

What Saves Us?
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Delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Eau Claire
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(singing) "There is More Love Somewhere"

Can love save us?

What saves us? Henry Nelson Wieman, a theologian, used to say that this was the big question that all religions try to answer, each in it's own way.

Richard Gilbert writes in "Living Under the Prophetic Imperative" that theology is always particular, asserting certain assumptions about a specific world-view. In Unitarian Universalism these assumptions do not rest on a specific event, person, or literature as the norm...Unitarian Universalism is not committed to a saving event, Gilbert writes, but to a process...an ongoing quest for religious meaning.

Coming from the South I've inevitably encountered the question, "Are you saved?" or "What Church do you go to?" Have any of you encountered that? Not sure how often that happens in Eau Claire. In Atlanta, If you don't get the question on the elevator, you are bound to get bombarded by the questions in the supermarket line or over coffee. Let's face it - We live in a bumper sticker world. People want to know about your affiliations, faith status, and musical tastes in a matter of quick and easy lingo. If you aren't like us, then who are you? If you aren't saved, then where does that leave you?

It feels like an *us vs. them* mentality when the lines are drawn between those who are in the club and those who are not. Our Universalist forebears certainly struggled with this question. They made a sincere attempt to reclaim a faith that recognized the goodness rather than the depravity of humanity. They could not believe that a loving God could punish anyone to hell for eternity. Instead, they believed that everyone would be reconciled with God eventually. In the history of Unitarian Universalism, the question of what saves has been just as central as to other faiths. In comparison to

the damnation foundation of the theology of Calvinism, 19th century Universalists gave us a roof that saved us all.

Universalism is certainly not a new theological concept and continues to be a strong call to many Christians today. Universalist beliefs have been proclaimed for thousands of years, starting with Origen in 200 CE and continuing through to James Rely in the seventeen hundreds, the faith didn't have the opportunity to form into a widespread religious movement until English Universalists came to America in the late 1700s to escape religious persecution.

In this chapter 4 of *Living Under the Prophetic Imperative*, Gilbert wrote about a the nineteenth century Universalist preacher Hosea Ballou. He was a circuit rider that preached universal salvation. The story goes that he was riding the circuit in the New Hampshire hills with a Baptist minister one afternoon. They argued theology as they traveled. At one point the Baptist looked over and said, "Brother Ballou, If I were a Universalist and feared not the fires of hell, I could hit you over the head, steal your horse and saddle, and ride away, and I'd still go to heaven." Hosea Ballou looked over at him and said, "If you were a Universalist, the idea would never occur to you."

Funny as that story is, It is a concern I have heard voiced before, especially from my Methodists and Baptists buddies in seminary. Without the threat of hell, what is there to keep a person in line? My first response is to wonder whether it takes a carrot and stick theology for people to behave. Do we have to have a cosmic lifeguard who will save humanity?

I'd like to read a poem titled "Salvation" written by Rev. Lynn Ungar, Minister of Lifelong Learning at the Church of the Larger Fellowship:

By what are you save? And how?

Saved like a bit of string,

tucked away in a drawer?

Saved like a child rushed from

a burning building, already

singed and coughing smoke?

Or are you salvaged like a car part – the one good door

when the rest is wrecked?

Do you believe me when I say

you are neither salvaged nor save,

but salved, anointed by gentle hands

where you are most tender?

Haven't you seen

the way the snow curls down

like a fresh sheet, how it covers everything,

makes everything

beautiful, without exception?

This is salvation. It is beautiful, not a saving from, but a recognition of what is. It is the return to wholeness.

I have been saved more times through loving, faithful relationship than through some one time obligation or judgment. When I was twelve years old, I was converted by a friend's fundamentalist and fiery church. I broke relationship with the loving, spiritual community in which I was raised and left behind the permissive and welcoming theology which encouraged my own questions. I wanted to become a “true Christian.” This church persuasively argued that I needed to be baptized again, since the sprinkling I received through my Episcopal background was not a true immersion or salvation from

sin. This church had me passing out literature and preaching to my family that they weren't saved. I was caught in a narrow understanding of who was in the club of salvation and who was not.

During one particular diatribe where I extolled my father to really get saved, he was patient enough to talk me through the “truth” that this church was calling me to swallow. His loving, faithful relationship really rescued me that day - not the bile and exclusivity that this church spouted. While my parents allowed me the space to explore spirituality in different ways, they also held me accountable to healthy and affirming expressions of faith. My father as an Episcopal priest asked me if I really thought he'd practiced a failed ministry for all these years? Were all the people I'd grown up with and loved in church really going to hell? The light of reason won. I truly grieved at my regrettable choice of casting my church family aside for a more narrow and less loving view of faith and fellowship.

