

SALVATION AND UNITARIAN-UNIVERSALISM

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Good morning. Thank you all for once again giving me the opportunity to share my thoughts with you – it is of incredible value to me for so many reasons and I appreciate it greatly.

Why this subject of salvation? This topic is of personal concern to me – a concept I have thought about, wondered about and struggled with for some time. So, since I am an extrovert in both the conventional and the Myers-Briggs senses, I therefore want to share my wondering with you and, I hope, stimulate you to wonder with me. And it is important to remember that our sharing of wonder and struggle in spiritual and religious matters is a main purpose of our being in community. We are here to share and grow together and I hope my comments can contribute to that.

So, my question today is – is there anything within the concept of ‘salvation’ that is of worth for Unitarian Universalists? By “worth”, I mean helpful in our spiritual formation, in our moral and ethical development, or in providing guidance and support for life decisions.

To address the question of the worth of the notion of salvation, first I’m going to explore the concept, specifically the meaning of the word and how it has been understood by Unitarians and Universalists. I will then lay out a way of considering the meaning of salvation for us as Unitarian Universalists today, in the 21st century. I won’t be mysterious about where I’m going - I do believe that there is much worth for UUs in considering salvation and that a deep consideration of salvation is necessary for us as spiritual beings. I will even go so far as to say that it is impossible for us NOT to consider the meaning of salvation in our lives.

However, my thoughts on this issue, for myself personally and as a UU, are very much a work in progress. Today I give you only some very first words on this subject, not my last.

I am very clear that the reason I am not a Christian is because I have never believed in the concept of ‘salvation’ as I have understood its Christian meaning. I will be the first to say that no doubt my understanding has been faulty. As a child I was sent, by my outspokenly agnostic father and my quietly non-religious mother, to the church across the street, to be ‘exposed’ to religion. [It is interesting to me that we expose our unwanted children on the hillside and our wanted children to religion!] My parents’ intentions were sincere and of the best; they thought that this was necessary for me. That church happened to be Presbyterian and I had many wonderful experiences there, some of a spiritual nature, but I always knew that I did not believe what the others there believed about salvation.

Now, the education on salvation that I received at the church was education for children received by a child, and I’m sure that contributed to my non-understanding. My memory is that I was told Jesus Christ suffered and died for our sins so that we would be saved from them and have eternal life. And we were born with sins – even if we committed no sins and died as infants or children, we would still be carrying the weight of sins inherited from all who went before us. And without belief in Jesus as our savior from sin, we would be condemned to a life after death of eternal pain and suffering, in Hell.

It was clear to me that in salvation I was being saved from something and for something else, but I was not clear on exactly what and how, let alone why. It was also obvious to me, even at age 9, that I could believe in the possibility of an eternal non-tormented life without a belief in Jesus Christ as the only means. I knew that other religions contained beliefs about forms of eternal life, such as reincarnation, that did not involve Jesus.

Even as a child, I could not see how I could choose to believe something so specific and so limiting when it was obvious that there were many other ways to believe. Some of my lack of understanding of salvation was due, no doubt, to my immaturity and inability to think about sophisticated theological concepts. But I also believe, as so many of us do, that I was “always” a Unitarian Universalist in some ways, even when young.

I want to be very clear in speaking of my personal religious journey that I am assuming no position of superiority in relationship to Christianity. I have a much deeper and richer understanding of Christian salvation and its value now, especially after spending a semester at a Presbyterian seminary. And I hope to gain an even greater depth of understanding of the Christian view, in part to know better our heritage as Unitarian Universalists - as for much of our denominational lives we have been Christians.

So, even though I believed from a young age that Christianity was not a religious path for me, and I have been committed to our faith and our denomination for many years, I did still wonder about the concept of salvation. I don't think this was so much a fear that I might be wrong and perhaps doomed for the ugly surprise of an eternity in Hell at the point of my death, but more a recognition of and respect for the powerful meaning the concept has for so many other people. I kept thinking I must be missing something...but I didn't know what.

