

A Saving Faith

Introduction....

Some time ago I dedicated the baby daughter of a couple I had married in 1996. The ceremony took place in a small chapel on the coast of Rhode Island and afterwards, there was a reception at the grandparents' home. While there, a man who had heard me preach that morning introduced himself and asked "What exactly do Unitarians profess? I mean, if Jesus Christ isn't your savior, how *are* you saved?"

Imagine my delight as I saw my 5 year-old daughter rapidly approaching with that urgent look in her eye parents all over the globe have come to recognize: the universal look that conveys I need to go the bathroom and I need to go NOW. I excused myself from my new acquaintance and never saw him again. But his question remained.

I am a birthright Unitarian Universalist, which means, among other things, that I have been attending coffee hours for a very long time. In all my years of coming to UU coffee hours, I have never heard *anyone* ask "Have you been saved?" or "How are you saved?" But these are important questions.

When most of us hear "Have you been saved?" we assume it to be in the Christian sense of salvation. To remind anyone who may have forgotten, or never knew, Christian theology posits that we are saved from sin through the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. Moreover, upon death, we are granted eternal life through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In this formula, we are taught we are saved *from* SIN

And we are saved *for* ETERNAL LIFE.

This morning I would like us to take a close look at this blueprint for salvation—what about this formula makes sense for us and what doesn't.

This is risky business.

There is much about Jesus and Christianity that has given me great solace and understanding. However, there is much in Christian theology and church dogma I find difficult. Can we critique something that many of us also embrace? I hope the answer is yes. I don't believe any faith is worth much if it doesn't leave room for expressing doubt and asking questions.

As religious people, we regularly reflect on our affirmations and our denials—what do we believe and what do we disbelieve? Using these questions as a starting place, I'd like to explore salvation in the context of the Unitarian Universalist living tradition.

Why don't we start with what we are saved from?

Unlike many liberal religious folks, I have no problem with the concept of sin. I appreciate the words of Unitarian minister, A. Powell Davies who wrote:

"To the best of my observation and belief, sin is highly contemporary, and we are all up to our necks in it..."

Evil in human life is not a fiction; it is a very somber fact."

He wrote that in 1950, but it could have been this morning.

I might want to broaden the definition of sin just a little—to sin can mean more than to do evil—I believe it to mean anything that prevents wholeness. I do not deny evil—not in myself and not in others—but I don’t believe we *have* to be evil to be sinful. We are all broken in some way—the minute we attained consciousness and in effect, understood ourselves as individual humans, we also understood our apartness from whatever had created us, and our separation from one another.

We have a variety of beliefs about what created us (pure biology, God, some combination) and the severed relationship with that creation affects each of us differently. What unites us is that we all need saving.

I need to be saved from excessive pride, self-righteousness, and envy—just to name a few. Most of us need saving from our obsession with the little trinity: money, fame, and youth. We need to be saved from loneliness, cynicism, and fear.

So, I understand the need to be saved. I just don’t understand how the suffering and hideous death of Jesus became the crucial link in our redemption.

I am not alone in my discomfort. The Christian minister and scholars, Rebecca Parker and Rita Nakishima wrote a brilliant book called Proverbs of Ashes which critiques the theology of the cross. This is the argument that says we should be like Jesus: the obedient, silent, suffering servant, willingly going to his death for us. This belief has led to great violence against women and children in particular. These authors are not the only Christians who take issue with this limited view of salvation.

So let’s broaden it a bit. I come from a long line of Unitarians who weren’t satisfied with the sacrificial lamb metaphor. The 16th century Unitarian theologian Faustus Socinus asserted that Jesus saved humans not by dying for them but by setting an example for them to follow. The scholarship coming out of the present day theological think tank, the Jesus Seminar, also emphasizes the significance of Jesus’ life—his practice and preaching.

Jesus lived a life dedicated to an egalitarian society. His parables are almost without exception, about subverting current society, with its hierarchies, its imbalance of power and wealth. He embodied his teaching in how he lived his life. He ate with all the wrong people, touched all the wrong people, healed all the wrong people.

I’m pretty sure *we* wouldn’t have liked him much. Yet, he preached that all had access to the commonwealth of God, not just a select few. Jesus told his community, “Love one another the way I have loved you.”

Jesus lived a life devoted to love. Isn’t this as important for our salvation as the fact that he suffered and died?

Even Jesus wanted to be saved from suffering and death. Didn’t he beg “Please take this cup from me”? That night in the garden must have been unbearably long. His desperate cry on the cross, “God why have you forsaken me?” is one of the saddest lines in scripture.

While I understand that suffering can be a transformative event, even a redeeming event, for us, I don't believe in the substitution theory of suffering. Nor do I believe that all suffering is redemptive. How has a child who has starved to death been saved? How has a woman who is beaten by her husband saved by staying in that marriage?

Clearly our world needs saving from suffering just as much now as it did when Jesus lived. Our world is wounded by pollution and poverty, by political and religious oppression. It suffers from widespread and unchecked disease, from the glamorization of violence.

We need saving from the consequences of a popular culture that can sink down to the very lowest common denominator, giving us junky journalism, television shows like *Kate plus 8* and my personal favorite rendition of hell: "Chuckie Cheese".

Has the suffering and death of Jesus saved us? For that matter, has the covenant between God and the Hebrew people at Sinai saved us? Has the Buddhist ideal of nirvana done it?

I don't think the problem lies in which faith tradition people choose to make meaning out of their lives. I think the problem lies in our overwhelming inability to respect anyone who believes something we don't. Salvation lies not in any one path—it lies in our openness to the reality of many paths. There is always more than one trail up the mountain. Do we respect the person who has taken a left at the fork when we have chosen right? We needn't agree with all the tenets in Christianity to accept it as a viable religious choice. The same goes for Hinduism or Judaism or Islam.

