

# “Salvation Right Now”

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I was saved in junior high. I had joined MYF, the junior youth group at the Anoka United Methodist Church. A girl from my class invited me – someone I can no longer remember. The church had rented a school bus to hear Billy Graham. It was night. We usually had pizza before these things, so I imagine us in the church basement, eating pizza before the bus left. Kids horsing around. *You like her, don't you? Shut up. You're a dork.* I sat very still, so easy to break. I fixed my attention on Rod and Jan Johnson, the couple who led us. Rod was tall, middle aged, with bushy hair that fell to his neck. He had acne and no eyelashes. *Jan has big nose*, I thought once, and then felt bad. She was kind. Rod was one of the most relaxed men I'd met; he laughed easily and was genuinely interested in us. They led Bible lessons for us in their small apartment. I loved MYF when they led the talk and the singing. We weren't quite as kind to each other when they weren't. Still, it was much better than school.

I looked older than other kids my age, and I tended to be afraid of them. There were dark circles under my eyes that I had always had, no matter how much I did or did not sleep. I had wild, wavy hair that refused to *shag* or *feather*. I pinched it back with bobby pins at each temple, which made me look like a tintype gentleman. Or a laundress from the '40s. People who saw my school pictures said I looked “serious” and “intelligent”.

My mother had died of breast cancer the year before. She was 51, and I was 11. After my father emerged from the first stupor of grief he grew mean. Things like meals and laundry were chaotic in our house. I was not one of those kids that grew up instantly with a full-on sense of responsibility when it was needed. Neither of us seemed capable of caring for us. We were lost.

A few months later, he began to court a woman named Marilyn, who had a son my age. Her family went camping with our family when I was little, so I knew her. She was divorced, with three sons roughly matching my siblings and me in age. Her youngest, Dean, was in my grade. I loved the sudden lightening of my dad's mood, and the order in our house. But like many 13-year-olds whose fathers were courting, I kept thinking: *I did not choose her. I did not choose her son.* They were married around Christmas time that same year. Soon they began to argue. I stayed away, often eating dinner at friends' houses, liking their families more than mine.

Taking my seat in the vast auditorium, in the midst of our youth group and hundreds of other kids from their churches, I was full of things I could not say, ticking with secrets. I looked up at Billy Graham; it was truly like seeing a star in person. In his sermon leading up to the altar call, he painted a life of the damned – joyless, rich with guilt, empty and sad. Then he held out a name, *Jesus*, like a promise. And a condition: repent of your sins. If you do this, if you ask Jesus into your heart and make him your Lord and Savior – you will be saved. Saved, meaning you will go to heaven when you die. But to a 13-year-old, whose own death was miles off and no real threat, that part was beside the point. The heaven I really wanted was a heaven I could have right now.

That is what made me come forward. I was up there, up as soon as they started playing, *Just as I am, without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me, and that thou bidst me come to thee, O Lamb of God, I come, I come.* I felt the waves of shame and fear and sadness just melt off. Someone loves you, in a way uncomplicated by sickness, death, and anger. Someone is calling you. And when you come forward, he gathers you up in your mess, holds your broken heart in his hands. In that moment, you know you are a child of God. I knelt at the railing and cried. I took the pamphlet, I said the words. I made the promises.

I've told this story before, in parts and full of humor and self-mocking. I have usually seen just the falsehoods, the manipulation, the disappointment afterwards. This time, I started seeing more. More on this to come.

First let me say that there *was* a lot of harm in theology set forth from that pulpit. Our Universalist forbears saw this a long time ago. They were right in rejecting the notions of sin and atonement. The idea that God was so angry with us that he must kill his son to substitute for our mountain of debt, our massive and incurable badness, is still one that makes me shudder. I did not understand as a 13-year-old how the very assurance of God's forgiveness of my sins would somehow keep fear in the picture, in the foreground. Was I forgiven enough? Was I doing the right things? If God could be that angry and vengeful, how could he truly love me? And what about all those other people who were not born again? What would happen to *them*? Was my lovely mother now in hell? Fear makes a damaging theology.

