sexuality curriculum."

I wanted so much to have the courage to publish my coming out post that February. I did write it then, but after reflection, I knew that I wasn't ready yet. I had to do a lot of thinking before I could publish the coming out post: thinking about who needed to hear from me personally before it was in public space; thinking about how much

to say, and what to leave out, or leave for another time.

In anxious moments, I'd revert back to my old thought patterns: It's no one's business. It's too private to put on a blog. It's not the kind of thing I should be talking about publicly. All of that was a defense mechanism, as thinking so often is. But after a few months, alongside all that thinking, there was a feeling. That feeling might best be described as a yearning to be seen. To be seen for myself, and not for some more societally acceptable version of who that might be—who *I* might be.

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### Being closeted induces a kind of emotional claustrophobia, which stifles and silences the soul just as a physical closet traps the body.

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Waiting a bit longer was the right decision, just as not standing up at the worship service until I'd talked to my son was the right decision. Still, it bothered me in February, and continued to bother me as time went on—not just because I missed out on my coming out post being part of the #SexUUality project, though I did have a pang of regret about that. It bothered me because I felt invisible, even inauthentic. I felt "in the closet" instead of "under the radar."

People who are claustrophobic know what it is to be uncomfortable in an enclosed space. Being closeted induces a kind of emotional claustrophobia, which stifles and silences the soul just as a physical closet traps the body.

Eventually I came out, but that was not the end of my struggle with both self-definition and how others defined my identity. In the coming out blog post I finally published in April 2015, I specifically rejected a few labels for myself, but I didn't give my readers a new

label to apply to me. Maybe that was because I was still letting go of the old one—straight—and maybe it was because there wasn't a choice that felt quite like *me* to me. It took me a few more years to settle fairly comfortably on "queer" as a way to describe my identity.

A lot has shifted in the four years since I published that blog post. I'm uncomfortable now with the ableism in the use of standing both as a metaphor and as the way people were invited to identify themselves as LGBTQIA to receive a blessing.

I'm now an ordained minister serving a congregation in Peterborough, New Hampshire. I was open about my identity during the search that brought me here in 2016, and about the fact that I was happily single at that time. By the next spring, I began dating a woman who is also a Unitarian Universalist minister, and we are now in a committed partnership. The congregation I serve seems to have had no negative reaction to that change. It's impossible to know how much of that is because I was already out.

Now that I've been out for a few years, I understand that "coming out" is a lifelong process, not something that was done in 2015. I don't visually present to a lot of people as "queer" (whatever they think that's supposed to look like), and so I still encounter frequent assumptions that I am straight. Even my beloved, when I first began flirting with her, thought I was straight (and thus, clearly not flirting) until one of her close friends did a quick search online and told her otherwise.

Despite those continued incorrect assumptions and the awkwardness they sometimes lead to, I'm proud to be among those who can, indeed, say: "It's okay. I've been there. Look at me—I'm out, and I'm glad, and my life is good." ■



## Who Am I?

BY SETH CARRIER-LADD, MINISTER,  
UNITARIAN  
UNIVERSALIST  
CHURCH OF MUNCIE,  
INDIANA

If asked to answer the question *Who am I?* how would you answer? No context, no setting, no defined purpose for asking, just the question: *Who am I?* If you haven't already, I invite you to stop reading and take a moment to think about it, right now. What would your answer be? Who are you?

Identity is such a tricky thing. It's fluid, and our answers to the question of who we are both change and remain stable over time. Ten years ago, I wouldn't have answered "minister," but now that's a central part of who I am. Five years ago, I wouldn't have answered "husband," but my marriage is now a central part of my life. Three years and one week ago, I wouldn't have answered "father," but now parenting is a central focus of my day-to-day activities. On the other-hand, male, straight, white and Unitarian Universalist are all identities that have remained a constant throughout my life. But even with those consistent identities, my understanding of them has changed over time. For example, I have a much more nuanced understanding of my whiteness now than I did ten years ago. And the way that I am Unitarian Universalist in the world has evolved considerably across my lifespan. So even my relatively fixed identities have changed. And yet, despite all this change, I still feel like the same me at my core. A changed me, but me nonetheless.

