

**Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Laramie**  
**April 14, 2013**  
**Rev. Dr. Penny Rather**  
**“Have You Been Saved?”**

**Reading**

“An Upside-Down Eastertide Meditation”  
by Parker Palmer (adapted)

Years ago, I stumbled upon a little book by Julia Esquivel, the Guatemalan poet and social justice activist, titled "Threatened with Resurrection." Those few words had a huge impact on me.

I'd been taught that death is the great threat and resurrection the great hope. But at the time I found Esquivel's book, I was experiencing the death-in-life called depression. Her title jarred me into the hard realization that figurative forms of death sometimes feel comforting -- while resurrection, or the hope of new life, feels threatening.

Why? Because death-in-life can bring us a perverse sense of relief. When I was depressed, nobody expected anything of me, nor did I expect anything of myself. I was exempt from life's demands and risks. But if I were to find new life, who knows what daunting tasks I might be required to take on?

Sometimes we choose death-in-life (as in compulsive overactivity, unhealthy relationships, non-stop judgmentalism aimed at self or others, work that compromises our integrity, substance abuse, pervasive cynicism, etc.) because we're afraid of the challenges that might come if we embraced resurrection-in-life.

Every religious tradition is rooted in mysteries I don't pretend to understand, including claims about what happens after we die. But this I know for sure: as long as we're alive, choosing resurrection is always worth the risk. I'm grateful for the people and experiences that continue to help me to embrace "the threat of resurrection."

My Eastertide wish for everyone is the ability to say "YES!" to life. Even when life challenges us, it's a gift beyond all measure...

**Sermon**      “Have You Been Saved?”

As I have been working my way through the monthly themes for preaching that come from All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, I am struck by how interrelated so many of them are. Our response to an abiding appreciation of Diversity, September's theme,

might very well a call  
to end intolerance and discrimination,  
October's theme.  
And one of the ways we open ourselves up  
to the experience of peace, - December's theme,  
or Gratitude – November's,  
is through Spiritual Practices,  
which we explored in February.

So when I came across this morning's reading  
after my Easter sermon two weeks ago  
on Letting Go was written,  
I decided I could use it this month.  
Because letting go and resurrection  
are most certainly related to April's theme of salvation.  
And technically,  
according to the Christian liturgical calendar,  
it is still the Easter season –  
the 40 days following Easter are called Eastertide.

Have you ever been asked if you are saved?  
I have been.  
By patients when I was a hospital chaplain –  
some of them didn't want me to minister to them  
if I was not.  
And by friends and family members  
who suspected that I was not  
and were anxious to correct that situation.  
And I know what people mean when they ask that question.  
They mean to ask if I have accepted Jesus  
as my personal savior,  
and thus been saved from sin and death.  
My sins atoned for by his death and resurrection.  
My salvation assured by my belief in that atonement.

But that is only one understanding of salvation.  
It is related to the historic basis for the second half  
of our name – Universalism.  
When our religious forebears were decidedly Christian,  
before the 20<sup>th</sup> century –  
Universalism referred to the belief that a loving God  
would never have created human beings  
only to condemn some of them to eternal punishment.  
But that the ultimate destiny of all of us –  
every one of us –  
was to dwell in heaven in communion with God.  
Universal Salvation.  
That is what Hosea Ballou believed.

The Universalist part of our religious heritage.

But ours is now a pluralistic faith,  
finding wisdom in many places other than Christianity.  
So what does salvation mean  
to 21<sup>st</sup> century Unitarian Universalists?  
A lot of different things.  
To some UUs it may mean nothing at all,  
or be experienced as an irritating religious word  
from some other tradition.  
Since we have no creedal test for belonging to our faith,  
it isn't possible to say what salvation –  
or any other theological word –  
means to all of us.  
But two approaches to salvation stand out for me.

Both ways that I look at salvation  
are predicated on the notion  
that we are interested in salvation in this life.  
Unitarian Universalism does not deny the possibility  
of some kind of life beyond this one.  
Though many individual UUs might.  
But as a religious tradition,  
we don't refuse that possibility.  
We just don't focus on it.  
It is not particularly important to our religious lives.  
All that we know we have is this life.  
So if we seek salvation at all,  
it is salvation in this life that we hope for  
and work towards.

The first way that I understand salvation in this life  
is related to the idea of being saved.  
But exactly what is it that I hope to be saved from?  
Not sin or death.  
But something else.  
Parker Palmer names it death-in-life.  
It is embodied in Zombie movies as a walking death.  
When I speak of salvation in this life,  
I'm saying that one thing I hope to be saved from  
is meaninglessness.  
Futility, irrelevance, pointlessness.  
From death-in-life.  
From being one of the walking dead.  
My faith does not tell me that I can conquer physical death.  
But I know from my experience of my faith  
that I can overcome spiritual death.

