

THE FIRST UNITARIAN SOCIETY OF MILWAUKEE

**WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE?
Part IV:**

**“What Are the Ways to Wholeness?
Exploring Soteriology”**

**by
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READINGS

Welcome, everyone, to Part IV of our six-part “What Do You Believe?” series of services.

Today, I’d like to explore with you: “What Are the Ways to Wholeness?” particularly from a religious, or spiritual, perspective rather than, say, from a psychological perspective. Our subtitle is called, “Exploring Soteriology.”

Now, if any of you happened to look up the word “soteriology” in the dictionary sometime before coming to church today, you probably found something like, “Soteriology: The doctrine of salvation”¹ or perhaps “The theological doctrine of salvation as effected by Jesus.”² Those are two different definitions that I found.

And that’s true – that’s what soteriology typically means, although I’m going to argue today for a considerable expansion of that definition as we go along.

So, I have two brief readings for your consideration.

First is from a pamphlet which was found underneath the church door a couple of months ago. (This happens to us from time to time wherein people occasionally share their concerns for us and our errant ways.) The pamphlet is entitled, “5 Things God Wants You To Know.” It was published by the “Beacon of Truth Baptist Ministries,” and it speaks to the more traditional understanding of salvation and soteriology.

#1. God wants you to know. . . You are a sinner.

[And then, in the pamphlet, it goes on to cite a key Bible verse, in this case: “As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one. Romans 3:10.” But for brevity’s sake, as we move through the “5 Things God Wants You To Know,” I am going to omit all the biblical citations and just cut to the chase.]

So, again, #1. God wants you to know. . . You are a sinner.

#2. God wants you to know. . . You will die. [Then there are supporting Biblical verses.]

#3. God wants you to know. . . Christ died for you.

#4. God wants you to know. . . Jesus wants to save you.

¹ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 1971 edition.

² *The American Heritage Dictionary*, third edition, 1992.

#5. God wants you to know. . . Jesus Christ is your *only* hope.”

So, that’s the traditional Christian version of salvation and soteriology.

Our second Reading gives you a little taste, at least, of where I would prefer to go with this service on soteriology, namely, to spiritual ways to wholeness. So, our second Reading, then, is a poem by a Unitarian Universalist minister, writer and poet, Lynn Ungar. It is entitled, “salvation.”

By what are you saved? And how?
Saved like a bit of string,
tucked away in a drawer?
Saved like a child rushed from
a burning building, already
Singed and coughing smoke?
Or are you salvaged
like a car part — the one good door
when the rest is wrecked?

Do you believe me when I say
you are neither salvaged nor saved,
but salved, anointed by gentle hands
where you are most tender?
Haven’t you seen
the way snow curls down
like a fresh sheet, how it
covers everything,
makes everything
beautiful, without exception?³

³ Ungar, Lynn, “Salvation,” from “Poems and Other Cool Stuff, a Collection of Poetry, Prayers and Odd Items from Fiat Lux,” on the Internet.

WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE?
Part IV
What Are the Ways to Wholeness?
Exploring Soteriology

A study of Unitarian Universalist values was carried out some years ago by a gentleman by the name of Robert Miller.⁴ Miller discovered that while we Unitarian Universalists are widely diverse in our stated beliefs, nevertheless, we share a remarkably homogenous set of values in a distinct and unique configuration that, interestingly, is decidedly different from our Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and unchurched neighbors.

For example, in a list of 18 values, we Unitarian Universalists ranked our top five values as: self-respect, wisdom, freedom, family security, and inner harmony. At the bottom of the list – our bottom four – not that they were bad, but that they were lower – were: pleasure, a comfortable life, national security, and last of all . . . salvation.

Yep, dead last – salvation.

Miller writes in his report:

While we anticipated this [that salvation might come in last], we were not prepared for the full force of the results. Respondents frequently communicated their intense desire to rule out *salvation* as a part of their value system. Many left the label *salvation* affixed to the wax strip and refused to include it in any way. Others pasted it vertically off to one side of the rank order grid. Still others discarded it entirely. . . . Others pointedly pasted it upside down below the numbered grid.