This is where Unitarian Universalism has something to teach. The past President of the UUA, Bill Sinkford, is fond of saying that we have a saving word for the whole hurting world.

We may not have the overarching story of the Exodus. We may not have one savior. But we do have a faith that respects, even encourages many beliefs, yet is grounded in certain universals:

We have faith in life as an unmerited gift, to be relished and treasured and appreciated, faith that people are basically good; faith in the never-ending mystery of why and how we are here. We have a faith that says Yes to life and love—even in the face of suffering, even when confronting death.

People tease UUs about our lack of belief. One popular joke I have heard for years is "What do you get when you cross a Jehovah's witness with a Unitarian? Someone who knocks on your door for apparently no reason." We've heard the jokes, we've gotten the looks. But it isn't true that we believe *Nothing*.

The congregations in our association covenant to affirm 7 principles, all of which offer saving to our world. I offer to you now the first of our principles:

"We believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person."

Every one of us on the planet is intrinsically valuable.
What a radical idea. It goes against everything we see around us every day, everything our society is built upon:

The rich are better than the poor, men are more valuable than women, whites are better than blacks --and everyone else. Bishops are more important than parishioners. Paying members are more worthy than non-paying members. Straights are more worthy than gays, and on and on.

The inherent worth and dignity of every person. This is not an idea original with us. But in UU churches, the idea has vitality. We bring it to life in our polity, our practices. Congregations “call” ministers as well as make all the important decisions about how the church will run. Our lay people not only participate in the services, but lead them. Our children are nurtured and respected for who they are.

Our congregations accept people who are Jewish and Christian and Buddhist and undecided. Our pews are filled with theists and atheists, humanists and agnostics and (what a Christian friend called me) tree hugging pagans. Our pews are filled with individuals who have not or cannot pay for their participation here.

How many houses of worship profess an open heart while practicing a closed one? Here are some other principles we promise to affirm:

Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
The use of democratic process in our decision-making;
Respect for the interdependent web of all existence.

Do we practice these principles every day? Of course not.
We are fallible; sinful, human. Our churches can always be improved.
We should do more social justice work, we should be more racially and economically diverse than we are, more inclusive of all who gather here. But just because we don't always follow our principles doesn't mean there is something wrong with *them*.

Our universalism—historically our belief that God loves us all, not just a chosen few – and more currently our belief that we are all worthy and that we are all connected, leads naturally to the assumption that all religions have wisdom to transmit and beauty to behold. This is a saving idea for a world divided and divided and divided.

If one finds the principles too cumbersome, we can think of some key words. In the church I grew up in, and the church where I spent my early adult life, we sang this doxology. This little hymn has all the saving words anyone needs.

*From all that dwell below the skies,
let faith and hope, with love arise.
Let beauty, truth and good be sung,*

through every land by every tongue.

Let Beauty, truth and good be sung.

I have been saved by the earth's beauty over and over again. The Mass Bay right down my block in Swampscott, with its endless moods and color shifts. The northern lights; phosphorescence on the water while paddling in the canoe at night; the first days of spring in New England when everything is glowing green and pink and purple.

And the autumn. One morning I left the house in despair. As I was driving, I came around a corner and saw the most brilliant red leafed maple tree. It took over the whole sky with its radiance, and it stunned me into humility and gratitude.

I have been saved by the beauty of our world.

I have been saved by a free search for the truth. Not the Truth with a capital T because we don't believe there is just one. But my truth. I have been saved from self-deception by discovering what my truth is, and learning how to express it.

I have been saved by the good. The endless goodness of others, in communities like this one, and in others, and by the goodness people have brought out in me. Sometimes I call this God or Love.

Love has saved me over and over again.

Our faith allows us to choose for ourselves what will be binding. What is meaningful to me? What gives me hope? What strengthens my faith?

I have been given hope and faith by my grandmother, by Joni Mitchell and Thich Naht Hanh, by Jesus and too many comedians to remember, by Ellen Gilchrist, my dog, piano lessons, my brothers; the Beatles and Mahler's 9th symphony, the American Ballet Company, my husband, my children, my girlfriends and the poets--Sharon Olds, Mary Oliver, and Mark Strand.

I have been saved by a good meal served by people who love me.

Our faith has given me the freedom to be saved by so many people, places and things—I cannot imagine I am alone in this. How have you been saved? How did it happen for you? We would like to know. We would like to hear about it.

Perhaps you have come *here* to be saved. I hope you have come to the right place. Whoever you are, wherever you are on your journey, we welcome you and want you to be here. Perhaps we can save you and perhaps you can save us. For it is not enough to be saved *from* something is it? What are we saved *for*? The traditional Christian response is that we are saved for eternal life.

I don't know what happens to us after we die. None of my loved ones who have passed over have *explained it very well*. While I do believe in heaven, I don't believe we have to die in order to find eternal life.

Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote

*“The cry for a life beyond the grave is presumptuous ,
if there is no cry for eternal life prior to our descending
to the grave. Eternity is not perpetual future
but perpetual present.”*

We are saved for perpetual present. We are saved so that we might pay attention to what is in front of us right now. In the present moment we will smell the sea and be aware of our breathing. We will attend to beauty, to suffering, to goodness, to the evil residing within, to the love in and around and among us.

We are saved from sin so that we might be able to save each other.
We are saved *by* love;
we are saved *for* love.

Indeed, salvation is defined as the act of saving or of being saved. We are right here, filled with all the love and energy we need to heal each other and our broken world. We have a saving word for our whole hurting world. Let us know it and proclaim it and live by it.

May it be so, now and always.

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