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Unitarian Universalist Salvation: Transforming Lives

So – Salvation! Two weeks ago, we discussed the Christian concept of salvation, and we compared it to what might be equivalent principles in other religions. For Christians, “salvation” is “the reconciliation of sinful and estranged humanity with God, in a heavenly afterlife, accomplished through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.” Commentators have suggested that synonyms for “salvation” might be terms such as “ultimate destiny,” or “liberation,” or “fulfillment.”

What might be our Unitarian Universalist equivalent to the function that salvation serves for Christians? Is there an ultimate purpose to our faith, a fulfillment that we seek when we gather together? I suggest that there is, although each of us might see it somewhat differently, and might use different words. I believe that our ultimate destiny, as Unitarian Universalists, takes the form of transformation – transformation in our lives and transformation of the world around us. And I believe that transformation is the gift that we offer to others who are searching – searching for meaning and purpose, searching for community, searching for caring and compassion. And ultimately, the possibility, the hope, for transformation, is what we offer to the world.

But I’m getting ahead of myself here. When we take up the topic of salvation, we can’t help asking, “saved from what?” For Christians, redemption arising from the brutal death of Jesus is thought to be necessary because the human condition is one of sinfulness. This condition of “ontological sin” goes back to Adam and Eve, and the Fall. It holds that humans are sinful simply by virtue of the fact of being human. Obviously, if you see yourself as inherently sinful, then you would also see yourself as needing to be saved from that state.

I think it’s important to address this question of human sinfulness head-on, because it is so pervasive in our culture. A belief system based on our basic sinfulness is ultimately very destructive, I believe. Let me enumerate some of the problems with it. First of all, it attaches a sense of guilt to the basic human condition, and guilt is seldom a healthy starting point for working out our problems. When we act out of a sense of guilt, we are primarily focused on obviating that guilt, not on achieving some positive objective. Secondly, focusing on our original state of sinfulness causes us to lose sight of sinful behavior that exists in the world, and it leaves us no room to choose not to sin. The theologian Robert Rauschenbusch recognized this when he defined sin as selfishness. We can choose not to act out of selfishness, and instead choose to act in ways that evoke the best in human nature. We can choose to work towards ideals of justice and freedom from oppression in this world.

My third quarrel with ontological sin is that it is based on a mind-body duality and notions about the human body and pollution. Think of the Garden of Eden story – after they have eaten from the tree of knowledge, the first thing Adam and Eve do is to take fig leaves to cover their nakedness. And so we have seen the story ever since; it has caused us to be alienated from our bodies over the course of many centuries. And this alienation continues to haunt us in the form of discrimination against women, and against gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people.

And finally, ontological sin fails to acknowledge the capacity for both good and evil that exists in all people. Evil exists in the world – no doubt about that! The shadow side of human nature is real. But we also have the capacity for good – and we can choose whether to act out of our better selves or our darker impulses. We do better to examine the interplay of these realities in our lives than to focus on a state of original sinfulness that goes back thousands of years.

Well OK – enough about all that! Enough about what we don't believe! The traditional Christian claim was that “outside the church there is no salvation.” And this meant, of course, that salvation could be attained only through the bloody death of Jesus. I propose that we stand that notion on its head, and that we proclaim, loud and clear, that “outside the world, there is no salvation.” Of course I wouldn't use the word salvation, but to stick with the concept for one more thought – what I mean is that the ultimate meaning of salvation must be found in the finite world, including the natural world. Not only that, any meaningful salvation must be transformative of the world. Is the world in need of salvation? Yes – but I would put aside that term and suggest that what we work toward as Unitarian Universalists, is transformation – in this world!

