

“How You Will Know Me: A Reflection on Identity”

Delivered to the UU Church of Roanoke on Sunday, April 26, 2026 by the Rev. Jen Raffensperger

When I was about nine years old, I picked up an intriguing book that my much-older brother had checked out from our local library. It was a huge book, a thicker paperback than I'd ever seen before, and the cover was so intriguing to me. It was mostly black and dark blue, the shades blending to show deep dusk over dark mountains...and in the vast sky overhead, an otherworldly face glowed. On the front of this book I read the words *THE STAND* by *STEPHEN KING*.

I picked it up. I read the back cover. And then I put it right the heck back down, because it was almost 800 pages long and I had just started reading chapter books. While it would be a few more years before I would tackle King's epic *The Stand*, it wasn't long before I spotted another intriguing - but significantly shorter - Stephen King paperback in the cutout basket at our local used bookstore. The cutouts were four for a dollar, so for a grand total of 27 cents, I walked out of there the proud owner of my first King book, the paperback of '*Salem's Lot*'.

I tell this story to illustrate not just that Stephen King has been a part of my life for longer than anyone else I'm not related to by blood. I tell it because across the years, the more King I read, the more it became a part of the story I told *about myself*. In his chatty, conversational forewords and afterwords, King usually addresses the reading audience by a term we fans have embraced: *Constant Reader*. It was only a few years ago that it occurred to me that "Constant Reader" was the first identity I took on for myself that wasn't directly related to my family of origin. It was my first step into the weaving of stories that would start to grow into the person I am today. And the person I am still becoming.

["Don't bother the earth spirit](#) who lives here. She is working on a story. It is the oldest story in the world and it is delicate, changing. If she sees you watching she will invite you in for coffee, give you warm bread, and you will be obligated to stay and listen. But this is no ordinary story. You will have to endure earthquakes, lightning, the deaths of all those you love, the most blinding beauty. It's a story so compelling you may never want to leave; this is how she traps you. See that stone finger over there? That is the only one who ever escaped."

Oh, how we love to tell stories - about others, about ourselves, about the world around us. Joy Harjo, an

amazing storyteller as well as poet, tells us this in an almost conspiratorial tone - this story? This earth story? This human story? It turns out *none of us here get out alive*. This poem feels both warm and ominous, the way a spooky tale told around a campfire might feel.

But what this story tells us is the heart and truth of the idea of *identity*. Like we talked about earlier, “identity” means the ways we are the same. Every fan of Stephen King is able to claim the identity of “Constant Reader” if they choose to do so. Now, does that mean that every Constant Reader is the same? Of course not! It means we have a common ground, a common story, a space where we overlap enough that we can find something to communicate about. Ask me how many times I’ve fallen into conversations standing in front of the Stephen King section of various bookstores!

Joy Harjo wants us to know - with that same sense of warmth and dread - that we are all creatures of earth. We are all subject to the stories woven by the earth spirit, and no thrusting rock ever truly escaped that fact. Once we are here, one identity - “creature of earth” - is constant.

But what about our other identities? As soon as we’re born, we start collecting them. We may all start with “creature of earth,” but each of us quickly added “human

being,” the sex we were assigned at birth, and the family name we were born into to our lists of identities. Maybe we also added identities such as “firstborn,” or “younger sibling,” to our list. Our race, or the ways the races of our parents mixed, also were part of the list of our identities at birth. The place we were born and raised became a part of our list of identities. If our family took us to church or mosque or synagogue, then that faith tradition got added to our list, at least for a while. If we didn’t stay in one place for long, because a parent or primary caregiver served in the military, or traveled for another kind of job, or didn’t have steady employment, those are whole other lists of identities that we start to accumulate. And these aren’t even the ones we have any choice about, at least not at first!

The term “identity politics” traces its origins to the 1977 [Combahee River Collective Statement](#), written by members of that selfsame collective organization who wanted to assert their own political power through the lens of their shared identities as Black women and as lesbians. They described the intersectionality of multiple identities as meaning that there was room to work with and to struggle with people who only share some identities, while highlighting the need for them to center their fight for justice on themselves.

While the women of the Combahee River Collective principally concerned themselves with the way their identities both shaped and were impacted by race and gender, the term “identity politics” coined in their statement has become a popular term to describe - for good or for ill - a worldview that aligns itself with social movements that claim specific identities as their driving force. And by now in the United States, it can also be extrapolated out to the identity category of political party membership.

In a YouGov/Economist [poll](#) published in 2020, “38 percent of Democrats and 38 percent of Republicans said they would feel somewhat or very upset at the prospect of their child marrying someone from the opposite party.” We have seen this shift dramatically over time. Generations ago, parents might be scandalized if one of their children wanted to marry someone from another faith tradition or, yes, another race. While it’s wonderful that those categories have shifted, here we’ve grown another: who we vote for, who we support politically, has become so wholly another of our *identities* that we find trouble doing what the Black feminists of Combahee wanted to do: find others we can work with, even if SOME of our identities are in conflict.

