



## Dragged Kicking and Screaming into Heaven

BY MARK D. MORRISON-REED, AFFILIATED FACULTY,  
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Have you ever heard a Unitarian Universalist speak of having had a conversion experience? Have *you* had such an experience? A moment which divides your life into before and after; a moment in which there is a spiritual transformation; a shift in your inner reality that changes the way you view the world? Such a moment once seized me, and I was transformed from a Unitarian into a Universalist.

It happened in the fall of 1980, at the annual meeting of New York State Convention of Universalists. My wife Donna and I arrived late, slid into a pew and turned our attention to the Rev. Gordon McKeeman, who had already begun to deliver a keynote address: "The Persistence of Universalism."

It was the beginning of our second year of co-ministry at the First Universalist Church of Rochester, New York, but we didn't know very much about Universalism except what we were learning via osmosis. Of course, I'd studied the basics in theological school: how the early church father Origen argued for universal salvation; how John Murray founded the first American meeting house in 1790; and why some, the Ultra-Universalists, were called the "death and glory" school. However, since I had been raised Unitarian in Chicago, the Unitarian ethos had been bred into me rather than Universalism. Or so I thought.

I sat admiring the stained-glass and carved beams, half-looking, half-listening until I heard McKeeman say "Universalism came to be called 'The Gospel of God's Success,' the gospel of the larger hope. Picturesquely spoken, the image was that of the last, unrepentant sinner being dragged screaming and kicking into heaven, unable...to resist the power and love of the Almighty." What a graphic, prosaic picture—a divine kidnapping. The last sinner being dragged, by his collar I imagined, into heaven. What kind of a God was this?

Suddenly, what I had learned in seminary and what I was gleaning from our congregation came together and I got it: This was a religion of radical and overpowering love. Universal salvation insists that no matter what we do, God so loves us that she will not, and cannot, consign even a single human individual to eternal damnation. Universal salvation—the reality that we share a common destiny—is the inescapable consequence of Universal love.

Unitarian Universalists embrace many images of God, and reject even more. But a God who drags the last unrepentant sinner kicking and screaming (no, actually profanely cursing and resisting) into heaven—that might be a God we can envision, we can admire, we can have confidence in, we can have feelings about, we can even laugh at. It is a personification of the Most Holy rooted in a powerful, sometimes overwhelming, feeling. It is an experience that transcends description, a yearning that defies analysis. What a relief to feel that ultimately there is nothing I can do to alienate myself from God's loving embrace, the almighty but tender arms of the creative force that upholds and sustains all life.

Universalism's insight is that you cannot coerce people into loving one another. The commandments are not threats. If they are not fulfilled, God will not withdraw a love that is all encompassing. No one has ever, or will ever, draw true love out of another with punishment. God's love is given to all and is a more a positive force for good than fear ever will be. Love is not just stronger than fear, it is stronger

# Quest

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Human salvation lies  
in the hands of the  
creatively maladjusted.

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

A monthly for religious liberals

### THINKING ABOUT SALVATION

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than death. Love survives in us, thus all the departed reside inside us.

Behind this is a simple truth: in being loved we learn to love. Those who are loved will in turn love others. Those who feel God's infinite love within themselves will feel so good about themselves, so connected to life, so full of compassion that they will not be able to help but to spread that love. They will overflow with love. *What is love?*—to stand before life with open heart, accepting arms, eyes wide with wonder, and a bemused smile.

This was the feeling that captured me some thirty years ago. This is the belief the world needs today as much as ever. The image of the sinner being dragged into heaven took my unconscious early experience of being raised and being loved by a family embedded in a Unitarian community and made that experience of love paramount. Henceforth I could say: I will make mistakes and fail; I will disappoint others and myself; I will do thoughtless, hurtful things. I may be scorned by the world, may be no good and rotten to the core, may even reject the love that is offered me—and still I am sustained by the creation that made us all.

The "Gospel of the Larger Hope" is a message of inclusion that proclaims God's enduring and undaunted love. What has always puzzled me is why it didn't sweep the world. Why, after a boom in the first half of the 19th century, did it collapse? Why is it the afterthought in Unitarian Universalism? Why is Universalism and its proclamation of unconditional and uncompromising, all-embracing and overpowering Divine Love more difficult to believe in than the resurrection and the virgin birth? Why is it easier to believe the unbelievable than to believe we are one human family beloved by God?

What we yearn for is unconditional love, but it is contradicted by our experience. Instead, the primary message each of us receives over and over again is: behave and be loved, behave and be

loved. The implication is that those who are good and compliant are loved, and all others are not. Universalism calls this "partialism." In other words, people have taken their own experience of conditional, judgmental, imperfect human love and ascribed it to God.