In conclusion, Miller says, “Salvation comes close to being a disvalue for Unitarian Universalists. . . .”⁵

Indeed, as Unitarian Universalists, I guess we do have strong opinions sometimes, and at other times, admittedly, we can get a little touchy, a little hung up on certain words and concepts. I’m reminded of the old saw, for example, that explains why we Unitarian Universalists often don’t sing very well, which, happily, doesn’t apply to this congregation so much. But the reason why many Unitarian Universalists don’t sing very well is supposedly because we’re so busy singing while at the same time we’re trying to read ahead to see if we agree with the words or not!

⁴ Miller, Robert L. H., “The Religious Value System of Unitarian Universalists,” *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Spring, 1976).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

But as one of my colleagues says, “Hey, chill out, everyone, I’m just asking you to *sing* the hymn, not *sign* it!”⁶

II

In any case, “salvation” is clearly *not* something that we Unitarian Universalists typically hold up as a high value in our lives. This, of course, is particularly true when we understand “salvation” to be of the type described in our first Reading, wherein we are all sinners, we’re doomed to die, and only our belief in Jesus Christ as our Savior will save us.

Indeed, this traditional understanding of salvation and soteriology is found in most of the world’s religions. Typically, it involves God (or some other Higher Power) saving us from one version or another of eternal suffering or damnation by providing us with an avenue to eternal life. Now, some religions claim that salvation can be attained by employing our own inner resources – such as meditation, the accumulation of wisdom, or through good works – while other religions teach that salvation can only be attained (again) through the grace of God or with the assistance of a Bodhi-sattva or an Avatar. But in each case, when it comes to salvation, the traditional emphasis is primarily on the next life, not on this life. The emphasis, in other words, is typically on a way to get into heaven or to be liberated from Samsara and the endless cycles of death and rebirth. So, again, in many of the world religions, when it comes to salvation, the traditional, orthodox emphasis is on the next life, not this life.

Most Unitarian Universalists, on the other hand, even if we believe in some sort of afterlife or reincarnation – and some of us do -- nevertheless, we tend to emphasize this life, not the next. Our seven Unitarian Universalist principles, for instance, are all about how to live this life wisely and well; they say absolutely nothing about an afterlife. Even our self-deprecating humor points to the emphasis on this life, as in what is perhaps the first and oldest Unitarian Universalist joke I ever heard. You’ve probably heard it, too. A Unitarian Universalist dies, and on the way to the afterlife encounters a fork in the road with two options: “*to heaven*” or “*to a discussion of heaven.*” Without pausing, the UU heads straight for the discussion.

So, for me, when I think about soteriology and “salvation,” I tend to think about ways to wholeness and to “heaven,” if you will, in this life, not the next. I tend to think about what the 12th century mystic Meister Eckhart used to call, not the eternal hereafter, but the “eternal *now.*” I tend to think about the Buddhist notion of *akinchana* – one who is free, fully present, and at peace, not one who is hopelessly entangled in

⁶ Korb, Kathleen Damewood, “Salvation,” Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Greater Naples, April 15, 2007, p. 1.

the forces of clinging, grasping desires, hatred, or ignorance. And again, when I think about soteriology and “salvation,” I tend to think of Jesus’ notion of the Kingdom of God, interpreted as a deep joy, presence, and love dwelling within us and among us. As Jesus said, “The Kingdom of God is *within*.” So, this, then, is another way to think about “salvation” – salvation in *this* life.

III

In our second Reading today, significantly entitled “Salvation,” Lynn Ungar says we “are neither salvaged nor saved,” like an odd car part or “a bit of string tucked away in a drawer.” Rather, she says, we are “salved, anointed by gentle hands where [we] are most tender.”