And, there are still other ways to define ourselves. When I paused just now to answer the question *Who am I?* the first response that came into my head was "I'm someone who is committed to learning and growing throughout my lifetime." That's a

value, a belief. It's not the only way I identify myself, but in this moment at least it felt like the most important one. There are also, of course, parts of identities that we might consider of lesser import or weight—for example, I'm someone who loves science fiction and fantasy novels, I'm a Boston sports fan, and I'm also a technology enthusiast. I wouldn't say those are the most important things to know about me, but they're part of who I am.

Then there's the value in our identities to consider. I'll never forget the sermon I heard as a layperson attending my UU church in Philadelphia, from a UU minister who was serving as the director of a retirement home. She lifted up her concern for the folks she was working with who seemed to have lost value in the eyes of so many in our society because they were no longer working. One of the first questions we typically ask when we get to know people is *What do you do?* with the clear assumption being that everyone has a job.

Which is why if someone answers that question by saying they are a stay-at-home parent, or they currently unemployed, the ensuing conversation often feels awkward. Our culture places value on working, and assumes that we all are. This minister shared with us how she was aware of how often her clients seemed to be diminished by no longer having a culturally valued job—not just in interactions with others, but also in many cases in how they saw their lives in general. She challenged us to remember *everyone's* inherent worth and dignity. That challenge has remained with me throughout my life and ministry.

Which parts of your identity are valued most by your culture? Which parts of your identity do you value the most yourself? Is there ever any conflict or tension between the two?

There are so many harmful stories that our culture tells us that affect us even when we're aware that they are

harmful. Violence pervades our media and our video games these days, and we like to pretend that if we know better it won't have an impact. Strict gender roles are part of the fabric of our society. As a boy raised by Unitarian Universalist parents in a Unitarian Universalist church, I can personally attest that all the valuing of my feminine side and all that I was taught about valuing my feelings didn't keep me from deeply internalizing our society's message that boys and men shouldn't cry. I rarely cry to this day. Despite the gains with marriage equality, the LGBTQ community still doesn't have full equal rights and protections as the law of the land in our country. Yes, there are some local ordinances passed, but in far too many places, gay people can be fired simply for being gay with no repercussion to the employer or legal recourse. What message does that send about how we value those people's worth and dignity?

I don't think there's a magic bullet that is going to make all of this go away. I do think that we can make a difference simply by continuing to do the things we're already doing to help change and transform the cultural norms and values with which we disagree. We can bring greater awareness to the impact all these messages have on us, even and despite the fact that we know they're trying to change us. We can bring awareness to the reality that identity is varied and shifting, and that there are many different ways that we are seen and that we see others, and that they are usually not one and the same. To create a culture where we not only recognize, but truly honor, uplift and respect the inherent worth and dignity of every person, we have to increase our awareness, and continue the work of changing our cultural messages. We can help each other know, not just in our head, but also deep in our bones, that we, that I, that you, have worth and dignity. ■



## From Your Minister

BY MEG RILEY  
SENIOR MINISTER,  
CHURCH OF THE  
LARGER FELLOWSHIP

Some identities, like being a student or a resident in a particular place, come and go. Others are with you for life. Still others you find yourself easing into and becoming more and more familiar with. For me, right now, aging is one of those gradual ones I find myself thinking more about. I'm in my 60s now. People in their 60s used to be old in my mind—but I find that the word "old" really tends to mean people who are older than I am. It's not a fixed identity. Suddenly 60s seem like the prime of life!

I hated turning 50. My women friends wanted me to have a croning ceremony, but that was annoying to me. I adopted a child at 40 and I was tired of people thinking I was the grandmother. At the urging of a friend who insisted I should have some kind of ritual, I honored the date in the most honest way I could: I gathered a circle of friends and then climbed under a table with a tablecloth over it and said, "I don't want to be 50! Tell me why I should come out!" Friends in their 50s then began to tell me what they liked about it—the increased confidence, the sense of not worrying so much about what other people thought. Finally, bored and sweaty, I emerged, still ambivalent but willing to face facts (and some late arrivers who looked stunned to have walked in on the middle of this).