Today, given the insane rate of incarceration in America, ongoing strife in Afghanistan and Iraq, the decades-old conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, upheaval in Syria, attacks in Libya, etc., Universalism is as important as ever. The world needs to know that God's love is boundless, but we UUs have abandoned the language and retreated from this ancient proclamation. Theism offers religious liberals a language to carry into the world. It is a useful language because it is the vernacular of ordinary people. Say "God is Love and God loves you and every member of the human family" and people will at least have an inkling of what we mean.

The world needs to hear about this faith that soothes wounded hearts and shapes attitudes to embody the spirit of Love rather than Wrath. In the face of neo-tribalism we need a message that challenges "axis of evil" rhetoric, contradicts an "us" versus "them" mentality and proclaims the oneness of the human family. There is only "us" and we are all beloved by a God who, dismissing free will (yes, you do not get to decide), embraces alike the saintly and despicable, who created both Mother Teresa and Saddam Hussein, supports both Obama and Boehner, loves both Bush and the now-dead Bin Laden, and drags Hitler into heaven as well.

This is a truth almost too shocking for us to assimilate, but, in the words of UU minister David Bumbaugh, "beneath all our diversity and behind all our differences there is a unity which makes us one and binds us forever together in spite of time and death and the space between the stars." It was to the unrelenting tug of this reality, which I know as God, that I gladly submitted that long-ago day. ■

## Salvation: Saved from What?



BY **MARK BELLETINI**, SENIOR MINISTER,  
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Before the City Hall of New York City turned 42nd Street and Broadway into the glitzy, blinding neon showplace it is today, it used to be a totally different place. I had seen both the movie and the musical called "42nd Street," and read books about its heyday. So, on a trip to New York, I decided to check out the venerable site myself. I wanted to see the glitzy, glamour and glitz with my own eyes.

When I came up from the subway to the street, however, there were no neon lights, no dazzling marquees. There was darkness silvered by only a few streetlights. 42nd Street and Broadway had clearly fallen onto hard times.

As I walked down the street, thinking that maybe I had come to the wrong exit looking for the expected dazzle, I saw instead such human degradation that I could hardly believe my eyes. Drug dealers were on every corner, heroin and crack-cocaine users lying in every gutter, needles and spoons at their side. Drunks were sprawled everywhere under boarded-up theaters with letters hanging precariously off their damaged marquees.

But as I moved toward the nearest subway entrance, which I calculated to be only a block away, I suddenly saw a strange neon blue glow peeping out from behind a tall building. With every step I took the glow grew brighter, until it began to come into view. Rising high above the end of the street, a bright neon sign! I first

saw the word “Jesus” made of blue light. But as I continued to walk, another word began to come into focus. And I did not see what I expected, the ubiquitous “Jesus saves” sign. Instead I saw this phrase: “Jesus knows.”

Whoever commissioned the sign, I figured, was a realist. I reasoned that whatever church official created that sign took one look at 42nd Street and realized that even the other-worldly salvation of the Christ they preach about would have little meaning to people already living in Hell, a Hell that would have shocked Dante himself.

“Jesus knows,” the sign said. In other words, “Let’s not even talk about saving anybody from this present Hell, because we can’t imagine how that could be done. All we can honestly say is that Jesus must know and he simply weeps with you.”

You have to give them points for a certain amount of humility.

Visiting 42nd Street in 1990 was hardly the first time I have visited Hell. I have been there a few times in my life—to hospital rooms where those I love are dying by inches, to neighborhoods where gangs and poverty rule like tyrants, and hard drugs destroy families and nearby lives. Sometimes even sitting in the comfort of my office I hear stories on the phone that sound as if they are coming up straight from Hell, so horrible and impossible are the circumstances these callers describe to me. And whenever I visit these hellish places I find myself thinking about the possible meanings of the word “salvation.” After all, the idea of leaving people to suffer and die in their own misery sounds completely heartless, and I have to wonder what might save them.

Now, some of us who were raised in conservative Christian traditions will surely feel some discomfort even hearing the tainted word “salvation.” Some of you were taught that Hell comes after death, and that salvation has to do

with Jesus saving people later, not now, and you gave up believing such nonsense long ago, and are not so sure you want to even hear the word “salvation” talked about at all.

But I assure you that the Christian tradition that taught you such things was not the tradition out of which this church grew. All the way back in 1828

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### My life has not convinced me that Hell consists of simply bad intentions in the mind, selfishness and a hard heart.