This, then, points more directly to soteriology and “salvation” in terms of ways to wholeness in this life, wherein gentle hands anoint and salve the broken places of our hearts, minds, and bodies. And, ultimately, like a fresh snow, with love and compassion, we are made whole and holy – in Ungar’s words, we are all “beautiful, without exception.”⁷

Etymologically, it may be helpful for you to know, the word salvation traces its lineage from Latin to a Sanskrit word *sarvah*, which means “all.” This is a reference to wholeness, to completeness and totality. And, as in the first syllable of “salvation,” likewise, the Latin root *sal* is related to health and wholeness, as in the words “salutary” and “salubrious,” meaning “healthful.”⁸

Similarly, in the New Testament, the Greek word most often translated as “salvation” is *soterion*, from which (obviously) comes the word soteriology. More interestingly, in the ancient Phoenician system of writing, which was pictorial, there was a symbol, or an image, that came into Greek as the word *soterion*. This Phoenician image was a picture of a broken pot or vessel. *Soterion*, then, is the process of being made whole, a process of re-integration, of being restored and made sound.⁹

And, thus, a case can be made, it seems to me, that salvation and soteriology, whatever else they may mean to others, can also legitimately refer to other this-worldly notions of bringing healing and wholeness to the broken places, to the tender places, of our lives.

⁷ Parts of this paragraph are paraphrased from Clark, Bill, “Salvation,” First Parish in Lexington, MA, Unitarian Universalist, found on the Internet.

⁸ Simpson, Cyndi, “Salvation,” Columbine Unitarian Universalist Church, June 14, 2009, found on the Internet. Consulting my *Oxford English Dictionary*, 1971 edition, I find that the first usage of the term *soteriology*, in 1847, was “a discourse on health, or the science of preserving or promoting health” (Webster).

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 4.

IV

Let me shift modes, now, and tell you some stories, some soteriological stories, about what I would regard as one of the key dynamics of our spiritual lives, namely, our finding a way to embrace the paradox of being able to experience perfection even in the midst of imperfection, of being able to experience peace even in the midst of chaos, of being able to experience wholeness even in the midst of our manifest brokenness.

Our first of two stories is told by Bo Lozoff. Among a host of other projects, Lozoff writes a newsletter that goes mostly to prisoners. Lozoff is the co-director of something called the Prison-Ashram Project, which, fascinatingly, tries to re-frame incarceration in our penal system to the privations and disciplines of being a monk in a monastery. It's a wonderful project. Lozoff has written a book, in fact, called, *We Are All Doing Time*. In any case, in his newsletter, Lozoff re-tells the following story.

In the ancient Hindu epic *The Ramayana*, there's a passage where Rama, a young prince who is actually God born as a human being, is supposed to be made king the next day, and his people are the happiest people in the world because they love him so much. There's a classic line in this part of the story [Lozoff continues] that I have remembered so many times in my life — "Many things can go wrong in the dark night before a king is made." How true!

And sure enough, that very night an evil influence overtakes Rama's stepmother, and instead of being crowned king, Rama is unjustly exiled by his father and is ordered to spend fourteen years in the forest as a wandering beggar, enduring hardships and dangers. The kingdom is plunged into incredible grief. Now the people are the *unhappiest* people in the world. They cannot believe it, they don't know how they will ever be happy again, how they will be able to laugh or have any pleasure while they know that Prince Rama is sleeping on the ground somewhere in the pathless forest, eating roots and leaves, enduring insect bites and having to keep watch for snakes, lions, wolves, jackals.

This is the worst thing that has ever happened in their country, the worst times they have ever known. Everyone in the kingdom is totally freaked out except for two people: Prince Rama himself, and his family's old wise man, Vashishta.

When the king's charioteer and warrior says to Vashishta, "Priest, the world has gone to hell!" Vashishta calmly replies, "I see the world much the same as ever." When someone says to Rama, "Rama, disobey

your father! Don't go! We'll imprison him and make you our King!," Rama calmly says "Give up your anger. The palace or the forest are the same to me."

Bo Lozoff explains this story:

This is an important paradox to understand for our spiritual journeys — The palace or the forest are the same to me. The same in what way? Certainly not the same in comfort or safety or wealth or social interactions. Yet there are prisoners reading this newsletter who do know how it is the same, in a sense, to be in the palace or the forest, to be on the streets or in prison...The worldly person in us sees good times and bad times, big days and little days, while the old wise [one] deep inside us sees every day as equal, just one more opportunity to make choices about whether to be kind or unkind, selfish or unselfish, helpful or harmful, wherever we may be.

