

Reflections on Saving Paradise
The Unitarian Church of Montreal
Rev. Diane Rollert, 12 April 2009

Fear not. Today marks the last in our series of wounded words. Not forever, but we'll take a rest for a while. Since October, we have been reflecting on the words of religion that challenge us. I've borrowed the term "Wounded Words," to describe those words that wound us or have been wounded by others. Who gets to define the words that we use? Do we let others tell us what the words of religion mean, or do we define these words for ourselves?

Elsewhere, Christians are rejoicing with the belief that Christ was resurrected from his death on the cross to bring salvation and eternal life to those who receive his message. But, for us, words like renewal, resurrection and salvation have very different, personal meanings. I may stand here as the minister of this congregation, but what I say can never be the final truth. That I must leave to each of you to discover. My role is to create a safe and sacred space where we can inspire each other to grow in our understanding, to wrestle with life's greatest challenges, and to find meaningful ways to live out our values.

I offer you but a sampling today of the many reflections I received this week.

Thoughts on Salvation from the Congregation

In my humble opinion, the reason why "salvation" is a wounded word is the very premise behind the notion that we need to be saved. The founding basis for this idea comes from the wrong-headed notion that we are all born sinners... —Hari Thaku

Sin and Salvation have a symbiotic relationship, you have to sin to have salvation, and to have salvation you have to sin; but what if I don't accept your definition of my behaviour as sin, do I still need salvation? ...

I offer concrete examples: in the Canadian Parole system when an convict applies for parole and appears at the hearing there is an assumption by the Parole Board that the convict will acknowledge he/she committed the criminal act, and show remorse. A problem for some convicts is that they have been wrongly convicted and refuse to play the game so that they will be paroled, and consequently remain incarcerated. This has shown to be true in a number of murder cases where eventually DNA tests exonerated the accused. As well, one convict who admitted his guilt showed no remorse as he felt the killing of his handicapped child was an act of love, and only because there was public pressure was he finally given parole. —John Pike

Prior to the medieval period, the significance of the cross and resurrection was, on the contrary, seen more in terms of the victory of Christ over, not so much personal sin, as the Devil. The understanding of Good Friday and Easter was more corporate, and celebratory, than individual and confessional....

This is the worldview of the authors of the New Testament: ...Between us and God lies a whole, heavenly world populated with really scary customers, and this was the situation from which we, collectively, badly needed to be "saved." ...

"Salvation," then, is about the victory of God over the immoral forces of our world, the forces that rob of us our moral freedom and ability to control our lives, the forces that bend us out of shape, that compel us, against our own intentions, to act in ways that are twisted and corrupt. The things we have to do because we have to hang onto our jobs, because that is the way the system is set up, because that is the way of the world whether we like it or not. The forces that make us sick and crazy, hungry and poor, and sometimes, just downright dead. Now there are different ways of imagining these forces: in the time of Jesus just about everybody agreed they were what we call "supernatural," (although to them they were perfectly natural and everyday realities); these days we are less comfortable with that hypothesis. We'd rather understand them as political and economic, and they make just as much sense in that reading.

And the ending of this sermon (cuz that's what this is sounding like, isn't it) I'll leave up to you There's got to be a good bang to it, tho. —Elizabeth Morton

Like many Unitarians, I have little interest in what some people might regard as personal salvation or damnation in an afterlife. The issue becomes more complex, however, when I reflect that "salvation" is both an individual and a corporate idea, and, as a corporate idea at least, is deeply engrained in the Unitarian tradition. We would like to save the World, or at least participate in its salvation. I look at a list of Unitarian principles, for example, and find that we affirm and promote "the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all," even if we have no detailed blueprint for achieving this...

We struggle along – but there are moments. Moments when we ...realize... that we are right where we ought to be. That it doesn't get any better than this. That this is it. These are sometimes moments of great pleasure, but often not particularly. They may follow a long struggle or quest, but they themselves are received rather than earned; there is a movement that, for me, feels more downward than upward, perhaps even morally. In evangelical language, these moments come by faith or grace, not by works. Someone else is involved: a Saviour, whether an actual person or some psychological or spiritual being that comes flooding in. Sometimes both. These moments do not last, but they seem to tap into something eternal. I suspect they actually do.

