

Remodeling Salvation
by Julianne Lepp
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Meditation:

A Letter From Martin Luther King, Jr

All life is interrelated.

We are all caught in an inescapable network of humanity.

Tied in a simple garment of destiny.

Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.

When we get up in the morning, we go into the bathroom where we reach for a sponge provided for us by a Pacific Islander. The towel is provided by a Turk.

We reach for soap created by a Frenchman. In the kitchen you drink coffee provided by a South American, or tea by a Chinese, or cocoa by a West African, and butter toast from an English-speaking farmer. Before you've finished breakfast, you've drawn on the labor of much of the world.

This is the way our universe is structured.

This is its interrelated quality.

We aren't going to have peace and justice on Earth until we recognize this basic fact of the interrelated structure of the universe.

Sermon:

Let's talk about remodeling. (*Hold up Ehren's toy measuring tape*) For some of us, remodeling is what we do just before we sell our house. After a tremendous effort of sweat, tears, and love - the cabinets are refinished and the floors are new and shiny. "Why didn't we do this years ago!?" the refrain echoes around shaking heads. Yet, it isn't easy to begin the process. Rooms have to be cleared, furniture moved, and lives rearranged. Remodeling is not often undertaken lightly. There are measurements to be taken and materials to be gathered, it requires some physical and emotional upheaval for it to be accomplished.

Some of you might remember Tim Allen who played the character Tim "the tool man" Taylor in the popular 90's show Home Improvement. This character with his high testosterone grunting would say "hua hua" as he took on the work of remodeling - often to the dismay of his wife and his television show partner. Besides the elements of tools and materials, I will argue that remodeling is often best

done in cooperation and relationship. I imagine that many of you might have a story about someone that chose to remodel for a parent or spouse without their input – it can create quite a lot of friction.

So how does one go about taking a screwdriver or buzz saw to the concept of salvation?

Salvation is a word laden with emotional entanglements for some, and recognizes a state of liberation for others. Before we can begin to pull out the really loud power tools, we have to understand what it is that we are working with. So, let's begin with the framework. Salvation in traditional Christian theology is seen as an intercessory event. Salvation occurs because the catalyst, Jesus Christ, has reconciled the fallen human race to God. In biblical language salvation is the deliverance from circumstances or oppression by some evil to a state of freedom and security. If sin is the greatest evil, then salvation is liberation from sin and its consequences. Depending on the theology of the denomination or Church body, this can be deliverance by way of preservation, by offering the means for being delivered, by removing the oppressive evil or difficulty, or by rewarding the effort spent in co-operating with grace in order to be delivered.

If you have lived in the South long enough, you inevitably encounter the question, “Are you saved?” or “What Church do you go to?” Have any of you encountered that? 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. 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 remodel and 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 seminary I have found quite a few students that share this view that a loving God would not condemn her people to hell.

Universalism is certainly not a new theological concept and continues to be a strong call to many Christians today. The UUA website states that while Universalist beliefs have been proclaimed for thousands of years, starting with Origen in 200 CE and continuing through to James Rely in the seventeenth 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.

As our UU history tells us, Unitarian and Universalists struggled with the constraints of orthodox roots. There was a continuing effort to remodel and construct a faith based on reason, tolerance, and freedom. Through Transcendentalism and the rise of humanism, and later through the broadening acceptance of earth-centered spirituality, the remodeling and reconstructing has continued...and continues on. Yet no matter the movements or influences of the day, Unitarian Universalism is a non-creedal theology. In a non-creedal theology how do you posit a normative statement on salvation?

I believe that the best argument on determining what is normative is demonstrated by the practice of congregational life. In fact, 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.

Since Unitarian Universalism does not approach faith from a foundational set of truths, 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 faith into the world. Unitarian Universalism is a faith community that upholds the tenets of interdependence and the inherent worth of every person in word and in practice. Unitarian Universalist congregations are highly covenanted communities. While the individual faith and life journey is upheld, 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 remodeling a salvation framework that is not individual, but based on the interrelatedness and ultimately the interdependence of the community.

The word interdependence implies a level of mutual dependence, and a mutual dependence requires participation and cooperation for the whole system to thrive. Theologians John Cobb and David Ray Griffin in the book *Process Theology* stated, “The whole of nature participates in us and we in it. We are diminished not only by the misery of the Indian peasant but also by the slaughter of whales and porpoises, and even by the “harvesting” of giant redwoods. We are diminished still more when the imposition of temperate-zone technology onto tropical agriculture turns grasslands into deserts that will support neither human nor animal life” Interdependence is an understanding of a relationship on a fundamental systemic level and on an emotional and spiritual level as well. Martin Luther King, Jr. understood this when he stood up for the rights of the disinherited and oppressed, understanding that what happens to *the least of these*, affects all of us.