I had no such difficulty turning 60. Rather, I felt invigorated and excited about it. For one thing, there were discounts attached to the number, and I'm cheap. For another thing, my kid was pretty much grown up and avoiding me anyway, so no one thought we were related at all on a daily basis, and so I wasn't hearing all those grandma comments.

And I've loved my 60s. The confidence remains, and the sense of having nothing left to prove. There is an ease and self-acceptance which is a blessing I wish I could have received earlier, about everything from my body to my inevitable blunders and errors.

But being old...this is kind of a new identity that's creeping up on me, and it seems to be getting stronger. For one thing, no one is left in my family who is older than me. Parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents—no one of the older generations serves as a barrier between me and death. For another thing, conversation at parties and social gatherings among my longtime friends is beginning to turn to their retirement plans. Things like Medicare and Social Security are no longer just social issues, but rather are practical topics, as people compare and contrast options and plans. And, then there's the matter of my body, which is no longer remotely drawn to late night dances or parties or even movies. Sleepy now, thank you very much.

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### I'm beginning to wonder and fantasize about my next stage of life.

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And I'm beginning to wonder and fantasize about my next stage of life. Growing old is an exciting prospect to me because I have great role models for it. Though my mother died ridiculously young from ovarian cancer, my grandmother lived to 106 and enjoyed every minute of it. She eloped at 76, and promptly bought a trailer truck with her new love and hit the road. She continued to travel into her 90s, and planted gardens and got a 30-year mortgage at 82. (She had temporarily moved into a retirement home but found the people there politically incompatible.) She wrote fiery letters to the editor and otherwise behaved in ways I intend to imitate. When she turned 105, she said sadly to me, "Oh, to be 100 again!"

I was reminded of her recently talking to longtime CLF member Jeanne Beatty, who lives up in Alberta, Canada. At 98, Jeanne has been a member of CLF for 50 years. When I told Jeanne I'd be camping in Jasper Park this summer, she said it was only about 4 hours from where she lives and she'd drive over to see me. I was taken aback. "But Jeanne," I said, "you can't camp at 98!" "Why not?" she demanded. "I've got it on my calendar!" We'll see if it works out, but I love her spirit!

With great role models like Jeanne and so many of you, "old age" becomes something to look forward to. But not for everyone. I was talking recently with another friend who, at 95, said he wants only to die. He said he's not in pain, just tired, and he feels like "a waste of space." I will admit that this upset me. My immediate, blurted out, response clearly surprised him. "I didn't know you were that much of a capitalist!" I said. "Like you're only valuable because of what you produce? I thought you knew better than that! You're valuable because so many of us love you!" He laughed and said he didn't believe me, but that it was a kind thing to say.

But I wasn't kidding; I meant it. I love that man dearly, and his loss on the planet will be a sad day for me. Still, I know that the death of his wife and other beloved friends has left him feeling alone. I hear from many of you about the loss of your "other half" and I know that the blow this deals is immeasurable. And aging, grief and loss do seem to come as a package deal.

And yet, my grandmother, and Jeanne, and so many of you inspire me about the possibilities of old age precisely because despite so much loss all around you, you find new ways to love and be loved, new people and places and relationships. I can only hope that I embrace my old age with a fraction of the zeal you show for it. ■



## REsources for Living

BY LYNN UNGAR,  
MINISTER FOR LIFESPAN  
LEARNING, CHURCH OF  
THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP

“Who are *you*?” the caterpillar asks Alice in *Alice in Wonderland*. It turns out that is a surprisingly difficult question to answer. Maybe the caterpillar would like to know who Alice is in relationship to *him*. After all, she’s a stranger in Wonderland. The caterpillar is likely wondering where this stranger came from and what to make of her.

It turns out that this side of our identity is something that we run into a lot. We humans are relational creatures, and we want to understand how other people’s lives connect with ours. When you meet a new person they might want to know where you work or where you go to church or where your kids go to school.

Unfortunately, we humans are also quite territorial, and all too ready to decide that someone “doesn’t belong.” After her encounter with the caterpillar, Alice ends up growing so tall that her neck becomes long and snake-like, and a pigeon, in great disgust, accuses her of being a serpent. It doesn’t do Alice any good to protest that she is a little girl—the pigeon has already concluded that Alice is a serpent after her eggs.

