

A UU Considers Salvation
UU Church of Vancouver
April 23, 2023

Reflection on the Theme by Alexis Balkowitsch

I don't like talking about salvation.

And my aversion to the topic isn't what you might think. I don't have any spiritual baggage or religious trauma from my youth that would make the word 'salvation' triggering. I was raised in a very secular household, which was pretty unusual amongst my peers. My mother, a rational, intellectual scientist to her core, was staunchly agnostic. In fact, she was always adamant in being called agnostic, not atheist—as she said, “I can't prove either way if God exists or not...and it doesn't affect me, so I'm not interested in doing so.”

My father, who was raised in a very Catholic household, became a very lapsed Catholic after he left home...or at least I assume so, as we never went to a church service as a family. The only time I've ever seen my dad in a church is for a wedding, a funeral, or if I'm there singing—and he's never once mentioned religious beliefs even in passing, let alone had a conversation with me about God. Is he privately a deeply spiritual person? Anything is possible, I suppose. But after forty-five years of knowing my father, I get the feeling his belief is much like mother's was, if maybe not for the same reasons—It's just not something he cares to worry about.

That means my experience of Religion—and ideas of God, and souls, and salvation—was gained entirely through friends and extended family. Church was an interesting event I went to with friends at the end of a sleepover weekend; a place where Grandma and Grandpa proudly introduced their youngest grandchild after Mass; a beautiful building where everyone seemed nice, and we got to sing, and sometimes they served cookies afterwards. And sometimes I really would listen, and wonder why a loving God would ever send anyone to hell...and if I asked Mom she'd answer, “Why, indeed?”

Out of this wholly unreligious household, I grew up to forge my own spiritual path. I discovered I do have a deep need for spirituality...while also keeping my mother's intellectual skepticism and my father's introverted reticence for talking about personal beliefs. It's made me free to explore “Capital R” Religion from historical, anthropological, and psychological angles, while

leaving me open to deep connection, wonder, and peace in practices, ideals, texts, and places of worship.

So why then, do I feel uncomfortable with the word salvation? I've mentioned before that I've taken time during the Covid pandemic to embark on a self-healing journey— to really become aware of myself and my history, including my traumas and triggers. And I've discovered how detrimental it can be to be constantly saved.

I love my parents, I know they love me. But you can't do this work without realizing that your parents are really just like you: not all-knowing elders, but flawed humans with their own (often unresolved) trauma, their own mistakes and regrets. These two people with deeply traumatic childhoods unexpectedly had a single child after years of infertility. And all they wanted was that I wouldn't have the struggles they did. Isn't that what any good parent wants? But even the best-intended love can be expressed poorly, and after years of saving me from hard experiences in unhealthy ways—pulling strings, easing responsibilities, shielding me from consequences, and on and on—I'm left feeling incomplete, overwhelmed, and incapable of functioning without outside salvation.

I don't have the answers yet on how to overcome the learned helplessness I feel after years of constant saving. But at least now I recognize it, and can begin to work on it. I can begin to release the blame I put on myself—for feeling incapable, for still wanting to be saved from almost everything, for finding it hard to ask for legitimate help or even knowing what kind of help I do need. I can extend love and understanding to my parents, and begin healing the generational traumas that led us here. And hopefully I can create a new, healthier idea of salvation—one built on community, respect, honesty, and love.

A UU Considers Salvation by Marjorie Speirs

When I was a child, I was taught that salvation came through Jesus, that “whosoever believeth in him would not perish, but would have everlasting life.” As an adult, I no longer believe in

Jesus, but, instead, both admire, and am challenged by, his teachings. He is one of my spiritual guides. I do not, however, believe that he was broken and tortured on a cross to ease my glide path to heaven.

So, what does salvation mean to me now?

I don't know what happens after we die or whether Jesus has anything to do with it. I have my intuitions, but no certainties, so I'd rather come at salvation from a different angle.

If we don't know what will happen after we die, what can we do about salvation while we are alive? I ask this question because I do believe there is salvation to be found in this life.

Let me begin by defining the term. I will start with the theological definition. The word salvation comes from the Latin *salvare*, which means "to save." The Oxford English Dictionary, or OED to us word geeks, gives this definition: "The saving of the soul; the deliverance from sin and its consequences, and admission to eternal bliss, wrought for man by the atonement of Christ."

This is the definition that makes me queasy.

But here is another theological definition, provided by The American Heritage Dictionary: "deliverance from the power or penalty of sin." I can work with this one. Before the word sin sends you fleeing your seats, let me explain that I am not talking about sin as I was taught to understand it – that is, behavior that will lead to punishment from God, behavior that Jesus died to atone.

I think about sin by going back to its root word. The Greek word for sin means "to miss the mark." I love this definition of sin. It is an archery term. Christians will say that missing the mark causes one to be separated from God.

I can work with this too, but, because I find the word God to be so laden with baggage, I will change the language to say that sinning or missing the mark causes us to lose sight of the whole of which we are a part, to believe that we are separate beings flailing about on our own.