Growing up around fundamentalists who cried out about the fires of eternal punishment, I constantly chafed at the question of “what saves us?” As a young adult, one of my first steps towards becoming UU was the recognition that I didn't believe in hell, other than the present suffering we cause each other. I also see hell as the absence of connection to “Life. The more I have delved into theology and spirituality, I have become more and more convinced that the ultimate expression of goodness and love lies in how we treat and uphold one another.

The website of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Fayetteville, Arkansas defines salvation in the following way: “The English word *salvation* derives from the Latin word *salus*, meaning health.

Unitarian Universalists are as concerned with salvation, in the sense of spiritual health or wholeness, as any other religious people. However, in many Western churches, salvation has come to be associated with a specific set of beliefs or a spiritual transformation of a very limited type. Among Unitarian Universalists, instead of salvation you will hear of our yearning for, and our experience of, personal growth, increased wisdom, strength of character, and gifts of insight, understanding, inner and outer peace, courage, patience, and compassion. The ways in which these things come to, change, and heal

us, are many indeed. We seek and celebrate them in our worship.”

Just as UU's have reconstructed the traditional understanding of what it means to be a congregation, theological language has also been remodeled. Yet, I still challenge that we can reclaim the specific word salvation. Salvation does not have to ONLY mean an intercessory event, by an outside savior.

I believe that salvation is not being saved from or for anything. Salvation is I believe the return to wholeness. It is the understanding of our connections with one another, the benefits, the responsibilities. If we can move from I to thou – we can move beyond simply self interest into larger perspectives. We can see the interconnected web of which we are a part, taking salvation to the understanding that if one of us is not whole – then we are all hurting. If a congresswoman is shot and wounded, this affects me. If my sister is hungry, then I am also affected. If my neighbor has no clean water, then I am also diminished by their misery. We can see this in our food supply. Here is one small example: If unclean water is used to grow the lettuce we eat, the lettuce farmer suffers from reduced sales and an unhealthy environment, the market that can not sell the supply suffers, and we suffer if we eat unclean food.

Richard Gilbert points to the Beloved Community, a concept that transcends as he put it – his meager efforts, a goal that commands my allegiance. He writes that we are too often preoccupied with finite endeavors, which cling to the everyday – we can not forget our connection with the cosmic reality that encompasses all of this.

A salvation that comes through the acting relationship of a interdependent community is not the saving of a broken or fallen people. It is the mutual transformation that comes from intentional community. It is the gift that comes from among ourselves. Community is a lens of power that magnifies individual gifts – the whole is gifted by the sum of the individuals. Together we can often

accomplish more than we can individually. Have any of you seen “Horton Hears a Who?” In this movie Horton the elephant has large ears that start hearing noises from a speck of dust. After listening and communicating with an inhabitant on this speck, Horton starts telling his friends and community that there is a whole world on this speck that he is carrying. You can imagine what his friends and neighbors thought about Horton when he said he had a whole universe on the end of his trunk. They not only made fun of him, but they had to question what that would mean about their place in the universe. Members of Horton's community were not particularly happy with what this could mean for the significance of their lives and became determined to teach Horton a lesson by destroying the speck.

It took every Who in Whoville to yell “**We are here! We are here**”- all of them working together to save all of their lives from destruction. We can look at our own small, blue planet and imagine the same conundrum. If we do not realize our connections and shared relationship, will we care enough to keep the boat from sinking. Will we be able to sound our voices across space, “We are here! We are here”

I believe the concept of salvation can be observed in the practice and values of the community. It is witnessed by the life of faith community, how it worships, how the community is self-governed, and how the community carries its values into the world. How do we care for one another? How do we uphold the inherent worth of every person? In our UU congregations the individual faith and life journey is upheld, I believe it is upheld within the idea of a world community that rises or falls together.

There is a recognition of intimate interconnectedness to the whole of life and the importance of each individual that makes the whole. The seventh principle of Unitarian Universalism is the respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. This makes an argument for viewing a salvation framework that is not individual, but based on the interrelatedness and ultimately the

interdependence of the community.

Let us cry out to one another and all of the universe – **we are here! We are here!** Let us reach across politics, race, and religion to reclaim the wholeness that belongs to us all.

(singing) “There is more love somewhere”

It is right here surrounding us, saving us right now.

Amen.