

## **What Saves Us**

Rev. Heather Concannon

January 13, 2019

### **Reading**

*from Saving Paradise*

Rev. Rebecca Parker

*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 simply 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.*

*To know paradise in this life is to enter a multidimensional spiritual-material reality... Paradise is human life restored to its divinely infused dignity and capacity, and it is a place of struggle with evil and injustice, requiring the development of wisdom, love, nonviolence, and responsible uses of power. Paradise can be experienced as spiritual illumination of the heart, mind, and senses felt in moments of religious ecstasy, and it can be known in ordinary life lived with reverence and responsibility. Paradise is not a place free from suffering or conflict, but it is a place in which Spirit is present and love is possible.*

*Entering paradise in this life is not an individual achievement but is the gift of communities that train perception and teach ethical grace. Paradise provides deep reservoirs for resistance and joy. It calls us to embrace life's aching tragedies and persistent beauties, to labor for justice and peace, to honor one another's dignity, and to root our lives in the soil of this good and difficult earth<sup>1</sup>.*

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpts from "Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Empire for Love of this World" by Rebecca Parker and Rita Nakashima Brock, Beacon Press, 2008. Pages 409-410.

We were sitting in the sparse dorm basement  
Of South Hall  
Waiting for our laundry to finish  
Having abandoned our biology homework on the table next to us.  
It was the fall of our freshman year in college  
And Liz, my biology lab partner, and I  
Were having tea and working on homework late one night  
When she started asking about my church.

Liz and I had this in common,  
As college freshmen,  
We were unusual among our peers in that we were both devoted to our  
Religious traditions  
The rare and coveted specimens of college students  
who were weekly church attendees.  
But we had never really talked about *which* churches we went to  
And Liz was curious about mine.  
“So, is it Christian, then?” Liz asked me.  
“Oh, geeze” I thought. “Where to begin?”  
As I started to explain Unitarian Universalism to her  
Talking about covenant, and about the belief in love, and justice, and compassion,  
And the focus on making the world a better place  
She looked really sad.

“Wait...” she broached the subject gently, kindly, “but you don’t accept Jesus as your savior?”

“No, not really”, I said, feeling almost like I was breaking the news of a bad diagnosis to someone.

“Unitarian Universalists tend to believe that Jesus was a great man and teacher, but not necessarily the only way to a good life”

“It’s just...” she said, “It’s just that I think you’re a really good person. It makes me really confused and sad to think that you’ll go to hell.”

I really liked Liz,  
We were quite friendly,  
She was easy to get along with  
I thought she was thoughtful, and kind, and had a good sense of humor.

To be honest, I think this conversation shook up her sense of world order,  
far more than it messed with mine.

Because Liz came from a religious tradition  
That offered only one type of salvation  
A salvation that included some, but not others  
And, though I went to church...religiously

Though she and I tried to live our everyday lives by very similar values  
Her understanding of salvation included her, but could not include me.

Rebecca Parker, who we heard in our reading this morning,  
says that human beings do indeed need to be saved,  
not from a wrathful God or from eternal damnation,  
but from the consequences of human sin.

And we see the consequences of human sin around us—  
And I know sometimes Unitarian Universalists can tend to emphasize human  
goodness  
Because it can be so hard to reconcile with our own brokenness, our own falling  
short.  
And because sin can be used as a bludgeon  
A kind of shorthand to control behavior  
We don't want to think of ourselves as sinful! We are good people!  
We Unitarian Universalists believe in the inherent worth and dignity of all people!  
In original blessing!

But I understand sin to be separation  
From our truest values, from one another,  
and from that which is the most holy and sacred in our lives.  
And it is something that each and every one of us is capable  
Of missing the mark,  
Of feeling distant from our own best selves,  
And what we owe to one another.

And we see sin all around us—  
In border walls  
And government shutdowns that cause people to lose access to needed pay  
And WIC benefits  
We see sin in corporate greed  
in an economy that values profit over people  
In violence  
And abuse  
And oppression.

And, my friends, I believe we need some saving, some healing, from these forces  
That would separate us.  
Because when we give in to these forces  
When we become separated from each other  
And our own values  
I believe that, ultimately,  
this separation can lead to  
A sense of despair and lack of meaning  
in our lives

whether or not our material needs get met.

