

WHAT MUST I DO TO BE SAVED?

by Rev. Kit Ketcham, Feb. 12, 2006

Are you saved, brother? Sister, are you on the path to glory? Will you reach enlightenment and nirvana or are you headed for the flames, or will it be limbo and purgatory? Are you pure? Have you lived by God's laws and thereby achieved union with God? Have you found the Atman, the God within, that realization of your total being? Are you ready for the Judgment Day, that day when you can see how your life stacks up in God's eyes and get that divine recommendation – will it be heaven or hell? Will you pass the test?

Fire and brimstone, brothers and sisters, fire and brimstone, meant to scare the hell out of you and bring you closer to redemption, reconciliation, and rebirth! Let me hear you say Amen!

You may have recognized, in my questions and admonitions just now, a brief conglomeration of the salvation principles of most of the world's historical religions-- Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, with theatrics from my Baptist heritage.

Buddhism finds salvation in enlightenment, in the act of being awakened to mindfulness, and the losing of oneself in enlightenment. Hinduism finds salvation in realization of one's total being--finding Atman or the God within. Christianity expresses salvation in terms of a transformed life on earth and a promise of life after death.

Judaism emphasizes obeying purity laws as a means of finding purity and relationship with God. Islam prepares its followers for a Day of Judgment, at which time one's life will be deemed suitable for a heavenly life after death or one in a variety of hells.

Let's define salvation. First of all, what might we want to be saved from? In modern life, what haunts us most? (answers?)

The word "salvation", or "soteriology" if you want to know the theological lingo, comes from the Latin root word "salvare", which means to be made safe. It's interesting to me that the same root word is related to such other familiar words as "salve", meaning a healing ointment, "salvage", meaning to rescue from destruction, "salutary and salubrious", meaning to promote health, and "save", meaning to conserve resources.

Life is suffering, according to Buddhist thought, and in alliance with this philosophy, the Psalmist of the Hebrew scriptures writes: "How long, O Lord? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?" "I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast; my mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws....The dogs are all around me, a company of evildoers encircles me."

Hmmmm, come to Jesus, discover Atman, find nirvana; achieve peace and joy and love. Leave behind your wretched existence and become at one with the universe.

The menu of choices is bewildering. Whether it is in English or Arabic or Hebrew or Chinese, we can't read this menu, nothing sounds good, and we're hungry.

"Grandfather, look at our brokenness" cried out the First Peoples of North America. Human beings know our lives are not perfect, nor painfree--we experience grief, anger, frustration, daily. We often can't put it into perspective. We sometimes feel as if our lives are in chaos and there is no way to change that. All of us have experienced the human need for healing---physically, emotionally, and mentally----because human life is no picnic.

About 15 years ago, when I was living in Denver, I began to attend Al Anon 12-step meetings, in hopes of convincing myself that I was okay, that I was capable of controlling my life and -- as a counselor--capable of helping others control theirs. I had left an alcoholic marriage, was plagued by money, food, and relationship problems, and I was trying to raise a teenage son as well. Life was a rat race; I felt drained by my responsibilities and obligations and didn't have any idea how to make life better.

One night early in my Al Anon experience, I was getting ready to go to an Al-Anon meeting, having agreed to meet someone there to introduce her to the twelve step program, when the phone rang. It was my sister Jean, calling from Vancouver. "Mom's had a stroke, it doesn't look good, can you come home?"

My heart in my mouth, I rushed off to the church where the meeting would occur. The doors were locked--it was too early. I paced back and forth in the chilly air, waiting for someone to come, someone who could meet my friend and talk to her about what the 12 steps could offer.

I did not intend to share my pain at my mother's sudden, possibly fatal, illness. I wanted to handle that on my own. I wanted no pity, I wanted no one to see me as incapable of handling my own problems.

But when two group members, Garth and Jan, arrived, to my own shock, I walked forward, opened my arms to them, and said, "I need help. I can't do this alone." and began to cry.

That moment was for me the conversion experience, the salvation, the beginning of healing that I had never experienced as a Baptist. I felt my shell of self-sufficiency crumble. I had never allowed people to see my pain before, had always isolated myself and pretended to be impervious when things went wrong.

I pretended that my Dad's death was a blessing, that my divorce was no problem, that I didn't have time for close friends, that my life was seamless and unfractured. But a few

months in a 12 step program had shown me that there might be another way to live, a way that offered wholeness and peace, instead of loneliness and denial.

In that moment, all of the stuff I'd ever heard about Higher Power or nature or the Universe or the interdependent web suddenly made sense. When I isolated myself, denied my pain, refused to ask for help from others, projected myself as invulnerable and invincible, I was slowly starving, cut off from the source of nourishment that all of us require.

No wonder I ate too much, spent too much, judged too much, talked too much, controlled too much, acting out my hunger and thirst for human community in the only ways I knew.

This realization was my salvation. Knowing that I am not alone in the universe, that being connected with others is essential to my health and happiness, has changed my life. When I forget that I too am part of the interdependent web, when I think that I control my life completely, it is then that my personal hell opens up and I again begin to starve.

But when I trust the universe to bear me up, when I share love, when I am honest with people about my needs, when I allow the real Kit to come out and play, then my personal heaven surrounds me and I am nourished and fed by its bounty.

Now, salvation and redemption are often associated only with Christianity and its concept of Sin. Sin, in Christian theology, is separation from God, behavior which is a choice for evil rather than good. In Christian theology, humans are born sinful; they require redemption, in the form of sacrifice, in order to be saved, reconciled with God, and forgiven of their sins.

