

How Are We Saved?

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A monk asked [Zen Master] Seng ts'an, "Master, show me the way to liberation." Seng ts'an replied, "Who binds you?" The monk responded, "No one binds me." Seng ts'an said, "Then why do you seek liberation?" In many Eastern traditions, the question of salvation is framed this way, in terms of bondage and liberation. In a lot of ways it is like what a friend of mine was telling me this week as we had the chance to catch up.

Dwayne and I met when we were in undergrad together. He was a faithful Methodist his whole life and was considering becoming a Methodist minister back then. I think his father may have been a minister. Anyway, some time before we all graduated Dwayne came to his senses and decided to take up another profession. I believe he graduated with a business degree. When I recently caught up with him, Dwayne told me that he became a car salesman after college. This made sense. Dwayne was a charming fellow; handsome and very likable. Just the sort of fellow you would want to buy a car from!

In his late twenties he was living on commission. Dwayne made a tidy living off his good looks and charm. He wound up doing quite well for himself. He met a nice girl and got married. They had two beautiful little girls. He bought a house long before I ever even thought about doing so. Dwayne was the top salesman. He lived in a town where people needed a lot of cars apparently. Then he went from top salesman to manager thanks to his business degree. He was widely respected by his friends, family, and peers. Dwayne was doing so well for himself, he even started voting Republican! (Come on Republicans, you had a very good week this week, you can take one of my dopy jokes.)

I will tell you right up front that this is NOT a Job story. Dwayne didn't lose all of his possessions and his family to prove how faithful he was. No there wasn't anything quite so dramatic to account for the strange feelings he was having. About a year or so ago, he noticed something different about himself. Dwayne was no longer comfortable in his own skin. It seemed that his life just didn't fit quite right. This made no sense. Everything he had ever wanted, everything he had dreamed for himself, had come to pass. And yet this strange feeling kept coming over Dwayne like a fog rolling into a harbor enveloping everything. It was the feeling that the things that had been important to him for the past

fifteen years were no longer what were important. His mind and heart had shifted somehow.

This was a classic midlife crisis of course. From college onward Dwayne had one internal directive driving him forward: achieve more. That he had done. Wife, family, cars, success, respect – all of it had come his way. Now all of sudden it feels empty. Talk about first world problems!

Yet it was a problem. This sinking depression was becoming a real problem. Had he lived his life in vain? Ever the loving of music, Dwayne said that there was a song by the Talking Heads that was popular in our day that captured how he felt:

And you may ask yourself
What is that beautiful house?
And you may ask yourself
Where does that highway go to?
And you may ask yourself
Am I right?...Am I wrong?
And you may say to yourself
My God!...What have I done?!

While I like that song, Letting the Days Go By, his story reminded me instead of Sheng ts'an. "Who binds you?" the Zen Master asks. "I do!" his student realizes. We all do; we all bind

ourselves, just as Dwayne had bound himself. Note that my friend Dwayne is a very blessed person. If you met him, you would not think, "There is a person who suffers." And yet we all suffer in some private way. Even someone as prosperous as Dwayne. The writer Ursula K. Le Guin once said, through the mouth of her novel's protagonist, "You the possessors are yourselves possessed." Conventionally speaking we would say that Dwayne owned his beautiful house and his beautiful car, but in a deeper sense they owned him. They required of him a certain way of behaving and being in the world. In his twenties, it was all about accumulating that stuff. But after a while it felt like he was the one now possessed by his possessions. And so despite the outward veneer of prosperity and accomplishment, Dwayne's world became a dull, grey, boring land of meaninglessness. Dwayne was in need of salvation.

Salvation may seem a funny word to us these days. After all, I am hardly describing my friend as a reprobate sinner. Granted he is a successful car salesman; a profession that counts few saints among its numbers. But Dwayne wasn't robbing banks for a living either. When we think of "salvation" it may invoke images of demons battling angels for supremacy of the human soul. If Milton is not your speed, and like me you were raised a Protestant, than the word "salvation" may have other

connotations. You could imagine a small spider scurrying along its web as a hand grabs the web and dangles it over a fire. That was Puritan theologian Jonathan Edwards' favorite analogy on God's relationship to humankind. Again, when we think of "salvation" it is typically framed in these grand cosmic terms.

Even our Universalist ancestors talked about salvation in existential terms. We heard this morning some of the more humorous anecdotes that the Universalists would share among themselves. They were all about salvation; heck they are named after their theory of salvation. The Universalists preached about a loving, merciful, and forgiving God in contrast to the angry God that hates both humans and spiders. Even with their theology of God as love, the Universalist still framed salvation as up in the clouds.

Our Unitarian ancestors were different. After all, the defining features of American Unitarianism in its early days were asserting the humanity of Jesus and denying the Fall of Adam that lead to original sin. So the whole, "Have faith in Jesus as your Lord and Savior" just wasn't going to be a workable formula for the Unitarians. But they did believe in salvation. Salvation is really the basic belief that there is a way of being that is better than the one we are in now. Usually that way of being exists in some other dimension, or another lifetime. But not always; not for the

Unitarians. They had some ideas about what that other way of being that is better than the one we are in now could look like.

