

This Saving Message

March 1, 2009

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Call to Worship

We
Are not
In Pursuit of formalities
Or fake religious
Laws,
For through the stairway of existence
We have come to God's
Door.
We are
People who need to love, because
Love is the soul's life,
Love is simply creation's greatest joy.
Through
The stairway of existence,
O, through the stairway of existence, Hafiz,
Have
You now come,
Have we all now come to
The Beloved's
Door

Hafiz, "The Stairway of Existence," *The Gift*, Daniel Ladinsky, trans, p 96

Reading

Andrei Sakharov, the renowned Russian physicist, once asked his wife Elena Bonner, “Do you know what I love most of all in life?” “I expected,” Bonner confided some years later to a friend, “that he would say something about a poem or a sonata or even about me. But no. Instead, he said, ‘The thing I love most in life is radio background emanation’” — the barely discernible radio waves which reach us here on earth from outer space and reflect unknown cosmic processes that ended billions of years ago.

What Sakharov meant of course was that he loved the mysteries that the cosmos hands us, the grandeur and immensity of this thing we call Creation. And he loved the fact that we human beings can occasionally get a glimpse of those mysteries and that grandeur, even the parts whose work was done billions of years ago.

Very few of us can ask the kind of sophisticated questions of the universe that an Andrei Sakharov did. Even fewer have the opportunity to receive a hint of a reply. But most of us at one time or another wonder about the ultimate questions of life: How did Time begin? Is there a God? Does life have meaning? What is good? Why must we die? These are fundamental religious questions. And most religions—at least in their orthodox varieties—believe they have the answers . . .

Unitarian Universalism is different. We respect the answers offered by Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, and the world’s other great faith traditions—we even draw our inspiration and some of our forms of worship from those traditions—but *we respect the mystery more*. We believe, in other words, that no single religion (or academic discipline, for that matter) has a monopoly on wisdom; that the answers to the great religious questions change from generation to generation; and that the ultimate truth about God and Creation, death, meaning, and the human spirit cannot be captured in a narrow statement of faith. The mystery itself is always greater than its name.

William Schulz, “Our Faith,” *The Unitarian Universalist Pocket Guide*, pg 1-2

Sermon

As I've spoken before, I was raised Roman Catholic. In college and afterward, I began to feel alienated from that tradition. The dogma and precepts of the church were no longer speaking to the experience of my life. I had more and more trouble reconciling some of the theology that I was expected to believe with the ways that I felt God or spirit speaking in my heart and soul. The church no longer relevant to the world as I knew it, no longer provided a "saving message" for me.

What do I mean by "saving message," you might ask? What is salvation for Unitarian Universalists? And do we feel that we need to be saved at all? by whom? and from what? Salvation certainly isn't a word we use much. And it may be loaded, for some of us, with baggage from our religious past and from the way we see religion practiced around us.

In the Christian tradition salvation is what happens when a sinful humanity is reconciled with a perfect God. Salvation here is manifested in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Therefore, giving oneself over to Jesus is seen by many as bringing this reconciliation or salvation.

But what if, as happened to me, one no longer believes the story of the Resurrection? What if, as happened in the evolution of my theology, one no longer believes that there needs to be someone to mediate my relationship with the sacred, with the holy? What if, one wants to claim personal responsibility for one's thoughts and actions, without some kind of intermediary? What if one believes that the quest for spiritual wholeness is ongoing and can't be settled in any one affirmation of belief or fidelity to a particular deity? What happens to salvation then?

Now, I might not use the word sinful the way it is used in much of western religion, but I have to admit that I am not perfect, that I sometimes hurt and hurt other people, that my life has its broken pieces, that I long for healing and wholeness, salvation, if you will, and the sharing in community of the struggles and joys of my life. It's that longing, that sense that there was something missing, which brought me to a Unitarian Universalist church in the first place.

For many years in my adult life I was un-churched. And even though I missed practicing my faith in a communal setting, I didn't think there was a church out there that fit my life and my beliefs. Then, during a difficult time, a friend dragged me kicking and screaming to a Unitarian Universalist church. And there I found people who welcomed me for who I was and a message that spoke to my life.

It was a “saving message,” one that connected me with the sacred, spoke to my deepest longing and could carry me through the rest of the week. There were many a Sunday that I would sit in the pew and get all choked up for the deep connection being expressed and the transformation that was evoked in me.

I know that some of you have heard this story before. And, I know that some of you have had similar experiences. And, I think, it bears repeating. It’s important for us to always remember why we came here in the first place and why we stay. What is the longing in us that brought us here and keeps us coming back? What is the “saving message” that we get here, the message that gives us the strength and courage to be real, to move toward our own healing and wholeness, to face the realities of our lives with joy and thanksgiving?