Lozoff continues,

Both the warrior. . . and the wise man are right: This is a horrible time for their nation, *and* the world is much the same as ever — good times and bad times going round and round the wheel of time and destiny.

"Being able to hold this paradox," Lozoff concludes,

is an important key to our peace of mind. . . . The warrior and the wise [one] — the passionately engaged part of us and the calm, unruffled observer — both have their place.¹⁰

This, I would suggest, is an important soteriological truth — a truth pertaining to spiritual wholeness and equilibrium, helping us to come to terms with a broken and bruising, and yet beautiful world.

V

Our second story is another salvific or soteriological story about this paradox of being able to experience perfection even in the midst of imperfection, of finding peace even in the chaos, of finding wholeness even in the midst of our manifest brokenness. This is a charming and instructive story — albeit, I have to admit, I find, of dubious au-

¹⁰ Lozoff, Bo, "Living in Peace," A Little Good News, Spring, 2008, (Durham, NC: Human Kindness Foundation), pp. 1-2.

thenticity – about the violinist Itzhak Perlman. This story originally appeared in the *Houston Chronicle*.¹¹

On November 18, 1995, Itzhak Perlman, the violinist, came on stage to a concert. Now if any of you have seen a Perlman concert, you know that getting on stage is no small achievement for him. He was stricken with polio as a child, so he has braces on both his legs and walks with the aid of two crutches.

He walks painfully, yet majestically, onto the stage until he reaches his chair. He then sits down, slowly, places his crutches on the floor, undoes the clasps on his legs, tucks one foot back and extends the other one forward. He then bends down slowly, picks up his violin, places it under his chin, nods to the conductor, and proceeds to play.

By now, audiences are used to this ritual. They sit quietly while he makes his way across the stage to his chair and settles in.

However, on this occasion, something went wrong. Just as he finished the first few bars, one of the strings on his violin broke. You could hear it snap. It went off like gunfire across the room. There was no mistaking what that sound meant. There was no mistaking what he had to do.

People there that night thought he would have to get up, put on the clasps, pick up his crutches, and limp back off stage to find either another violin or a new string.

But he didn't move. Instead he waited a moment, closed his eyes and then signaled to the conductor to begin again. The orchestra began and he played from where he had left off. And he played with such passion and such power and such purity as never heard before.

Now anyone knows that it is impossible to play a symphonic work with just three strings. I know that. You know that. But that night Itzhak Perlman refused to know that.

You could see him modulating, changing, recomposing the piece in his head. At one point, it sounded like he was de-tuning the strings to get whole new sounds from them that they had never heard before.

¹¹ This story is from Clark, op. cit., pp. 3-4, but www.snopes.com, a fact checking website, finds no corroborating evidence to support the authenticity of this story. I have shortened this story slightly from the apparently original *Houston Chronicle* version with help from a version found in Clark, as cited above.

When he finished, there was an awesome silence in the room. No one moved or made a sound.

And then people rose and cheered. All were on their feet, screaming and cheering, acknowledging the extraordinary music they had just heard.

He smiled, wiped the sweat from his brow, raised his bow to quiet us, and then he said, not boastfully, but in a quiet, pensive and reverent tone: "You know, sometimes it is the artist's task to find out how much music you can still make with what you have left."¹²

Thus, our task, I would suggest, friends, is to make music, first with all that we have, and then, when that is no longer possible, to make music with what we have left.¹³

Indeed, the ongoing spiritual journey to salvation, to wholeness, to attaining peace in this world — a broken, bruising, and yet beautiful world — embraces, I believe, this paradox of being able to experience perfection even in the midst of imperfection, wholeness even in the midst of our manifest brokenness.

"The palace or the forest are the same to me," said Rama.

And, thus, with gentle hands, let us anoint and salve all of the broken places of our hearts, minds, and bodies in all of those most tender of places. And, ultimately, like a fresh snow, with love and compassion, let us all be made whole and holy — "beautiful, without exception."

¹² Clark, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-4.

¹³ Paraphrased from the original *Houston Chronicle* version of this story.