One of the most important contributions the Universalists made to America's religious life was to start teaching, as early as the 1700s and at great personal risk, that a loving God could not possibly send us to hell. It is said that the Unitarians represent the head in our faith – is, critical thinking, respect for the integrity of the mind – and that Universalists represent the heart – the deep compassion of their message for people terrorized by the threat of eternal punishment. Compassion for fear. In fact, this idea, the universal salvation of all, made its way into a lot of mainstream Christian denominations. So many adopted the idea that it started to make specifically Universalist churches seem unnecessary and, some say, contributed to our decline. We also declined, I am convinced, because we have emphasized this critique of mainstream

religion and this fearful notion of what it means to be saved - much more than we have expressed a clear alternative to it. Which is a shame, since we have one.

Rebecca Parker, one of our finest Unitarian Universalist thinkers today, describes Universalism as “the faith that *underneath* is the everlasting arms. There is someone or something that holds us all, embraces us all, and all of life in its intricate, complex and beautiful interdependence. So that the final and foundational truth,” she says, “is our communion, our connection. We are mysteriously held together by love.” (Rebecca Parker, “Connecting Beauty and Justice”, General Assembly, 2010)

Love is underneath it all, love is the foundational reality. The problem is that there is what she calls a “proximate reality”, one that our dominant culture teaches. Parker says, “The dominant culture holds to a different faith – one that regards all human beings as out for themselves and sees the earth as an exploitable and expendable resource in the pursuit of economic gain.”

*Love the quick profit, the annual raise, Wendell Berry says,  
the vacation with pay. Want more  
of everything ready-made. Be afraid  
to know your neighbors and to die.*

(Wendell Berry, “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer’s Liberation Front”)

This proximate reality, this false idol faith - is writ large, in a company like BP, which could cut corners on well inspection, or a state government, like Arizona, which dishonors the lives and struggles of Mexican people, institutionalizes resentment and suspicion into law. It is writ small in the heart of young people who feel lonely and deficient and ashamed. Our vision gets distorted. We get pulled apart and set against each other. We start believing things and desiring things and fearing things – and doing things - that hurt us, and hurt each other, and hurt the earth. We live in fear.

If love is the answer to these fears, we are taught that love is scarce, and that it must be earned by the special, the beautiful and the best. These are among the things we need to be saved from today. As our Universalist forbears taught, as I intuited as a 13-year-old, hell is not some next life, but in this one. We want to believe in love, that love is the final reality, and we have massive evidence to the contrary – evidence that seems to come from within us.

Last month when I was in Minnesota, I saw someone from my MYF days, someone whom I found on Facebook, my friend Jana. She now has a doctorate in literature, and she is a very fine poet, which means that she is a fearless and passionate seeker of the truth. What a gift. And what a gift to have a thoughtful witness, to talk with someone who was *there*. I was surprised to learn that back in junior high, she struggled too, in the middle of what looked like a

perfect house and a perfect family. A lot of teens carry around shame and helplessness, she said. At least you were allowed to face some of that shame, to acknowledge that yours is real, that you are not alone in it. It named a reality that nowhere else are you allowed to name. It told you that nothing you have done is so bad that it cuts you off from the human family. That you were lovable.

In that auditorium at the Billy Graham crusade, I was not alone. Each of us carried something of what I felt. Something happened to us there, something that couldn't have been faked. Being so broken, and being called, gathered up, of there being a love that existed underneath everything and held, that was all true. It wasn't in some cosmic transaction about heaven and hell, it wasn't about the life to come. And Billy Graham didn't give it to me – he just told me I needed it. He just told me that it existed. Salvation existed – right now.

What saved us then, were not just the words about love from a star preacher, stewed up with some seriously questionable theology, but something underneath them, something we experienced more profoundly AFTER the worship service, on the way home on the bus and in the weeks to come in the church basement. It was the love that was shown to us in youth group. And it was a love given out to everyone, even before they knew us. They taught and they showed that it was possible to care and not give in to the cruel hierarchies of school, the papered-over wounds of family. They listened to us and were patient with us and got after us for things, but they didn't kick us out. They set up the lunch tables and ordered pizzas and pop. They made a place at the table for anyone who wanted to be there. We were the Guest, as Kabir would put it. We were part of the love that he longed for, with the intensity of a willing slave. If you see the Guest as God, then this God's existence is about welcoming and including. It depends on our welcoming and including one another. Without deciding in advance who deserves it.