We humans tend to be alienated – alienated from each other; alienated from our bodies, alienated from the natural world around us, and alienated from what is sacred in our lives -- right here, right now. According to various social science studies, Americans are lonelier than they have ever been. In a recent study, 25% of respondents said that there was no-one – not a single person – whom they felt close enough to to confide in. And today, only a tiny fraction of American households are multigenerational, meaning that most households contain no children or youth, and no elderly people. One-quarter of all US households contain only one person. Now there is certainly nothing wrong with living alone. But what these numbers suggest is that there are many, many Americans who are disconnected from other people. And they suggest that when people come to visit us on Sunday morning they are looking for connection; they are looking for community; they are looking to belong! And they're looking for something to connect them – or to reconnect them – with their sense of awe and wonder, with their sense of holiness, of sacredness – right here in the world they inhabit. In short, what they are looking for is transformation.

The sense of alienation and estrangement that we humans feel is, I believe, a product of hierarchical systems of materialism and domination that have existed since ancient times. Hierarchical systems of power-based relationships keep us from living in relationship – relationship with each other and with the sacredness of life. They give the privileged few overweening wealth, privilege, and power at the expense of most of humanity. Systems of domination oppress us all, and they destroy the life-sustaining balance of nature. In particular, they oppress women, the poor, people of color, and people of “different” sexuality,. Transformation of historic and global proportions would consist of dismantling these systems of domination. Such transformation would create communities that are mutually life-affirming, it would recognize our relationship with what is really sacred in the world and the commonality of the earth's creatures. Or, we could envision this transformation in terms of liberation – liberation of the poor, people of color, women, our GLBT brothers and sisters, and of the natural world. We are all in need of such liberation -- liberation from hierarchies, liberation from materialism and

greed, liberation that frees us to act out of compassion and caring, liberation that enables us to live with a sense of our interconnectedness, our interdependence.

A relational, liberative UU model envisions that we humans participate actively in this work of transformation, rather than relying on God or Jesus to do it for us. Humanity and the divine would both take part in this transformative work. In this view, there is no “God” who is an all-powerful, all-knowing entity, nor one who controls human affairs. According to this view, the divine, the spirit, the transcendent is very much present in this world. And when we are able to connect with this spirit of transformative power, we bring out the best in human nature. We feel our sense of connectedness with all the creatures of the earth. We are able to live out of hope, not out of fear.

Throughout history, many prophetic figures have contributed to this kind of relational model of transformation. Examples would include the Buddha and Muhammad, as well as modern prophetic leaders such as the Dalai Lama, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Cesar Chavez, Mother Theresa, and Thich Nhat Hanh. And we don’t need to accept the model of Jesus as bloody sacrifice to see Jesus as another prophetic figure of a model of transformation through our connectedness. Jesus passionately attacked institutions of domination, and his teachings and actions reflected an alternative social vision. Jesus identified with the poor and criticized the wealthy, he challenged the oppressive and patriarchal family system; he challenged social boundaries based on purity, gender, and class, and he criticized the mediating role of the priests. His vision of what he called “the Kingdom of God,” was a new social order that would exist in this world, not some future paradise. In short, Jesus preached of a human community based on relationship and community rather than one based on hierarchies.

The poet Hafiz says “let’s stop reading about God – we’ll never understand “Him”.” The transformation we seek doesn’t lie in dogma, or doctrine, or scripture. And it certainly doesn’t lie in seeing Jesus as a redeemer who had to die in order for humans to be saved from their sinfulness.

Instead, Hafiz tells us, we encounter the spirit, we encounter the power of transformation in the universe, when we “let tenderness pour from our eyes the way the sun gazes warmly on the earth.” We find the potential for transformation -- of ourselves and of the world – when we play games with children, when we extend ourselves to a friend. And also when we toast the evolutionary path we have climbed. Transformation occurs when we truly open our hearts; when we wave our hands and tell the universe that the social order we seek is one based on love.

Salvation for Unitarian Universalists would mean transformation through the creation of a compassionate social order based on equality and inclusiveness;

It would mean creation of a world community of mutuality that is life-affirming;

It would recognize our relationship with the divine and with one another;

The transformation we seek would recognize and affirm our part in the sacred, interconnected web of all existence.