I thought that the Christian view of salvation, as I poorly understood it, was the only one out there - owned as it were, by Christians - and I knew that was not for me. I finally put the idea out of my head for the most part (but not entirely), by some degree of force and determination. I decided I didn't need salvation; it was an irrelevant and meaningless concept for me and probably for most Unitarian Universalists.

Now, I want to fast forward some thirty years from the Presbyterian church of my childhood, to 1996. I was a member of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Lubbock, Texas. We were a small church, never exceeding 100 members and seeming to struggle to hold on at that level, let alone grow. Lubbock is a city of over 200,000 people - and to me should have been able to support and develop at least one good-sized UU church. I thought this to be especially true as west Texas is one of the most socially, politically and religiously conservative areas in the United States. When people at my current church complain about Richmond's conservatism, I tell them that Richmond is Sodom and Gomorrah on the James compared to Lubbock, Texas. So I believed that in Lubbock, we should have had the religiously disaffected minority flocking to us in droves. After all, it is no coincidence that two of our denomination's biggest churches are in Salt Lake City and Tulsa, Oklahoma.

One day, right before I went to our Mountain Desert District Leadership School in the summer of 1996, I was at church and in conversation with another member about our struggles to grow. "You know what our problem is," I said with some degree of bitterness, "we don't offer salvation". I have never forgotten this, because it was at Leadership School that I had to eat those words, as my view of the concept of salvation and its purpose in our lives was changed forever.

But I will leave my story of salvation for a bit to look at the concept of salvation from some other perspectives. The first of these is etymological - what does the word "salvation" mean? Secondly, I want to consider, probably much too briefly, the historical meaning of salvation for Unitarians and Universalists.

Regarding word meanings, I had always thought that salvation was simply about "saving" or being "saved", but that is not correct, at least not entirely so. "Salvation" traces its lineage to the Sanskrit word *sarvah*, the root of which, *sar*, came into Latin as *sal*. The Sanskrit *sarvah* means "all" - it is a reference to wholeness, completeness and totality. The root *sal* came into Latin words related to health or wholeness, such as "salutary", "salubrious" and "salute" (as in to wish someone good health). *Sal* also came to the Latin word *salvare*, meaning to save - as in save from illness or death. I will come back to the more strictly religious meanings of the word a bit later.

Now I want to consider the meaning of salvation for our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors. Where the early Unitarians in 18th century New England differed most strongly from their Calvinist forebears and peers was not only in the notion of the unity of God, but in their rejection of the related concepts of original sin and election to salvation. Original sin is the idea that humans are born in a state of sin because Adam and Eve's sins and those of all their descendants have been transmitted to us.

Election to salvation is the idea that God knew (and therefore chose) who will be saved for Heaven and who will be condemned to Hell before the beginning of time. Therefore, regardless of how we behave in this, the only life we know, our

fate is already sealed. For Unitarians, the concept of original sin seems to deny the possibility of choosing a moral or righteous life; the concept of election to salvation to undercut the motivation for it. If I am confirmed to heaven – then I might as well sin at will and be what Immanuel Kant termed “a happy rogue”. And if I am condemned to Hell – the same!

Unitarians believed that all humans are born good and have the possibility of choosing a good and moral life. Therefore, they believed in the possibility of salvation through consciously-chosen righteous behavior, not through a belief in Jesus as savior, or as we UUs express it in our shorthand, we are for deeds, not creeds.

Universalists, on the other hand, were all about salvation – salvation for all. Also against Calvinism, Universalists rejected the notion of the saving of a chosen few. Their belief, and I cannot emphasize enough how radical it was in the 18th century, was that ALL humans would be saved and go to Heaven, that there was no Hell. These views were expressed in a document of astonishing brevity – the Universalists’ Winchester Profession of 1803 – which I will read in its entirety:

Article I. We believe that the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament contain a revelation of the character of God, and of the duty, interest and final destination of mankind.

Article II. We believe that there is one God, whose nature is Love, revealed in one Lord, Jesus Christ, by one Holy Spirit of Grace, who will finally restore the whole family of mankind to holiness and happiness.

Article III. We believe that holiness and true happiness are inseparably connected, and that believers ought to be careful to maintain order and practice good works; for these things are good and profitable unto men.