And so I was startled to realize that what saved me then is what still saves me today. The heart of my faith then is the heart of my faith now. Despite the radical shifts in my theology, the heart of my faith has always been love. And what we need are people who help us see it and feel it. Who give us evidence that a saving love exists underneath it all, the everlasting arms.

Anne Lamott writes, “In many ways, life is so much the way it was in the middle ages – violent, terrifying, full of chaos and plague, murderers and thieves. [We long to see evidence that] in the midst of ourselves there is still a good part that hasn't been corrupted or destroyed, that we can still tap into and reclaim.” (Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird*)

Some of the most powerful evidence of saving love, I am convinced, comes from people who take risks for others, who love those they don't even know. Rebecca Parker gives this remarkable testimony. She recently celebrated an important anniversary in the life of a Methodist church she served some 25 years ago. In 1985, this church made the courageous decision to become what we would call a “welcoming congregation”. This is similar to the

process our church underwent a few years ago when we decided to become openly welcoming to gays and lesbians. Think about 1985, though, and think what you know in general about the Methodist church and gay rights. At that time, their denomination voted into church law a ban on practicing homosexual clergy – a law that is still in existence today.

That church's decision to openly WELCOME gays and lesbians was more than controversial. They lost 25% of their members, which was a lot, since the church wasn't that big in the first place. It so happened that this 25% were the highest givers. The church leader at the time said, "If we do this, we may lose our relationship with these members. But if we don't do this, we will lose our relationship with God." Today, 25 years later, they are a thriving community, celebrating their decision to reach out.

After the anniversary service, Rev. Parker was stopped by a young woman. "You don't know me," the woman said. "I just joined this church 2 years ago. This church has saved my life. When I first moved here, I came out to myself and to my family. My family couldn't accept me. The college I went to was a conservative Christian school. I was shunned. I was so lonely and isolated, I didn't know if I could go on living. I really thought about killing myself. Then someone told me about this congregation, that this was a church where I would be valued for who I am. When I came, people were so loving. I felt seen, beautiful, good, respected. This church saved my life. So I want you to know all those risks you took, they were worth it.

"Before I even existed," she said, "you imagined me and helped me. You loved me before you even knew me." (Parker, "Connecting Beauty and Justice")

She became the Guest. She was part of the love they offered, without knowing who would receive it. Sometimes we get to hear about the lives we save, and sometimes we don't. But we have a better chance of hearing about them, if we are willing to put our faith in love out into the world. If we speak up, if we go beyond our walls.

This week, 100s of our fellow Unitarian Universalists have been doing just this. All across the country, Unitarian Universalists have been protesting Arizona's new anti-immigration law, SB 1070. There have been demonstrations at state capitals in many states. And specifically, they have been committing civil disobedience in Phoenix, Arizona. They wear yellow t-shirts that say, "Standing on the Side of Love." Now I admit to having been skeptical of this phrase, it felt like a slogan, a little vague, a bit squishy and 60s-romantic. But no more. You can see videos on You Tube of Unitarian Universalists in these yellow t-shirts, singing, praying, marching and being willing to go to jail to stand up – for love. In this case, it means an abiding, human concern for the rights of other people. You can see a photograph in Friday's New York Times of a woman in a yellow T-shirt being brutally handcuffed. It is amazing, though as a friend of mine put it, it is not for the faint of heart. It takes tremendous courage to stand on the side of love, and she shows it.

There is something remarkable in putting yourself on the line for people you don't even know. It invokes the Guest, the Everlasting Arms. And it requires all of us for its existence in the world.

What I would like to know now is, How do we save people? What kind of a church are we? And how will we be known in the world? I watch people in this congregation care for young people, spend time with our youth, set out the pizzas and pop and serve them. How would someone who was hurting, know that there was a place was created especially for her at our table? How would she know?

Every week we say the words of welcome, which include "no matter whom you love" – a phrase of inclusion for gays and lesbians, who are often told or don't need to be told, that the church is not for them, in all of their human experience. People who are gay or lesbian are wanted and respected here. But beyond our saying this phrase every week, how would anyone know?

We have evidence, we ARE evidence, that we have a saving love to share. But we are much too quiet about it. If we want to have salvation right now, we have to offer salvation right now, to counter the messages of the culture with our community, our hearts and our lives. And we can't keep it to ourselves. Can I get an 'amen'?