Parker Palmer's example of death-in-life is depression.  
This is a form of spiritual death that I know.  
Probably some of you do, too.  
According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,  
at any particular moment  
one in ten Americans is experiencing depression.  
And over time, many, many more than that.  
Now, I acknowledge that depression is a psychological  
and physical illness.  
And that I am neither a psychologist nor a physician.  
But depression is also a spiritual condition,  
and so I speak as a minister –  
and as someone who has known its ravages.  
And from those two perspectives,  
I know that a person's faith  
can partner with psychotherapy and medication  
to help save him from the walking death of depression.  
Can help her find energy and courage and means  
to let go of the false security  
of familiar but life draining situations –  
like the other examples of death-in-life that Palmer lists:  
    “compulsive over-activity, unhealthy relationships,  
    non-stop judgmentalism aimed at self or others,  
    work that compromises our integrity,  
    substance abuse, pervasive cynicism”  
You probably know other examples.

Unitarian Universalism can help us experience  
Salvation in this life when our  
religious beliefs,  
our spiritual practices,  
and our faith communities  
help us abandon a seductive but counterfeit safety  
and embrace the threat of resurrection.  
As a familiar aphorism says,  
a ship may be safest in the harbor,  
but that's not what ships are built for.  
We might feel safest in depression or cynicism,  
judgmentalism or overwork,  
but those are not things that we are made for.  
We are made to say “YES!” to life.  
“YES” to truth.  
“YES” to love.

Unitarian Universalist religious beliefs can help.  
Particularly our first and seventh Principles.  
Expressed in slightly different language  
in our two banners –

that all souls are sacred and worthy.  
And that there is a unity that makes us one.  
Really believing those things about ourselves  
gives us the courage to leave that safe harbor.  
As Hosea Ballou did when his experience of his father's love  
enabled him to understand God's love  
differently than he had been taught  
and leave the safety of his Calvinist theology  
for the resurrecting power of Universalism.

And how can we come to really believe those Principles?  
Not just theoretically,  
but really feel them in our bones.  
Through experience.  
First the experience born of spiritual practices,  
such as meditation.  
And second through the experience of our faith community.  
Where we are cared for  
and given the opportunity to care for others.  
Where we can tell our stories and really be heard.  
Hear the stories of others and know we are not alone.  
Where we can see the value of our contributions to the whole.  
Where our achievements are celebrated  
and our shortcomings forgiven.  
Where we see and feel our connections –  
because we know that it is up  
to us to treat each other in these ways.  
These ways of being in community are not inevitable.  
We have to work at them.  
This is our covenant with each other as UUs.  
I make an effort to care for and celebrate and forgive you.  
And you do the same for me.  
And in the process we both know  
that we are sacred and worthy.  
We both feel connected to each other and to something bigger.  
And we both experience salvation in this life.

The other way that I understand salvation in this life  
is related to the first part of the word.  
Salve.  
An ointment – a medicine – and agent of healing.  
The beautiful harp music we are enjoying this morning  
comes from Alice's collection of healing songs.  
When Alice and other therapeutic musicians play for patients  
their music can reduce stress,  
assist in pain management,  
facilitate ease in the birthing or dying process,  
and provide other healing benefits.

Notice I said healing.  
Not curing.  
For the two are different.  
As Alice explains on her website,  
much of today's therapeutic music  
comes – like our prelude did –  
our of the Hospices of the Middle Ages.  
The world's first hospitals and health care systems,  
created by physician-monks and nuns.  
Places of physical and spiritual care,  
where music was one of the elements that contributed  
to the sacred art of dying.  
Not curing, but healing.

When I was a chaplain I was often asked to pray with a family  
for their loved one to be cured.  
And often I knew that a cure was unlikely.  
So I would pray instead for healing.  
Perhaps healing, or more accurately a cure,  
from the ailment that had brought them to the hospital.  
But not necessarily.  
I would pray for healing of body or spirit.  
Or the healing that comes with peace  
in the face of death.  
This is the second way I understand salvation in this life.  
As a salve – a healing agent.  
Not unrelated to the first.  
For when we are able to give up those things  
where we experience death-in-life  
in favor of resurrection-in-life  
our spirits may be healed.  
And we may be saved.

You may have heard it said that the perfect  
is the enemy of the good.  
That in pursuing an ever elusive standard of perfection  
we can miss out on experiencing what is good.  
In the same way,  
a cure can be the enemy of healing.  
We can miss out on a healing experience  
if we are too intent on finding a cure.  
For disease.  
And for dis-ease.  
Salvation in this life does not promise a cure from death.  
But the possibility of healing in life.

Unitarian Universalism can guide us  
toward salvation in this life.

As can music, art, nature, worthwhile work,  
relationships when we choose to understand them in this way.  
What are the things that help you say “YES!” to life?  
That heal your spirit when it is hurting?  
These are the things that can save you from meaninglessness.  
From death-in-life.  
These are the things that can help you  
answer a resounding “YES!”  
to the question “Have you been saved?”