And, I do not believe that all suffering  
Comes from sin—  
Do not confuse the two.  
Because as Unitarian Universalists  
We believe that suffering is a part of life  
Not punishment for a way of living.

Because, as we heard from Rebecca Parker in our reading,  
“Paradise is not a place free from suffering or conflict,  
but it is a place in which Spirit is present and love is possible.”

So what, then, allows us to enter a place of paradise,  
Which is her way of saying,  
So what, then, will save us, if suffering is a part of life?

Salvation comes from that which affirms life  
From the powers of love and goodness  
Used to heal, to create justice, to offer comfort and love.  
Powers that we hold within each of us.  
Powers that we can share with one another  
Powers that we can call upon when we show up, offer love  
Create justice, heal, comfort, and affirm life.

Now, please put away your orders of service,  
Because it is time for a pop quiz.

What does “Universalist” refer to, as in “Unitarian Universalist”?

- a. Universalists believe in the Universe as the creator
- b. Universalists believe in universal salvation, no one goes to Hell
- c. Universalists believe in all religions, universally
- d. Universalists believe in one universal God

Yes! B!

Historically, our Universalist ancestors believed  
As they began to articulate a Universalist theology in the early 1800s,  
that if God were a loving, parental figure, as they had been taught,  
Then why would a loving God send any of God’s children to suffer eternally?  
Furthermore, they argued,  
Good people, if they were truly good, could not be happy in a place called heaven if  
they knew some people were eternally suffering,  
And if they couldn’t be happy, then it couldn’t truly be heaven, right?

Now, I don’t know what happens when we die  
And my own personal conception of God looks a lot like a decisive puppeteer

And more like a loving force,  
Calling us toward one another  
A witness, a presence, a sense of being part of something greater than ourselves,  
Community, wholeness, love, justice, mystery.

But I love what this historical view of Universalism has to offer  
Because it reminds me that we cannot be saved unless we are all saved  
We cannot be free until all of us are free  
Our liberation and our salvation are intertwined—interdependent, with one another  
Right here, right now,  
In this life and on this earth.  
We are called to create paradise, here and now,  
Which is not a place free from suffering  
But is a place where we resist injustice  
Where we use our powers to heal, and not to hurt  
And where spirit is present and love is possible.

I know that people tend to be wary of the word salvation  
Nowadays, in our congregations, and perhaps even more so in our wider  
world  
Because, I suspect that many of you  
Associate salvation with people  
Like my college friend Liz  
A salvation that says that some are in  
And some are out.

But I also believe that the purpose of this faith  
Is nothing less than salvation  
Because, my friends, this faith has saved me  
Over and over again  
It has given my hope when I have most needed it  
It has given me community, it has given me depth, and it has given me a  
framework for finding meaning in my life.  
This faith has saved me,  
This faith has saved people I love  
And I know that this faith has saved many of you, too.

Megan Dowdell, in her essay in the book  
Testimony: The Transformative Power of Unitarian Universalism,  
Talks about how Unitarian Universalism has saved her. She writes:

“When I was eleven years old, I entered a New England Unitarian Universalist  
church for the first time on my own. I was invited to sing in the youth choir  
that traveled among several churches downtown. After one session in the  
religious education program, I wanted to return every week. Arriving  
without my parents, I quickly became an adopted child of the church. A

family would bring me along to the church retreat and make sure I had a ride to come serve food at the silent auction or volunteer in the childcare program. Looking back, I wonder what the members must have thought about this young girl who was always the first to arrive and the last to leave. Of course, what they didn't know then was that my home was not a safe place. I suffered consistent abuse by my father and experienced prolonged periods of silence and neglect. Some might call this hell."

Megan Dowdell goes on to talk about the ways that her church saved her over and over again:

When she was coming out as queer as a teenager and invited to co-chair their Welcoming Congregation team,  
With trusted adults offering appropriate support and opportunities,  
With her minister offering pastoral care and an encouragement to begin healing the wounds of her childhood.

She closed: "Through Unitarian Universalism, I grew into a vision of family and community that condemns violence of all kinds and releases the desire for retribution that would keep me farther from my own flourishing and well-being.