Please note I did not say sin separates us from that wholeness. This is because we are inseparable from the wholeness of creation; it is impossible to live or survive outside of that wholeness, that interconnection.

We can, however, forget that we are part of the great, churning cycle of creation, the eternal Tao. Thus, when we think we have to do everything by ourselves or when we take credit for something without acknowledging all those persons, creatures, and things that support us, we are sinning. And in this definition, salvation is that which keeps us aiming for the mark, that keeps us walking with integrity on the path that is ours to walk as part of the great unfolding, that keeps us conscious of the Divine. And when we are conscious of that unfolding, we will be aware of our part in it and the ways we are missing the mark.

We will see that if missing the mark is failing to tend to the whole of which we are a part, then failing to protect our children from gun violence is a sin. Failing to care for – in Jesus' words – "the least of us" is a sin. Despoiling the planet on which we live is a sin.

And where is salvation when we miss the mark?

I think it is, most often, in, and with, one another.

How will we heal our planet? How will we end the sin of gun violence?

Well, I drive a hybrid vehicle and plan for my next vehicle to be an EV. I recycle. I try to avoid plastic. I don't use pesticides. I don't eat meat. I hang my clothes on the line from May through October. I don't own any firearms.

Pretty good, right?

Well, it's a start, but my individual actions are feeble in the face of the challenges that threaten us. I believe salvation from these kinds of systemic sins will only come through collective action to force change at the source of the problems. For instance, if plastic straws are outlawed, if manufacturers are forbidden to use the kind of hard plastic that encases many products, if assault weapons are banned, we are on our way to salvation.

Unless we press our lawmakers to address these sins at their source, I doubt our individual actions will make much of a dent. But working together, we can bring about salvation. Here is an example of a place where we are collectively missing the mark.

Many people have had the experience of being overtaken by drug or alcohol addiction. Are they sinning? Well, not in the sense I was taught to think about sin, but yes, they are missing the

mark. And, as is often the case, missing the mark is its own punishment. Those who are addicted often feel alone and ashamed. And they are missing their chance to share their gifts and to fully experience their place in the whole.

Salvation comes in beating the addiction, something that is not easy in a society that treats addicts as lesser, instead of as beings who require care and treatment in order to heal and know their worth. Salvation comes when we, as a collective, take care of those in our midst who are struggling—when we hit that mark, so that others might hit theirs. In short, salvation from addiction generally comes through, and with the help of, others, and, again, through working to address the problem at its source.

And that involves the hard work of uncovering, untangling, and addressing the sources of addiction – which include, but are not limited to, trauma, mental health issues, homelessness, and easy access to devastating drugs. There will be no salvation from addiction or any other societal ills, until we, together, face the sin of failing to address these sources, until compassion and legislative action bring us closer to hitting the mark.

When I consider societal ills, I often think of the Martin Luther King quote about the arc of history being long, but bending toward justice. In my mind, I picture all of us hanging from the arc, lending our weight to the bending, pulling it toward justice. Or maybe it isn't all of us. Maybe it is those of us who have the energy and means, who are, or should be, lending our weight to the project, so that others may benefit.

That is the work of salvation.

Now let me give you an example of a place where collective action was successful in guiding our local and state governments to hit the mark. About a month ago, there was an article on the front page of *The Columbian* about a woman named Linda Lorenz, who had gathered others to stop the clear-cutting of a lovely, natural area.

Her story went like this: In May of 2018, while walking the Hantwick Trail in Yacolt, Linda Lorenz came upon employees from the state Department of Natural Resources, who told her they were assessing the steep hillside above the trail for a timber project.

Alarmed by the prospect of logging in this pristine area, Linda put out a call for action, and gathered hundreds of runners, fly fishers, and other concerned citizens, along with persons with legal expertise. These folk, working together with the Vancouver Audubon Society,

Friends of Clark County, and the Sierra Club, gathered signatures and traveled to Olympia to attend Department of Natural Resources meetings and testify at public hearings.

Linda Lorenz spoke with the Commissioner of Public Lands and made a presentation to Gov. Inslee. And although, as she told *Columbian*, she “must have been told no a hundred times,” she, with the help of many others, found solutions to each roadblock presented to her.

Two of those who worked with Lorenz were a retired hydrologist and a retired fish biologist who conducted a survey that resulted in a multiple-page report, prepared by Friends of the East Fork, outlining the geological hazards and water-quality issues associated with the site.

Ultimately, a couple of Clark County councilors were convinced by the information gathered by Lorenz and the hundreds who worked with her, and almost four years after Lorenz learned of the logging plan, the county decided to reconvey the land in question as a parkland.

The *Columbian* article acknowledged that grassroots lobbying is difficult and does not always result in triumphs. Certainly, Linda Lorenz could not have brought about this result on her own, but working consistently and persistently with others, she was able to keep the state and county from missing the mark by despoiling a unspoiled area. “There is power in many voices,” she told the *Columbian*. “I couldn’t have done any of this without them.”