The verbs we use to describe these moments are transitive, and in the passive voice. We are blessed. We are saved. —Harvey Shephard

Salvation is balance and connectedness. It is not about something in the future or another dimensions, but is possible here and now, in the sacred context of the world we actually live in, Gaia/ Mother Earth. The interconnectedness of heart, mind, spirit and body and the interconnectedness of human beings with all other beings are central to our healing. —Ann Beer

The more I found myself delving into this topic this week, the more I wished to be saved from its complexity. There is much about Christian theology that has never spoken to me. So I turned to *Saving Paradise*, a recently published book that has been circulating among many of my colleagues. Authors Rita Nakashima Brock (a United Church minister) and Rebecca Ann Parker (a Unitarian minister) write of their sojourn through the Mediterranean to understand the meaning of paradise and salvation in earliest Christianity.

“As [they] investigated early Christian art, [they] stepped back, astonished at the weight of the reality: Jesus’s dead body was just not there. ...in the early church, paradise—first and foremost—was this world, permeated and blessed by the spirit of God. It was on earth.”

“Images of it in Rome and Ravenna captured the craggy, scruffy pastoral landscape, the orchards, the clear night skies, and teeming waters of the Mediterranean world, as if they were lit by a power from within. Sparkling mosaics in vivid colors captured the world’s luminosity. The images filled the walls of spaces in which liturgies fostered aesthetic, emotional, spiritual and intellectual experiences of life in the present, in a world created as good and delightful.”

Then a thousand years pass, and the early art work depicting an earthly paradise is replaced by scenes of violence and crucifixion. The history is horrible and disturbing. Christianity becomes “obsessed with atoning death and redemption through violence,” replacing “resurrection and life with a crucifixion-centered salvation,” and paradise gets relegated to a distant afterlife...”

Why? Brock and Parker document with painstaking detail how the first crusades launched in 1095 were “an attempt to quell the feudal violence plaguing Europe,” and how it was then that politics truly harnessed the meaning of salvation so that it would be acceptable for the violence of war to pave the way to heaven. (I must tell you that I have not enjoyed spending the past week reviewing this history. I would rather contemplate the coming of spring renewal after winter’s darkness.)

So let us speak of renewal. Another 600 years pass, and one of our Universalist foremothers leads the way back to paradise. Brock and Parker single out the 17th century English Universalist mystic and church founder Jane Leade who “offered a spiritual vision of paradise as a realm in which humanity’s ‘beautiful diversity’ flourished. “ Leade wrote in her journal that, “salvation was ‘accomplished through the life-giving power of God’s love which embraced all people.’” Later Universalists carried forward her themes, arguing like Hosea Ballou, “that heaven and hell are not to be found in the afterlife but in the life we create here and now for one another.”

Brock and Parker sum up the meaning of their research that spans centuries with these words: *“Universalism tells us that we can come to know the world as paradise when our hearts and souls are reborn through the arduous and tender task of living rightly with one another and the earth. Generosity, nonviolence, and care for one another are the pathways into transformed awareness. Knowing that paradise is here and now is a gift that comes to*

those who practice the ethics of paradise. This way of living is not Utopian. It does not spring from the imagination of a better world but from a profound embrace of this world. It does not begin with knowledge or hope. It begins with love."

That, I think is enough for me to never let go of the legacy that our Universalist ancestors bring to our Unitarian tradition. While our Unitarian ancestors are long remembered for the great works of poetry and philosophy they wrote, our Universalist ancestors are better known for their good works. Striving against economic injustice, slavery, and fighting for women's rights throughout the 19th century, they were at the forefront of social change long before their Unitarian brothers and sisters followed suit. The Universalists embraced the world as it was and they tried to make it better. If that is what their message of universal salvation teaches us, if that is their Easter message, then may we never forget it.

Mary Oliver writes in her poem, *In Blackwater Woods*:

*Every year
everything
I have ever learned*

*in my lifetime
leads back to this: the fires
and the black river of loss
whose other side*

*is salvation,
whose meaning
none of us will ever know.
To live in this world*

*you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal,
to hold it*

*against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.*

"Every year everything I have ever learned in my lifetime leads back to this: the fires and the black river of loss whose other side is salvation..."

Perhaps salvation is simply this. We live with the joy of life and love and with that comes loss and pain. We must learn to let go of what we love and in the letting go we are saved. For me, the reading of this poem, and the letting go, have always happened within the context of community. We have made it through the long winter and the darkness

together. We have made it through many losses that still break our hearts. Yet now we come into the days of light. We mark this time with the most simple of rituals. A drop of wine, a bit of bread, and a rededication of remembrance – a re-enactment of a ritual that has been observed for at least 167 years in this congregation. This we will do, after this service ends, when all who wish to stay are invited to join me in an optional but long observed tradition of communion here.