As a Unitarian Universalist, I cannot claim a God who simply damns those who do bad things to hell. Instead I find myself saved in a community that wishes to build a world of justice, mercy, and compassion for all, knowing that I am not the last to need saving"

I think, too, about our Our Whole Lives, or OWL,  
which is our comprehensive sexuality education program—  
Since the 1970s, Unitarian Universalism has been offering comprehensive, inclusive sexuality education that affirms human sexuality as a healthy and whole part of life,  
Regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation.  
And of course, OWL does so much more than talk about sex,  
OWL also teaches about communication, and boundaries,  
and recognizing unhealthy relationship dynamics.

I am the most moved, however, by the fact that during the early years of OWL,  
When so many religious traditions were condemning LGBTQ people,  
And using the HIV/AIDS crisis to further vilify and condemn the gay community  
That the Unitarian Universalist response was to offer  
more and more inclusive and  
more and more comprehensive sexuality education  
I often say that OWL is a life-saving ministry of Unitarian Universalism  
And I think that that is true:  
OWL affirms life

OWL affirms identities

And OWL offers tools for engaging in sexuality and relationships  
in a way that is as safe as possible, both physically and emotionally.

Life saving.

Life affirming.

Salvation.

When we create communities that affirm and support life

That harness the power of love to transform our lives

We offer a kind of salvation

A healing of the wounds of this broken world

That we cannot do alone.

Rebecca Parker again, writes:

“In every situation, love asks, “What will serve life?”

This means human love comes from a growing wisdom about life itself.

If one wants to love, it is life that one must seek to fully know.

To love is to choose life.”

My friends,

We cannot be saved alone

And we do not have to do it alone.

We are saved by love, by community, by faith, by something larger than ourselves.

We are saved by that which affirms life in the presence of suffering.

We are saved by one another

We are saved when we wield the powers of love

For life, for one another, for justice.

May we each be agents of our salvation.

May it be so, and amen.

### **Benediction:**

Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime;

therefore we must be saved by hope.

Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate  
context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith.

Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone;

therefore we must be saved by love.

-Reinhold Niebuhr

And, sin aside  
Sometimes, we just suffer.  
Loss, death, depression,  
What else?  
Cause us to suffer  
And what, then, saves us?  
Still, I believe, what saves us is that which affirms life.

We bring food because it affirms life  
We offer hugs that ground us in our bodies  
We show up at rallies and marches asking for justice  
Because justice affirms life  
And we do all of these things as an expression of love.

Because, I believe that love i

Day after my dad died  
Story of calling Allison, tell me about boring normal life things  
Affirms life  
Reminds us that we cannot be free from suffering, but won't always be this hard

*Dancing with Moira and Micah at Sanctuary?*

What saves us?

These things are all around us

OWL

UU Salvation

Unitarian Universalists believe...

Universal salvation

COA Class?

COA class on evil—all have capacity for good and for evil

God is not the string puller, but the loving presence that shows up

We cannot be free from suffering, but spirit is present and love is possible

What is it that affirms life?

Any action we take that affirms life is a

After my dad died, wanted to spend time with young people, babies,

What is it that affirms life for us?

High accountability/ high grace

Sin as separation

Push back on the idea that someone or something else is going to “save” us.

“Salvation comes through the powers of life and goodness, present within and around us.”

“Salvation comes through the gift of human powers and capacities, used to heal injury, comfort the afflicted, create justice, and offer love”

Shortly after my dad died, last January,  
I called my friend Allison.

Allison had come down from New Hampshire to be with us  
The night that we found out that he died  
And the next day, I was driving between my mom's house, about an hour west of me,  
back to my house to arrange some logistics.  
I called Allison on the drive.  
"Allison," I said. "I'm going to be driving for the next hour.  
Can you distract me, so I can drive? I'm not ready to be alone with my own thoughts  
yet"  
Of course." She said "what would you like to talk about?  
"I don't know," I said, "tell me about your day. Tell me about normal people things"  
And for the next 75 minutes  
Allison told me about the most mundane normal people things.  
Where she had gone grocery shopping and what she had gotten and  
And in a moment where my whole world felt like it had been turned upside down  
I had this—a moment of being grounded  
By what felt normal, life-affirming,