In a recent edition of the UU World magazine, Bill Sinkford, president of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations wrote about a gathering held at which twelve ministers from some of our most rapidly growing congregations met to explore how our churches grow.

The first question that the consultant asked was, “What is the saving message of your congregation?” Bill writes: “It was fascinating to listen as—in various theological languages, and in just two or three sentences—they all said the same thing. What they said, one after another, was this: *The saving message of my congregation is that we nurture the human spirit. We encourage and help people to get in contact with the holy in their lives. And we help heal the world.*”

William G. Sinkford, “Our Calling,” *UU World*, Vol. XXII, No. 2, Summer 2008

We nurture the human spirit. We help people touch the holy. And we bring a mission of healing in the world. As Bill Sinkford says in this article this saving message shifts our focus away from some kind of a theological or dogmatic center of belief to a deeper understanding of what we and our congregations are called to do.

And I want to remind us just how exceptional that is. In this morning’s reading when Sakharov tells of what he loves most in life, he talks about the great mysteries of the universe that we do not understand, and perhaps never will. Not that we ever give up trying. But I believe it is foolish to put something in a nice neat little box that is ultimately beyond our imaginings.

So, the focus, the center, what saves us in Unitarian Universalism is not based on dogma and creed but on what we do for each other and how we interact with the larger

world. We create, in this congregation and in other UU churches, a safe and sacred space where we nurture each other in the spiritual quest to find our whole selves. We don't have to leave some things at the door. We don't have to suspend disbelief. We aren't asked to affirm things that fly in the face of science and reason and our own experience.

Here we can have an emotional life and an intellectual one, not only a religious or spiritual life. There is a relevance here, and buzz and an energy that shows that this place is alive, dealing with real people and real issues not just those that are dead and boring. Let's face it, there is much in life that is deadening, whether it is the job or the multiple ways that we're unable to bring our whole selves to our lives.

One of the things we human beings long for is connection, connection to others and connection to the ongoing life journey to which we are all called. We come here wondering, perhaps, "Is this my tribe?" "Are these my people?" Yes and yes can be the answer for all who wish to feel the spirit of life and love. Yes and yes for all who are looking for spiritual sustenance to get through daily life. Yes and yes, for all who wish to use our gifts to make a difference in the world.

It is here we find the strength to encounter the grief and joy of others. It is this place that fulfills our longing to live out the transcendent, the sacred in our lives and in the world.

Of course it's not all as serious as it may sound. This is also a place filled with fun and playfulness, what I would even call divine play. For those of us who were here at the Hoe Down on Friday, as we experienced some measure of a diverse community coming together enjoy each other, dance, and have fun. And the presence of the holy was here with us as well and continues to be as we explore our differences and stand with each other in this sacred quest.

And let's not forget the children, for here is the place where we nurture children to realize their own dreams and not impose ours upon them. Here is the place where many adults know and care for children who are not their own as we attempt to put into practice the village that is needed to raise all of our children.

We talk of this church as being a beacon in the Dorchester community. And we don't have to have our lantern on top of the steeple to do this. But, if we are going to be a beacon then we cannot be a bunker. A church that is a bunker defines its space and builds walls to protect and save those who have claimed the market on truth. Meanwhile those who are not like us are kept on the outside.

A church that is a beacon welcomes, and yes offers a saving message to all who wish to be engaged with each other in their own spiritual journeys. There is no inside and outside. The light shines equally on all.

My friend Rob Hardies is the minister at All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church in Washington D.C. Some of you may remember Rob from when he came here to preach at the service when I was installed as your minister three years ago.

Rob was part of that gathering, mentioned earlier, of a dozen ministers who had experienced significant growth in their congregations. Rob tells a really wonderful story on the CD that has been distributed from that conference.

Now in UU churches, the ceremony that we do to welcome infants and children into the life of the family and community is called a "baby dedication," or "child dedication." In that ceremony, in addition to a blessing of the child and words of welcome and commitment from the whole congregation, there is a piece where the minister asks the parents and grandparents and godparents questions about their commitment to this child. Most often everyone answers the questions with some affirmative response like "yes, I will," or "yes, we do."

Now Rob tells of the first time he did a baby dedication all in Spanish. And when he turned to the grandmother and asked her if she promised to love and care for and nurture this child, she responded by clutching her arms over her chest and saying , "con todo me vida," "with all of my life."

"Con todo me vida," with all of my life, with all of our lives. That's the spirit that is embodied in this church. That is our saving message. This is the place where we can bring all of our lives. This is the place where we come with our longing and our brokenness and our joy, and we give each other back our lives, all of our lives.

May it always be so.

Amen and Blessed be