

I'm Nobody, Who are You?
An Easter Sermon towards Humility

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UU Church of Meadville
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Emily Dickinson, the patron saint of recluse poets, asks:

"I'm Nobody, Who are You?
Are you Nobody, too?
Then there's a pair of us. Shhh! Don't tell.
They'd banish us, you know.
How dreary to be somebody; how public, like a frog.
To tell your name the live-long day to an admiring bog."

Now, please don't jump to conclusions or get offended...I'm not comparing you to a "bog," admiring or otherwise. And, I'll admit, that it is a bit risky and even, disconcerting, to stand up here, utterly exposed, and invite a comparison of myself to a frog!

In truth, I love ministry and preaching, and I don't find it particularly "dreary" at all to be a public figure – a "somebody" in Dickinson's terms, because I've put in the requisite hours reflecting on the shadow side of such exposure, and the shallowness of locating one's worth in notoriety, or even praise.

Yet, I've been reflecting on Dickinson's poem during Holy Week, which represents the ultimate *somebodiness* of Jesus Christ – crucified and resurrected, and as such, the Superstar of Christian faith. I've been pondering what it might mean, in our fame-crazed, twitter-driven, guru-entranced, You-tubed world, to be a nobody and a somebody, extraordinary and ordinary -- by society's standards, by religious standards, by our own standards, and by those held out to us by our family and friends.

More so, the question of *somebodiness* is one we may relate to especially well as a gathered community. As demographic studies about UUs in general suggest, we are undeniably a community of talent, education, resources, and accomplishment.

So, what could we find if we were to seek our true worth beyond the pressure to promote our special *somebodiness* in the world by telling *our* names the live-long day to whomever will listen to us or validate us by "liking" our status on Facebook? And today, especially, what might it mean to view Jesus as both extraordinary and ordinary, a somebody and a nobody, much like us work-a-day humans?

As I consider the nuances of the fame/talent/humility equation, my mind wanders back to 1999 and a small study group of four seminarians, close and trusted friends, private people in the thick of a journey towards a very public profession. Together, we met to prepare for our appointments with the Ministerial Fellowship Committee (or the MFC for short) at the UUA and to hopefully gain their all-important stamp of approval.

To aid us in our preparation, we had inherited a long list of provocative and useful sample questions which we lob at one another during our meetings: What was the Restorationist Controversy? ; Who is A. Powell Davies; What is the significance of Krakow in our history,? What is your philosophy of Religious Education? and so on.

It was a challenging and rewarding exercise, and yet, there was one question that really made us squirm, namely : "What *special* qualities do you possess that will make you an excellent UU minister?" Ugh. Special? Excellent? We giggled and sighed, cleared our throats a lot, blushed, panicked, and tossed off flippant comments about adoring coffee hour, the memorization of hymns and how stunning we'd look in black.

But the truth is, the query made us squeamish for a reason. It pushed the ego button and posed the uncomfortable, ever-present question: "What makes *you* a somebody? It asked us to sell them on our special *somebodiness*, but to do it with the requisite ministerial humility. Yikes! We kept practicing.

Earlier, we heard a reading taken from an actual NYU application which asks: "Are there any significant experiences you have had or accomplishments you have realized that have helped to define you as a person?" As we all heard, the future student's witty and clever reply is a veritable PR blitz of *somebodiness*: he is an expert in stucco, he breeds prize-winning clams, he has spoken to Elvis, he has performed covert operations for the CIA and single-handedly repelled army ants in the Amazon.

He excels at full-contact origami and urban hang-gliding; he doesn't perspire. Obviously, the young man is a talented writer with a terrific sense of humor. He skillfully pokes fun at the question by asking, can *accomplishments* ever truly define who we are or express our worth? Can experiences or notoriety, no matter how meaningful or memorable, ever capture our *somebodiness* adequately? Personally, I doubt it.

So why do we keep asking and answering the "somebody" question? Probably, because we have little choice. It begins in pre-school with "Star of the Week" and continues through auditions, Math Olympiads, Little League try-outs, college applications, job interviews, and appointments with approval boards like the MFC.

A quick Google search on my computer the other day underscored for me what a surreal society we live in – one in which every superstar *and* wannabe headlines a fan club, and where a "Hall of Fame" exists for every conceivable endeavor from Alabama jazz and anagrams to fresh water fishing and shareware. There's even a "Psychology Hall of Fame," sponsored (not all that surprisingly) by 1-800-therapist.com. Amazing and bizarre.

It seems that in our consumer-centric society, driven by an insatiable need to both idolize and vilify celebrities (and pseudo-celebrities) and accumulate wealth and gain power, everybody is expected to market themselves these days in what New Age business consultant James Wanless calls the *You Biz*, in which "you, the individual, are the product."

In this brave "You" world, according to Wanless, "You cultivate Your distinctive gifts, Your foresight, Your intuition, Your intentions, Your values, and Your relationships so that you can establish Your market niche and set yourself apart from other Brand Yous." So if we subscribe to the Wanless paradigm, I'm a brand called "Robin Landerman Zucker" and my task is to set myself apart as a somebody and establish my market niche. I could do that; I *have* done that, I *must* do that in my private practice!

I'm all for believing in myself; believing I can excel in my chosen field, but Wanless' scheme seems a bit bloodless to me. For instance, one thing Wanless neglects to mention is that like all Brands, I have an expiration date...being human and all! I'm not quite sure how to work that little wrinkle into my product slogan, though. How about, "Sermons dated for freshness?"

Consider Emily Dickinson, whose main themes were fame and death, and who, despite her insightfulness, could not have foreseen a society transfixed by blogs, tweets, fan clubs, 24-hour web cams, Youtube or the Personal Branding.