What is it that people seek from relationship? What do people seek from faith? I believe that people seek transformation.

A salvation that comes through the acting relationship of a covenanted 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. 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.

Close your ears if you don't want the spoiler... For it was the sum of all the whos' voices that saved them from destruction. They sung out and shouted to the universe at the top of their lungs “We are here! We are here!” - even a speck of dust was recognized as inherently worthy of saving. Horton transformed his ill-wishers by bringing them to relationship, with *the least of these*.

Unitarian Universalism clearly recognizes the inter-connectedness of humanity and the planet. Our congregational communities recognize the complex interplay between the needs of the individual and the community which we are a part. This often calls us to our most difficult, and most rewarding work on healthy relationships. This is the work that transforms conflict and keeps people at the table.

David Pyle, a combat veteran, sermonized on the interdependent relationship of life at the Unitarian Church in Evanston, Illinois. He said, “Each and every one of us is a unique, valuable, and irreplaceable jewel, set in a cosmos-spanning web of intricate connection and beauty, in which who we are is reflected through the jewels of every other person around us. What supports one of us supports us all, what damages one of us damages us all. We are all connected in that web, whether we are Bosnian

Muslim, Bosnian Serb, Bosnian Croat, American Liberal, American Conservative, Myanmar Buddhist, Islamic fundamentalist, Darfur refugee or Sudanese Janaweed Militiaman. The amazing vision that began my healing from the atrocities of Bosnia was this simple, beautiful, interconnected understanding of the world and of our place in it... and it is one of the most radical ideas ever espoused.” Coming from an experience of violence, David Pyle was “saved” by the hope of interdependence and the inherent worthiness of individuals as professed by Unitarian Universalism. These concepts are redemptive in the face of violence and suffering in the world.

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. The more I have delved into theology and spirituality in seminary, I am more and more convinced that the ultimate expression of goodness and the sacred lies in how we treat and uphold one another. I have studied heavy and thick tomes of theology that suggest salvation comes from a sovereign deity on high to reconcile a broken and fallen race to its creator. I vehemently reject the view that life is somehow less than good, and must be purified. Viewing human beings as damaged and broken can only perpetuate being broken. To me, there has never been a falling from grace – grace is recognizing my connection in the beautiful cry of a newborn as much as the downtrodden eyes of my homeless neighbor on the street. I see the spark of my own salvation in the rows in front of this pulpit, in the aisles of the grocery store, and even in the person that firmly condemns me to the fires that I deny.

Regardless of whether the word salvation works for you or not, it is hard to deny the intimate interdependence of the world in which we are a part. The economic crisis, the politics of food and resources, the imbalance of the haves and have nots continually remind us that we are not isolated beings. Our actions reverberate outside of our individual lives and affect our neighbors and even mountain villages across the ocean. When I worked with the Emmaus House Poverty Rights Office during my first year in seminary, I was not ready for the level of need and suffering that occurs in one of Atlanta's forgotten and disinherited neighborhoods. Hunger, struggles for housing, and struggles to

be recognized as a human being are all happening in this city of ours. I saw it on Hank Aaron Drive, and I am seeing it in the lines of hundreds of people at Courtland Street this summer.

When I sit with a mother of four children who has worked her job for nine years and is in danger of losing her housing and therefore her children - how can I not be in relationship with her? Her youngest children are the same ages as my two boys. This occurred my first day working at this ministry. I writhed with the knowledge that since her partner walked out with rent money, a hardworking and loving mother might not have a way to feed, clothe, or house these children. As the four of them played around us, I called agency after agency. The phone calls brought only two leads, and I was able to refer her for clothes – but her housing still remained a question! I have learned that while I am not always able to solve the problems of resources and alleviate human suffering, I can offer myself. I can offer a direct look in the eye and welcome a man that might not have washed for days and call him by name.

It is amazing how much saying someone's name or simply recognizing the relationship that exists between one another can diffuse pain and offer hope. We are on this small blue planet for a limited time. I feel that we are called to the work of uplifting one another, not because we are broken – but because we are beautiful! I have borrowed a little of Tim Taylor's “Hua Hua” in this struggle for defining salvation. It isn't easy to cast aside the negative aspects of “being less than” and unworthiness that I have attached to the word in the past. But, as with any hard remodeling job. I see the beautiful lines, take the cloth off the furniture, and hold up this salvational model of interdependence as my meaning of what it is to be in the work of saving and being saved. It is a process not a destination. It is mutual not a line drawn in the sand.

May we all continue to seek our individual truths and to recognize the relationship that calls us back here in community, relationship, and love. May it be so.