Now, though we may not like the word Sin nor its Christian meaning, we mostly are willing to admit that we do make mistakes, we are imperfect, we hurt others and ourselves, sometimes accidentally, sometimes deliberately. We often have to ask for forgiveness from one another.

When we are careless with the earth, when we pollute or damage the planet, we are aware that we have done the wrong thing; we may ask forgiveness from God as we understand God or we may make amends to the earth itself in some way.

But our consciences usually require us to seek reconciliation from the being or entity which we have harmed, and our regret for our behavior and its consequences causes us to seek some kind of redemption.

How do we Unitarian Universalists, then, with a need for rational, not magical, thinking, come to terms with the idea of our need for salvation or for becoming whole, healed, healthy, transformed?

In seminary, I discovered a Unitarian theologian named Henry Nelson Wieman, who offered a challenging and profound approach to some of our deepest human concerns, including the idea of salvation and being made whole.

Wieman, who defines God as the Creative Force in the Universe, sees human salvation bound up in the use of the creative force within each of us. To be “saved”, Wieman believes that each of us must use our creative abilities--and he doesn't just mean art, music, and poetry--for the fullest possible expression of ourselves and for the transformation of the earth.

Wieman's approach is unique in that it requires no Saviour (as do some other of the historical religions such as Christianity and Islam). He sees each human being as a saviour, of self, others, and the earth.

He emphasizes the need to recognize that we human beings live in an intense moral predicament, that we frequently do what we do not want to do, and that we need transformation and salvation.

Our human nature does not always allow us to see ourselves clearly; our human intuitions are sometimes wrong and our creative insights may be impaired by cultural norms. We have many shortcomings that we already recognize and many that we need to recognize. And as we come to know ourselves more clearly, more accurately, we become open to the possibility of transformation, of salvation from the hell of our fears and denial.

Henry Nelson Wieman proposes that to be transformed, we humans must recognize our shortcomings and consciously commit ourselves to the deepest possible expression of our creative force, which may be our art or music, indeed, but most likely occurs in our relationships with one another.

When we are living out of our creative force, our relationships become more honest, more loving, more joyous, less fearful, less defensive, less secretive.

There are many ways of looking at the question of salvation, some of them standard issue mainline religious dogmas, some of them individual paths to wholeness that include disciplines of many sorts--nutrition, exercise, meditation, body work, psychotherapy, medications. We each grapple with our health in our own ways. But the important thing to note is that we are all grappling with it. We all are actively seeking wholeness, health, salvation from the ills of human living.

What is your path to “salvation”? What alerts you to your need for healing? What have you learned from your pain? How do you now handle fear and grief? How would you like to handle your fear and grief? How do others help you? How does your concept of “God” or the Ultimate in the universe help you on your path to wholeness? How can we as a religious community help one another find wholeness and salvation?

In a few minutes, I will give you a chance to respond to some of these questions, if you are willing. It will be interesting to hear from one another what our paths to wholeness mean, how we have struggled with this question and its many answers.

Sharing these kinds of insights builds and strengthens the ties within our community, and fulfills one of the most important functions of a religious institution--the fostering of spiritual growth inside us and among us, enabling us to reach out to others.

Working on this sermon caused me to do a lot of thinking about my own path to health and wholeness. Granted, it was the dropping of my defensive denial and isolation that opened the door for me to transformation, which came initially through AlAnon and its 12 steps. But since that time, my path has shifted somewhat for I wanted to find my path to wholeness, my salvation, in my religious community.

Yet as I look at my life and the ways I structure it, I can see that my path to salvation, my path to wholeness still is framed by some of the universal truths I found in those painful years long ago.

I found transformation when I realized that I did not have all the answers, that I did not have to have all the answers, that I was not God nor did I need to act like God, that I could relax my tight control and release myself into the care of the universe.

I found transformation when I became teachable, when I realized that others had a great deal to teach me, and that arrogance prevented my learning from them. I learned humility. I learned to be real. I learned that there was great joy in humble service and I learned to make amends to people I had hurt. I learned that forgiveness was healing and that the most important forgiveness I could receive was from myself. I learned true joy, not just momentary pleasure.

I would pray for the same for us all--as individuals and as a congregation. I would pray that we might be teachable, open to new learning from whatever sacred source we consider greater than ourselves. I would pray that we might forgive ourselves and one another for our mistakes, that we might learn great lessons from our pain and fear, that we might learn mindfulness and serenity and find ways of giving these gifts to others. I would pray that we might see ourselves more clearly, love ourselves more deeply, and give ourselves more fully to one another. This is my prayer for us today.

Let's pause for a moment of silent reflection and prayer. **COMMUNITY RESPONSE**

HYMN # 311, "LET IT BE A DANCE" You know, at this point in many traditional services, the preacher makes an altar call. Folks are invited to come to the front of the sanctuary to pray or to indicate their desire for the Spirit to enter their lives and transform them. I'm certainly not going to make that kind of altar call, but I would invite you, if you wish, during this final hymn, to come forward and get a hug if you need one, as your blessing from this community.

We are here together to receive transformation, individually and as a group, and our blessings tend to be in the form of hugs. So please come forward as you are comfortable and receive a hug or a handshake if you prefer, as a blessing upon this February Sunday. And when you return to your seat or if it's too hard to get out of your row, you might even offer that gesture to others around you. SING SONG

BENEDICTION: Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that our physical, our emotional, our spiritual health depends on our willingness to make changes in our lives, that we have the power to heal ourselves and to offer the encouragement that others need to heal themselves. May we remember this as we go about our business in the next days, and may we be open to the creative powers of the universe as they work their transformations in our lives.

Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.

POSTLUDE