It is understandable, of course, in this age of heightened rhetoric, open hatred and bigotry, and the existential crisis

of democracy writ large, to have deep misgivings about those whose “political identity” would seem to embrace stances that we find morally abhorrent. Not to mention that some of us inhabit identities that certain political identities wish to condemn and oppress...or eliminate.

How do we do this? How do we find the places where we are alike enough to find a way to communicate, to struggle with, to challenge, to learn from, to grow towards or against, our fellow human beings? Do we have to strip it back down to “creature of earth”?

Perhaps we do. Perhaps we don't.

“Long after the empire was no more, it was all the aunties who led every expedition.

Just like on earth, it was all of the tías who looked at an unknown and threw their heads back, Cackling as they soared into the sky, showing the children, all of us, where exactly we belonged.”

This [poem](#), by Jesús I. Valles, is one of the most liberating ones I've ever read. It lets imagination soar well beyond earth and our current situation...and also preserves those touchstones that we understand and ground ourselves within, even as our own identities grow, shift, and change.

“We are inside a Leviathan, waltzing with every lover
moon Jupiter’s neglected,
And earth is a distant story we are told before bed, right
before she blesses us,
And every morning still smells like huevos con chorizo and
the Avon spray she loves most.

Once, on earth, someone told my Tía Came, ‘Go back to
your country!,’ which she took to mean,
‘Go home!’ and if the sky is the thing that follows us
everywhere, she thought, if the vast black
Blue saw me born, then the sky is my home, and every
star is every place I’ve come from.”

If the vast black Blue saw me born, then the sky is my
home, and every star is every place I’ve come from.

We are so much more than our identities. Make no
mistake - we ARE our identities. They are so vital to our
experience here as creatures of earth, part of how we
make meaning while we are here, how we create the
stories we tell about ourselves. And for those of us who
may inhabit identities that put us in danger from those too
small minded to learn about us, I want to reassure you that
I never want you to erase that part of yourself. I never
want any of us to have to erase any part of ourselves! But
you are empowered to share what you feel safe sharing,

or to choose NOT to share in any space or company where you might not feel safe. I'll invite those of us who may inhabit identities that do not put us in danger regularly, to remain aware of those around us who might be more vulnerable in a given situation. We want to expand our idea of who our neighbor is, and that takes our attention, and our courage in the face of hatred.

But we are MORE than our identities, greater than the sum of our parts. And our identities are not static and carved in stone. As we grow and shift and learn and fight with ourselves and fight with others and question all we've been taught and explore our feelings once we reach a place where we feel less shame or judgement... our identities shift. But our "more-ness" does not. We are creatures of earth; this world that supports us, that we are uniquely suited to, is home to every creature of every identity.

But oh we do love to look to the stars. Wondering, when we do, if other worlds surround them, if other creatures with other planet-stories are looking out at us, looking out at the vast black Blue and wondering: "Whose homes are there? Whose stories am I not hearing?"

"Somehow, even in this future, amidst motherboards and cast-aside MREs,

Every Cool-Whip and Country Crock tub is still deceitful,
more mystery than promise,
Housing nothing like its original cargo but instead salsa
and the week's beans.

Even with the stars close enough to kiss, the swerve heat
of celestial bodies pegadito,
Every Danish Butter cookie tin is still stocked with the
seamstress' tools,
Her threads, thimbles, and every needle that ever kept our
miseries mended."

How many of us have ever opened a margarine tub
and...*actually expected margarine*? In my childhood
home, we'd more or less stopped using margarine, but we
still had *all these tubs*. When you looked at the package,
you couldn't tell what was inside.

Of course you couldn't. Any container might tell us a few
things about what's in it, but we don't really know unless
we investigate. We don't really know what's inside of
anyone unless we get curious. I want a world where the
miseries get mended out of unexpected places, the tools
of the seamstress in the hands of so many that we make
sure *everyone* of any identity gets to be part of that
co-creation. Our world is full of creatures of earth whose
stories we don't understand. We might not like what it says

on the tin, but we want to be cautious about those labels, too. They may be deceitful. They may be unclear. There is always, always more to the story.

We will never build the world we dream of if we exclude...well, anyone from it. That's why this is so hard. This is why it's something we come together to do, to wrestle with, to hold ourselves accountable when we're not doing our best.

If we're asking ourselves about the stories of others when we are looking to the stars, then why not ask that when we look around our neighborhood? When we look around us inside the grocery store? All those people might have access to the mending tools for our misery, and we'll never know if we don't approach them with honest curiosity.

This story? This earth story? This human story? It turns out *none of us do this alone*. And thank goodness for that.

So may it be.