So, I conclude that many instances of missing the mark require the salvation of collective action. There are, however, instances of missing the mark that we can, and perhaps must, address by ourselves.

Here is an example. I am a writer. Words are my coin. We all have gifts. This is mine. I can’t make music or understand calculus, but I can write. I feel most myself when arranging words on a page. Yet, I am often distracted by texts and social media and the tasks of daily life.

When I allow these distractions to keep me from writing, I feel unmoored and anxious. Maybe this is not your idea of a sin in need of salvation, but for me it feels like missing the mark. When I look up from writing, I realize I have been fully present and plugged into my place in the whole. When I go several days without writing, I am easily thrown off balance and overwhelmed by the stressors of daily living.

So, where is salvation when I am missing the mark in this fashion? It is in discipline. It is in writing first and, insofar as is possible, ignoring the tasks of daily living until my writing time feels complete. It is in turning off my phone and putting it in a drawer while I write.

I suppose this instance of missing the mark pales before our collective sins. But we all have places where we are missing the mark in our daily lives. I am not talking here about failing to check everything off our to-do lists. In fact, hewing too closely to our to-do lists may be causing us to miss the mark by failing to tend to our spiritual lives, to enjoy our relationships, to make time for rest.

I think we miss the mark as individuals when we are unkind, when we are judgmental, and when we are impatient, to name just a few.

Surely, it is worthwhile to seek to hit these personal marks, for it is difficult to hit our collective marks if we are not tending to our personal salvation.

I'd like to turn now to the secular definition of salvation. I refer again to the OED, which provides these definitions: "Preservation from destruction; ruin, loss, or calamity . . . a person or thing that saves."

I'm going to address the person-or-thing-that-saves part of this definition, for I have found it to be true that people, our fellow humans, save us from individual calamity or buoy us up during difficult times again and again.

Many of you know my husband, Bill Gross. Some of you know that he is being treated for cancer. When he was diagnosed last October, we were overwhelmed--overwhelmed by his hospital stay, which kept being extended until he was finally discharged after nine days, overwhelmed by information coming at us from multiple doctors, overwhelmed by what this would mean for our future.

I was overwhelmed by tending to our dog while Bill was hospitalized. And by updating people about Bill's status.

And by remembering to eat.

And then Bill's sons stepped up to support us, accompanying us to doctor visits and helping us to make decisions. And a couple of people offered to pass along information so I wouldn't have to respond to everyone who contacted me.

And friends from this congregation rallied to help us. Bonnie and Gale Long took over care of our dog for several days. And Linda Sant'Angelo arranged for food to be delivered. Rev. Kathryn called me, and, at my request, kindly arranged for me to resign from the UUCV Board.

This was salvation. This gave us time to figure out which end was up.

And the support has continued. I have had calls of concern from our intern, Jennifer, and more offers of food, which I gratefully declined, as we have settled into a manageable routine for now.

Friends and family have continued to walk this journey with us, holding us in a net of love. We have been saved from the calamity of facing this challenge alone.

In addition to people, there are also, as noted in the secular definition, "things that save us from ruin or calamity." For me, these things include gardening, writing, walking, and swimming. Each of these things takes me out of myself – saves me from rumination and self-pity. Each is a kind of salvation.

I would like to mention one more place where I find salvation.

I began this sermon by stating that I reject the Christian notion of salvation, which requires us to believe that Jesus was killed to atone for our sins. I am, however, sustained by another kind of spiritual faith. It is my faith that our lives are undergirded by love, and that our human efforts to meet our marks, to save others from calamity or ruin, are carried along on, and entwined with, this love.

This is my faith. I do not ask or expect you to share it. We are UUs, after all, and we each find our own path.

When salvation is hard to find, when I struggle to hit my marks, I look to poets and mystics such as Mary Oliver, Rumi, and John O'Donohue. And I turn to spiritual texts such as The Gospel of

Thomas, an early Christian text that did not make it into the New Testament, and the Chinese classic The Tao Te Ching to guide me on my spiritual journey, to help me remember the whole from which I come and in which I dwell. I will not go into a description of either of these texts now, as I have preached about each of them in the past.

I will simply quote the poet William Wordsworth, who wrote, "I have felt . . . a motion and a spirit that impels all thinking things, all objects of all thought, and rolls through all things." My sense of this motion and spirit that rolls through all things brings me back time and again to trying to hit my mark, to remembering the words of the children's affirmation -- love your neighbor as yourself, search for truth with an open mind, make the world a better place.

So where, in the end, is salvation?

I conclude it is in family, in friends, in community, in our gardens and our gifts, in allowing others to care for us, and in cultivating a spiritual life. It is in living with integrity, in living with purpose, in taking collective action, in helping others – not to avoid punishment or in the expectation of a reward, but because this is our place in the unfolding whole.

We will, none of us, create or receive lasting, uninterrupted salvation. But may we all keep aiming for our marks, both collectively and as individuals, and may we keep bending that arc toward justice.