Most likely, our forefathers and foremothers who founded this congregation in the 1840s, and the leaders of this community who followed in their footsteps year after year, feared that Easter and our Christian roots might someday be forgotten. So they wrote into the governing rules that we would observe communion twice a year; once on the Sunday closest to All Souls Day, and once on Easter Sunday.

Brock and Parker write that in the ancient days, communion was a meal to be shared, not of blood or body, but simply a beautiful coming together, of sharing bread and wine, infused with divine goodness and beauty that led to paradise here on earth. Here, in this congregation, that is how I see our communion, as an affirmation of our common bonds, and a giving of thanks for the best of what humanity can be.

Let me offer one last reflection on salvation from one of our members, Marlo Ritchie:

I have a bad spring cold and laryngitis (got it in time for my birthday, go figure!) and have strict orders from the doc to not to even whisper. ...My dear sister emailed me and basically said that for someone who often offers words to other people in the spirit of helping or comforting them that maybe I needed to just be silent and let people do that for me. It made me smile, because her intimate knowledge of who I am in the world, and what I struggle to give to myself, allowed me to feel 'saved' from the pit of my self-pity, isolation and discomfort. Also, my lovely, patient partner Steve took me out for a silent birthday dinner. We had a great time scribbling messages back and forth on a little pad of paper. My colleagues have been equally supportive, and have helped me to feel lighter about my situation. This challenge, along with many other times of transition and hardship in my life, is but another opportunity for enlightenment and gratitude.

For the record, the Unitarian Church was a place of salvation for me in an intense time of grieving in my life. I'm thrilled to share that this is now becoming a space where I can experience intense joy! Thanks for the opportunity to put the last few days into words. It has been a birthday I won't forget!

Hugs from down the street,

Marlo

Amen. Blessed be. Namaste.

Additional Reflections Read During the Service:

You asked, "What saves us?" I think that Wilhelm Reich had a good answer. He said:

"Love, work and knowledge are the wellsprings of our life. They should also govern it."

Interestingly enough, you didn't ask WHO saves us. Basically, we're responsible for saving ourselves, but there are times when we all need a little help. That's what family and friends are for, or so they should be. But sometimes they aren't enough either, particularly if you want to learn more and explore brave new worlds. I think the Unitarians have it right when they talk about the interconnected web. Belonging to a series of communities-like a set of overlapping circles where everyone shares ideas, knowledge, food and friends-of which I have many now, thanks to you!-makes the sum far greater than the parts could every be. Sharing and caring are what save us.

—Nancy Kleins

Où est le salut quand tu vois ta meilleure amie être fusillée, sans aucune raison? Où est le salut quand ton oncle doit marcher des milliers de kilomètres pour revenir à la maison après sept années dans les goulags sibériennes à extraire l'uranium? Où est le salut quand des enfants sont drogués par des gros bonnets de la drogue et blanchisseurs d'argent? Où est le salut quand on se retrouve sur la rue sans foyer ou dans des camps de réfugiés? Où est le salut quand l'indifférence mène au désespoir?

Quand on parle du salut, que veut-on dire? Comment mettre fin à la violence en se souciant uniquement de sa survie dans l'au-delà? Quel rapport y a-t-il entre Jésus sur la croix et la fin de la violence et de la mort? On dit qu'il faut attendre pour voir. En attendant, que doit-on faire? Attendre? Attendre quoi? Attendre qui? Attendre Godot? Attendre, il me semble, c'est consentir à la peur, à l'intimidation; encourager la victimisation.

Seul sur une roche, ne recevant plus d'amour, l'espoir s'éteint. Il n'y a plus de régénération de la vie. Dans une communauté où on sent l'interdépendance, où la dignité et la valeur inhérente de chaque personne sont appréciées, où on peut célébrer les merveilles de la vie, où on peut grandir dans l'espoir de partager l'amour, les humains peuvent discuter, apprendre, espérer, partager. Avec ce vivre-ensemble, ils donneront à notre humanité naufragée l'espoir d'un meilleur vivre-ensemble, d'un meilleur monde, une meilleure planète.

Notre salut, c'est de parvenir à bien comprendre notre situation dans la toile interdépendante de la vie pour mieux se construire comme humain. Un dernier mot d'encouragement d'Edgar Morin :

« L'agonie planétaire deviendrait alors gestation pour une nouvelle naissance : nous pourrions passer de l'espèce humaine à l'humanité. »

—Hannelore Poncelet

