

Saved By Unitarian Universalism

Rev. Victoria Ingram
October 3, 2010

I would like you to meet my husband, Carl. He's the man who introduced me to Unitarian Universalism, and this morning, I've asked him to share with you a bit about how he came to embrace this faith. I hope this helps you get to know him a little bit better, too. CARL'S STORY

Now, let me tell you a little about how finding Unitarianism has been a blessing, a form of salvation, in my life.

I've told you before that my family attended the Presbyterian Church when I was growing up. In my late teens, I found myself seriously questioning the beliefs that were a part of the creed of the church of my childhood. I doubted and struggled to reconcile my emerging understanding and truth with what I was told at church, and I felt myself moving toward a crisis of faith.

One evening, as I was thinking about the role of dogma, faith, belief, and religion in my young life, I was overcome by my thoughts and feelings, and I began crying. What I was coming to think of as true for me was so different from what I'd been taught, from what I knew my family and religious community seemed to believe. I felt alone. I was scared that I would never again experience the sense of community and acceptance I'd enjoyed in my church, since I no longer, in good conscience, could say that I believed as they did.

After crying for a little while, I was overcome by a sense that, to this day, I don't fully have a rational explanation for. But, I can tell you that I felt like I was in the presence of some greater consciousness, some power beyond myself. And, in this place, I felt loved, accepted, and whole. It was reassuring, abundant, illuminating, and full. I sensed that it was a truth I could count on to be with me for the rest of my life, as reliable and real, strong and potent as anything I could touch, see, or hear. I knew I was loved, safe, and held in the embrace of some kind of grace. And, I felt at peace.

Move forward 20 years – 20 years in which I tried to find a sense of community, but was unsuccessful. Then, as I said earlier, when I met Carl, I also found Unitarian Universalism. The truth I carried within me was welcome in this community, and I felt that I'd come home. I was thrilled to once again feel a sense of connection, a sense of acceptance, a sense of belonging within a faith community. And, I knew I was not alone anymore.

Every UU church in which I've been involved has given me that gift – a place, a sense of belonging, a place to call myself one of a community. And it has been a blessing in my life for over 15 years now. I feel like my life has been saved through my connection, my belonging, within Unitarian Universalism.

Are you saved? Have you been saved?

Sometimes, these questions make Unitarians uncomfortable. Often asked in the context of conservative Christian beliefs, we find our possible responses to be inadequate, confusing, or incredibly nuanced; when we wish they might be easy or, possibly, that we simply hadn't ever been asked the question in the first place. It can feel like what we're really being asked is, "Are you one of the club?" or, "If you're not one of us, who are you?"

I heard that once a young Unitarian was visiting a Christian church when the pastor asked if she were saved. She whispered, “In my church, we aren’t allowed to get lost.”

In the usual Christian use of the term “saved,” these questions ask if we believe that Jesus died as a substitute for us sinful and unworthy humans, separated from God by our unworthiness. Rooted in Calvinist theology, this vision of salvation focuses on what we need to fear will be our fate if we have not accepted Jesus as our savior. And, if that were our belief, I suppose that the idea of this kind of salvation would be important to us. But we do not believe that people are born into a state of sin from which they must be saved in order to avoid spending an eternity suffering in hell.

UUs aren’t so concerned with the answer to “saved from what” as we are the question “saved FOR what?” In the words of Universalist PT Barnum: “To (us), heaven in its essential nature is not a locality, but a moral and spiritual status, and salvation is not securing one place and avoiding another, but salvation is finding eternal life. . .immortal life is existence regardless of quality. Eternal life is right life, here, there, and everywhere.” Unitarian Universalists are much more concerned with what is it that we are supposed to be doing with THIS life, with this moment, in this time we have as conscious beings living on Earth.

The word “salvation” comes from the root word “salvare” – which means to save, but also includes concepts like being safe, comforting, healing, regaining wholeness, and bringing together broken parts. These expanded aspects of salvation are of importance to us in our faith tradition, for we focus our attention on the concerns of creating the possibility of heaven on earth in the here and now, for all to enjoy.

We want every person, every life, to count while it is being lived. We want every person to be able to explore and live to their full potential, unhindered by pain, suffering, want, or injustice. Unitarians see salvation in increasing our wisdom, insight, and compassion that allows us to live our values robustly and visibly in our communities. We yearn for a world where every person grows and becomes whole in their full capacity, ready to offer his or her gifts to the world.

We are, therefore, concerned with salvation by character, by our persistent search for truth and meaning, by committing ourselves to continue to develop our moral character, and by striving to become the highest and best of what we can be in our lifetimes.

Listen to these words of the Reverend Dana McLean Greeley, who was President of the Unitarian Universalist Association from 1961 to 1969.

“There are two categories of people that I worry about in . . . society today. The first is made up of those who are concerned primarily that they shall be saved in the next world, who don’t believe in the open encounter, who think that faith us JUST for the other world, who have no interest in charity, or politics, or social reform.

“And the second category of people that I worry about are those who have no faith to begin with – no conviction, no commitment, no hope. . . . They are faithless and uninspired; and I look for no good works, no change in their lives, no change in society from them.

“Faith is supposed to produce good works. We must improve our community and our world, all the time, in every what possible. No city. . . is yet good enough or helpless or beyond improvement. No church, no business, is good enough or beyond

improvement. Even character is part of our good works. We are not saved by faith, and our civilization is not saved by faith, without character.

“Character is not achieved in a vacuum. It means human relationships, and daily duties, and honesty, and generosity, and sympathy and mercy. It means accepting our responsibility and doing our best, whatever we can. Faith without character ... is dead.”
(Greeley, *Forward Through the Ages*, p. 95)

So, we UUs believe in salvation by character – deeds, not creeds, as we say. We believe that our salvation is the result of practice, not platitudes - by taking action out there to make the world a better place and taking action in here to make ourselves the best people we can be.

Perhaps the best word for us is not salvation, but transformation. The Rev. Craig Scott has said: “I believe that our ultimate destiny as Unitarian Universalists takes the form of transformation – transformation in our lives and transformation in 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.”

Are you saved? Are you practicing your values, refining your character, and living your search for truth and meaning? Have you been saved? Have you taken yourself out into the world and offered that salvation to others through your actions, your compassion, and your conviction that life can be made better for everyone?

In Carl and my stories, we’ve shared how Unitarian Universalism, this community of faith, hope, love and practice, plays an important role in our transformation, our salvation. I know each of you has your story, too.

We are out in the world six days a week, doing those tasks that we need to do, striving to make the world a better place. On Sunday, we come together here, to reconnect with ourselves and with each other, as we consider our progress, offer each other support, and encourage each other to keep up the good work.

In a world seeking connection, for people searching for a place to belong and be accepted, our faith community is a place of hope and acceptance. We offer an invitation to be transformed, to share yourself fully with us and with the world, and to put your faith into action. In tending to our own character development, we are saving ourselves. By opening our arms to those who seek what we have found in this faith community, and by taking ourselves into the world to act on our convictions, we can help to save the world.

May it be so.