The Universalists would therefore not believe that a rogue could be happy in sin – for true happiness lies in doing good for ourselves and each other. For them, Hell was something to be created for ourselves by our own unloving actions in this lifetime. But no matter what mistakes we make in our own lifetimes, they believed there can be no mistakes committed in a finite human life that are worthy of an infinity of torment. A just and loving God would not do that to His children, He would not withhold the possibility of redemption for all.

These early Unitarian and Universalist concepts represent a powerful and valuable heritage for us regarding salvation. Over 200 years ago, groups of brave and thoughtful people, who applied their highly-valued sense of reason to the Bible and to Christian belief and practice, and who remained clearly within the Christian tradition, firmly discarded ideas that we still hear shouted at us from televisions today. They are our heroes and our models for religious inquiry.

However, many of us may have never been concerned with Christian notions of original sin or election to Heaven. Either we have never been part of the Christian tradition or we have left it. Is there any worth for us in the concept of salvation today – is there any meaning to it accessible to us beyond the Christian tradition, however liberal?

To seek a meaning of salvation for Unitarian Universalism today, I want to take you back with me to Leadership School. In the Mountain Desert District, as in our own Thomas Jefferson District, Leadership School is held in the mountains – but in the Mountain Desert District, these are the Rockies, not the Appalachians. Our Leadership School was held an hour northwest of Boulder, Colorado, at an elevation of about 12,000 feet. I’m sure that this contributed to both my exhaustion and my euphoria at the end of the week!

Part of the Leadership School curriculum is education and exploration in the area of Unitarian Universalist religious heritage and values. In 1996, that section was led by the Reverend Robert Latham, then the minister at the UU church in Colorado Springs. I attribute to him the initial understanding and development of my personal concept of salvation, for which I will always be grateful. For Robert, all religions seek to answer what he calls Life’s Five Big Questions – the questions of cosmology, ontology, epistemology, soteriology and eschatology. That is: who or what is in charge, who are we as human beings, how do we know what we know, what is the purpose or worth of our lives and what is the meaning of our deaths? Your answers to these questions are the foundation of your religion, and we all have answers to these questions, however

unformed and unexpressed. I believe further that we must, as humans, seek answers to these questions – that it is a human imperative.

Question number four – about the purpose and worth of our lives – is the salvation question. Earlier in my brief description of the general etymology of the word “salvation”, I said that I would return to the more specifically religious definitions. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word most often translated as “salvation” is *yeshah*, meaning “to be free, in a wide or roomy space, carrying the sense of being freed from confinement, constriction and limitation”. In the New Testament, the Greek word translated as “salvation” is *soterion*. In the Phoenician system of writing, which was originally pictorial and from which the Aramaic, Greek and Roman alphabets derived, the symbol for the word that came into Greek as *soterion* is a picture of a broken pot or vessel – *soterion* is the process of being made whole.

As Robert Latham pointed out to us, there are two assumptions implicit in this picture, which, please remember, is of a broken pot, not a mended one. The first is that all humans experience brokenness in their relations to self, others and the Universe; brokenness is a human universal. The second assumption is that the journey to wholeness is an ongoing process – everyone, no matter at what age, has the capacity for greater wholeness and healing, though in our human imperfection the process is never truly complete.

For me, these concepts were a revelation, which gave the lie to my notion that Unitarian Universalism does not offer salvation. As a path and a place where we are encouraged to seek freedom, to transcend our confinement and limitations and to achieve wholeness, I think we offer it as well, or better, than many faiths. My friends, salvation is not about being saved from or saved for anything. It is about how we find the purpose of our lives; it is about the ways in which we seek to become whole and complete in our relations with ourselves, others and the rest of creation.

So, my final questions for you today are: What is it that brings you to *yeshah*, that wide and roomy place beyond all confinement and limitation? What is it that allows you *soterion*, to be made whole? And how is it, in this loving and sacred community, that you will help yourselves and one another to *yeshah* and *soterion*? In the words of the Reverend Robert Latham, “the purpose of religion is to speak and model a message which offers the power of wholeness in human relating and the inspiration of hope in human destiny”. So may it be for you and this Unitarian Universalist community.