It was very informative to hear what some of your ideas of salvation are. The community sermon writing was very popular for this month. There were different ways of saying it, but all the responses were something like: salvation is living a life full of good deeds. Some were more poetic in how they said it, but that was the basic idea. “Salvation through good works” is how this is usually framed. Believe it or not that is a very old idea. In fact, those of you who wrote to me describing your belief in good works, will be happy to know that you believe in one of the most famous heresies of all time! You should be proud of yourself for standing in just ancient and notorious company. Back in the fourth century AD the idea that you are saved by good works was known as Pelagianism. St. Augustine himself argued against Pelagianism, and it was Augustine’s writings that faith rather than good works save us, that inspired Martin Luther.

But, all you nascent Pelagian heretics out there may be pleased to know, that the early Unitarians would agree with you. They were Palegians too. “Deeds not creeds” was a very popular slogan among the Unitarians in the twentieth century. To the pragmatic Unitarians, salvation is something to be demonstrated over and over, not won once and for all. You know you are saved

not by how blessed you are with material wealth, but by how much Free Trade Coffee you buy at coffee hour. All joking aside, UUSC is a good example here. The Unitarian Service Committee was created to help Jews escape from Nazis. Say what you will, but that was more important to the Unitarians than debating how many angels dance on the head of a pin or what color robes to wear at Easter. Faith is something you live out with your actions. I am a Unitarian because I frankly don't much care what the people who ran the Unitarian Service Committee believed in the 1940s. They saved Jews from death camps, and if that means they were Pelagians who thought you were saved by deeds and not creeds – then I say fantastic!

The Unitarians actually didn't flaunt being heretics as much as we might today. Many a Unitarian Universalist wears the term "heretic" proudly these days. Back then though, they were a little more careful with the term even if you acknowledged being a heretic. Channing was the first, as he usually is, to talk about this earthy, earthly, understanding of salvation. Remember our definition: salvation is the belief that there is a way of being that is better than the one we are in now. A way of being that is better than the one we are in now. Doesn't have to be other than this world, it could be a transformation that occurs in the here and now. People can change, transformation is possible. Channing

used a very 19th century term. He called this “self culture.” That hits our 21st century ears a little funny, but if you are interested in learning more about Channing’s views on salvation through good deeds, then I recommend his essay conveniently titled “Self Culture.” In many ways it was similar to the Jewish notion of “Mitzvah.” We are put on this earth to help each other and to be of assistance to other human beings.

But you know, the next generation of Unitarians took this idea a step further. They expanded upon the idea of good deeds as a means to salvation, and renamed it “Salvation by Character.” Character is our theme for the month of November, and the cornerstone to this Unitarian belief of salvation. Salvation by character is more than simply doing good things; it is about becoming a better person. If you do one good deed, you might be saved. You might also be a member of the Boy Scouts. Salvation by Character means that you are not merely a person who does something nice now and again. Rather it means you are a better person, something deep within your soul has changed. You not only do good deeds, but see the world differently. You live into that new being. You have a sense of freedom that transcends the responsibility of doing good. You are now being good. It takes time – not overnight. But salvation by character is a way to find salvation that doesn’t require the

supernatural. It is here in this world and evident in the lives of people who have experienced it.

And that is a good thing, because salvation is just what my friend Dwayne needed during his midlife crisis and subsequent depression. He thought about trying some of the clichés. He could get a tattoo, or a sports car, or a mistress. He joked with me that his wife wouldn't approved of any of those things! So instead he started running. Dwayne took an impressively mature approach to the whole thing. He started jogging and getting in shape. At first it was to stave off the aging process and the pounds that can come with a slower metabolism. But then he started to like it! Dwayne entered various races. 5K runs and so on. He ran in charity events and raised money for good causes. He began to ask friends and family to sponsor him. But he was in so many races that he didn't want to pester them all the time. So he was his own sponsor. He started giving money to cancer research, to Alzheimer funds, heck even to help stray animals. And soon it was not just his physical health that was improving. Dwayne found a fresh outlook too.

Yes, from a Pelagian point of view, Dwayne was doing good works. He gave to good causes, and I am sure that there were pragmatic real life consequences to those actions that were positive. But that isn't really what saved him. What saved

Dwayne was a creeping feeling, as gradual as his oncoming midlife crisis had been, that it was no longer about him. In the first half of life he had been about accumulating stuff for himself and his family. Now he was actively looking for ways to help other people. What started out as a way to help himself by running, transformed into a new outlook on life. Now it wasn't about how much he could amass for himself, but about how much he could give away. Dwayne got through his midlife crisis not by grabbing on to more stuff, like a new car, but by letting go. Because ultimately that is what it's all about in the end; we all have to let go of everything we have in this life; good or bad.

Bret Lortie came to see that very dramatically as he was hanging off the edge of cliff. Dwayne came to the same realization more gradually, but it was the same place. That transformation to a new state of being can come gradually or all at once, just so long as it comes. It changes not only what we do, but who we are. For Dwayne it meant he was more generous, more in touch with the needs of other people. It came about for him one mitzvah, one good deed at time. And the cumulative effect was that he felt free. He now understood the answer the Zen Master Sheng ts'an's koan. Why seek liberation when you are the one who binds you? Let go of the possessions that possess you, make others a priority above your ego from time to

time, and a whole new way of being opens up. That was the message Dwayne had for me.

May we too live our lives peppered with acts of goodness and mercy; be they small or large. For taken together they will be a torrent of fresh air upon our soul. May we let loose and let go all of the pettiness that binds us. And may we find salvation by character in our faith of a larger liberty. Amen Blessed Be.