Yet, I think it was this very idea of being a product that caused her to lament "how dreary to be somebody..." Dickinson didn't detest the idea of being appreciated for her abilities, just the unsavory enterprise of self-promotion.

My colleague, the Rev. Roberta Finklestein, argues that Emily Dickinson knew what she was doing. She was not this little, retiring, uneducated waif in the kitchen writing random thoughts on scraps of paper – though sometimes she did write on scraps of paper. She wrote because she needed to express herself...she could not *not* express herself. But she seems to have done this, first of all, for herself and the muse...like a person who privately loves to paint, or to carve wood, or to sculpt stone. It's not done, primarily for public recognition; but rather because it offers a "way in" to deeper connection way with Self, Life and the ground of Being."

In reality, Emily Dickinson, this quirky woman, *published* only four poems in her life time but is now considered one of our finest poets; in her own time, she was a self-proclaimed and ridiculed "nobody" because she was a talented *ordinary* person who shunned the pursuit of notoriety.

Or, at the very least, Emily seemed to comprehend the difference between fame and self worth. This is a far cry from 2018 and the 15-minutes of fame or infamy we all supposedly thirst for (according to Andy Warhol), or unwittingly attract, in our media-saturated lives – where every phone is a camera and there's nowhere to hide.

We're often tantalized by celebrities and their high-style outings and devour every iota of information we can get about their private lives. I think, on some level, we are relieved to find that our celebrated somebodies are a lot like us; run-o-the-mill folk who cope with clogged sinks and bad haircuts, health issues, failed marriages, and parenting challenges; flesh-and-blood people with expiration dates, who face longing and disappointment; and experience triumph and tragedy just like us regular nobodies. This allows us to both adore them for their talents or pizzazz and care about them at the same time.

Speaking of talents, I'm not suggesting that we should pretend we don't have any or sit around waiting to be discovered. Here's where this sermon is going to sound a bit like a commencement address. If you are an accomplished mathematician, I would never urge you to act befuddled over long division! Playing small doesn't serve the world. It actually *robs* the world of the blessings that exist within each of us in varying shapes, shades, and measures. And I do believe they are sacred blessings, and that even the most ardent "self-made" person had to get his raw materials from somewhere.

Somebody else who liked ministry and preaching was Jesus. In the Gospel according to Matthew, in his famous Sermon on the Mount, he preaches these well-known words: "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill can not be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on a lamp stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works...."(MT 5:13, NRSV)

Ironically, it is in the same chapter of Matthew that Jesus preaches that "the meek shall inherit the earth." Uh-oh! And that brings us back around to that uncomfortable MFC study question about our "special qualities, our distinctive

"somebodiness," and how we might possibly negotiate the tightrope between being in the You Biz and walking humbly in the world.

Those who extol Jesus' exceptionalism (his role as Savior, the one true path) believe him to be the Son of God. In some ways (some crass ways, at times) he has been appropriated, branded, and marketed in Wanless's YouBiz model. Yet, Jesus was actually somewhat reluctant to make the claim of divinity. He often referred to himself as the Son of Man, suggested that "the first shall be last," and when he uttered, "Father," it was in reference to the God of his people. When asked whether he is the Son of God, he replied famously, "But who do you say I am?" Essentially, he was leaving it to faith and perception.

In the praise game, we're highly susceptible to perceptions, too. We can only perceive ourselves as "somebodies" in relation to externally-defined measures or benchmarks. You can't be "somebody" in relation to yourself, because you *are* yourself no matter what."

The thing is, trying too hard to be "Somebody" (capital S) is exhausting and dreary, and actually separates us from our inherent special-ness (the authentic gifts that emerge when we get out of the way) . One can find greater freedom by simply residing in the flow of one's extraordinary ordinariness, where there is no better or worse, no greater or lesser, no bigger or smaller, no comparison of any sort.

As I ponder my own essential worth, I find that it resides mostly in the extraordinary ordinariness of my day-to-day existence as a minister, mother, friend, colleague, journey-woman. Like many of you, when I'm "just plain Robin," I tend to get the most gold stars for the least flashy acts. My children, Sam and Michaela, for instance, tend to think that I'm a somebody because I come through in a pinch, I care, and when they were younger, I used to drive them around a lot! Moreover, I believe that any admiration I receive does not arise from accolades I may reap in my profession, but instead from the fact that I say "I love you" and really mean it; I'm not afraid to show my own vulnerability and humanity, I forgive and I apologize.

Personally, I have never heard a kid say, "I love my Dad because he increased the profit margin of his company by 7%, has 5,000 twitter followers, or a gazillion likes on Facebook. Nor have I ever seen the word, "Successful" or "Superstar" on a tombstone. Don't most of us hope to craft a whole-hearted life and earn the designation "Beloved" as our legacies? I know I do.

Ordinary things done extraordinarily well constitute religious values - ordinary things like gentleness, forgiveness, fidelity, commitment, justice, compassion, and generosity. Your extraordinary ordinariness may not earn you the Pulitzer Prize or win you the PGA Masters. You may not be catapulted to superstardom like the winner of *The Voice* or be enshrined as a wax figure in some dusty Hall of Fame. Hey! You may never make enticing four course meals using only a mouli and a toaster oven, or be caller number nine and win the free passes.

Inevitably, we *do* need to strive for some measure of excellence in order to succeed in society's conventional and external arenas, including ministry. Yet, in the final analysis of our worth, beyond that alluring fifteen fleeting minutes of hollow fame, we can embrace and celebrate our extraordinary ordinariness -- frogs, recluses, poets, cynics, somebody's "somebody," enduring prophets like Jesus, lights of the world all.

Amen, Blessed be, and Happy Easter.

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