This is rather silly in Wonderland—after all, no one ever really eats a mushroom and turns into a giant with a long neck—but it happens all the time that people decide who we are, and then conclude that what they have invented about us makes us a threat. And the less people know—the more they categorize someone as a stranger—the more likely they are to see them as potentially dangerous. For instance, people in locations with very few immigrants tend to be much more negative about immigration than people who live in places with large

populations of people from outside the country. People who believe that they don’t know any LGBT folks are more likely to be homophobic than people who have LGBT friends or family.

Our brains want to affirm our identity by identifying who we are *not*. Evolution has shaped our brains to distrust those we think of as being not like us. But the world changes faster than evolution does, and in the modern world our chances of being neighbors with people who are, in one way or another, not like us are just about 100%.

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### Our brains want to affirm our identity by identifying who we are *not*.

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So how do we re-tune our brains to this world where we constantly encounter people who are outside our “tribe,” who differ from us in ethnicity or race or language or politics or gender or sexual orientation or ability or any of the 1001 ways that people are different from one another?

Maybe some part of the answer lies in our ability to answer the question *Who are you?* There are so many answers to that question. We are our relationships: parents, children, siblings, partners, friends, colleagues, teachers and students. We are our heritage: race, ethnicity, language, stories. We are our sexual and gender identities. We are our bodies: age, ability, height, appetites. We are our theologies and our philosophies, the things we’ve learned and the things we want to explore. We are our hopes and fears and dreams and disappointments.

And not one of those things is normal. Or abnormal. When we invest the time and attention into deeply and specifically answering the question *Who are you?* we come up with a long list of precious details that we hold in common with others—and at least as many that differ from people who we know. The tendency to identify people as

“strange” or “other” rests in the assumption—often unconscious—that our identity and experience is “normal.” But the more we look at all the facets of who we are, the more obvious it becomes that our intricate set of facets couldn’t possibly be the same for everyone.

But there’s another piece of the puzzle. Alice, in the confusion of falling down the rabbit hole and changing size and meeting beings as surprising as a hookah-smoking caterpillar, loses track of who she is. Or at least loses the ability to define herself in the ways she is used to. But in moving through a place where so much is unknown to her she is challenged to understand herself in new ways. Which is another part of the answer to how we change our brains.

When we dare to enter unfamiliar places, talk with unfamiliar people, taste unfamiliar things (even if they don’t change our size), then who we are expands to meet our expanded world. As Alice experiences, we may run into folks who challenge our sense of who we are—who lead us to the awkward realization that we aren’t sure, that our identity is shifting with each surprising encounter. It isn’t necessarily comfortable, this interview with a caterpillar, or with any stranger. But it is what leads us into a Wonderland of discovery, where we move beyond imagined walls into new possibilities for who we might turn out to be. ■

Unitarian Universalists understand religious and spiritual identity to be something that unfolds over time as we learn and grow. The CLF strives to help with this process of ever-deepening identity through a variety of resources that are available around the world, 24/7. Please help to support this mission by giving as you can, either by sending a check in the enclosed envelope or by donating online at [clfu.org/give](http://clfu.org/give)



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Unitarian Universalist  
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**Quest Monthly Editorial Team:** Adrian Graham, Stefan Jonassen, Janet Lane, Kat Liu, Beth Murray, Niala Terrell-Mason, Meg Riley, Arliss Ungar, Lynn Ungar, editor

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**CLF Staff:** Meg Riley, senior minister; Jody Malloy, executive director; Lynn Ungar, minister for lifespan learning and *Quest Monthly* editor; Mandy Goheen, director of prison ministries; Lori Stone Sirtosky, director of technology; Beth Murray, program administrator; Judy DiCristofaro, fiscal administrator; Hannah Franco-Isaacs, social media coordinator and administrative assistant; Andrea Fiore, webmaster.

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Identity would seem to be the garment with which one covers the nakedness of the self: in which case, it is best that the garment be loose, a little like the robes of the desert, through which one's nakedness can always be felt, and, sometimes, discerned. This trust in one's nakedness is all that gives one the power to change one's robes.

by James Baldwin, from  
The Price of the Ticket:  
Collected Nonfiction 1948-1985.