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the Unitarian Christian, William Ellery Channing, the so-called Father of North American Unitarianism, wrote the following amazing words:

*Human ignorance is seen in the low ideas attached to the word “salvation.” People think that salvation is something which another may achieve for them. The word Hell, which all persons acquainted with Jewish geography know to be a metaphor...this word has done unspeakable injury. It has possessed the diseased human imagination with thoughts of torture, and turned their thoughts to Jesus as someone outside them who will deliver them. But the salvation which humanity needs is not from outside things, but is from the evil within the mind, which hardens itself against love, which makes gain its god, which shuts itself up in a dungeon of self-interest, which consents to be a slave, and which allows itself to be formed by custom, opinion and changing events. To save, in the highest sense of that word, is to heal the diseased mind, and restore it to freedom of thought, conscience and love.*

Now, Channing was a man relatively at ease. He lived in a nice house, had na-

tional fame, was esteemed even by his enemies as a good and gracious man. He lived in a time and in a city where poverty and degradation were not as exorbitant as they are in the cities of our own age. He did not trip over drug users on his way to the church. He did not often have to witness Hell on Charles Street. So, unexposed to great doses of Hell on earth, and having already decided that “salvation” was a this-worldly event, Channing tried to make it psychological.

The salvation humanity needs, he said, is not from outside things, but from the evil within the mind which hardens against love and shuts itself up in a dungeon of self-interest. This is all well and good, I suppose. Learning to love better, to be more generous of spirit, is for the best, I would agree.

But my life has not convinced me that Hell consists of simply bad intentions in the mind, selfishness and a hard heart. I am sure that some of these problems contribute to the building up of Hells on this earth, but in my experience people don’t just need to be saved from their minds, but from their conditions and situations.

How will this kind of salvation happen? Well, the blue sign I saw in New York was not all wrong. “Jesus knows,” the sign said. This is a touching statement. The gospels, after all, go out of their way to tell us that the human teacher Jesus made it his goal to spend time with the sick, the poor, the downtrodden and the scapegoats of his society. He did not shield his eyes from the tears of the world. He actually knew something about the hard conditions of life. He seems to have had a knack for helping people get better, to become more healthy and sound of body.

But the Teacher is dead now and has no power to save anybody on this side of death or on any other side. So what then is to be done by those of us who live? Is it possible that the work of salvation, of abolishing Hell on earth as

we have abolished Hell after death, is something that belongs to us?

Genna Rae McNeil certainly thinks so. In the reading which appears to the right she says that, for her kind of African American religion, “the nature of salvation is to provide space...physical and spiritual...in which to function as a human being.” She reminds us that to be saved is to be “responsible for human nurture.” To be saved, therefore, is to participate in tearing down the

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structures imprisoning those who cannot save themselves. To be saved, says McNeil so elegantly, is “to invalidate the reality of dead-ends” in the world. It’s “to have engaged in dissent and resistance.” It’s to promote the “inexhaustibility of hope.”

These are great lines, in line with what the Western Scriptures actually say. They are very inspiring to me. But, unlike Channing, I think that these words need to apply to real Hells on earth, not mere psychological ones. And remember, one of the definitions of Hell is that it’s a place you can’t just leave on your own accord.

So, for me, to be saved is to not just tell those lying in their vomit on the street to pick themselves up by their own bootstraps and start dancing. Instead, to be saved is to work together to build up the best possible treatment programs for people so broken. To be saved is to never preach little homilies on love to abusive husbands. It’s to pack up the abused wife and move her out pronto.

To be saved is not to preach to a mother in the fourth generation of poverty to just get up and go to work at

McDonald’s for minimum wage, a salary with which she cannot even pay the sitter. It’s to work with social agencies, and in the realm of politics, long and hard enough to slowly change the whole situation and “invalidate the dead end.”

To be saved is not to tell a person with brain chemistry out of whack that they just can go it alone without their expensive medication because the insurance industries will not pay for such medications. To be saved is to begin to work to transform the American healthcare system into something humane.

To be saved is to be a real Universalist, to say that safety, soundness and ease—i.e., salvation—belong to everyone equally. It’s to not only preach against the concept of torture in the next world, but also to work to stop torture, and a lack of safety, soundness and ease in this world. To be saved is to understand the power of mutuality.

So from now on, if someone button-holes you to ask if you are “saved,” don’t get indignant. Say: “No, not yet, but I am working on it, both for me and for the people with whom I share this planet. Would you like to join me in being a savior?”

That’s right, there is no arrogance at all in choosing to call oneself a savior. It’s arrogance, rather, to refuse to be a savior. It’s arrogance to refuse to do the work that calls all religious people of good will: to douse Hell here on earth, and let the garden of paradise grow once again under our feet: safe, secure, sound, spacious, resistant, and free.

Like the Jesus in that sign on 42nd Street, we have to know these things deep inside us, and then we can begin to be saved by the ways in which we let that knowledge transform us and our ways in the world. Sure, it will take time, and lots of creativity we don’t know we have yet, but really, can you imagine a better use of your time, your life, and your love? ■



*Photo by  
Lawrence Wilson*

## An African American Perspective on Salvation

It is of enormous significance that for centuries, countless African American Christians have affirmed ‘Salvation’ as vitally connected with spaciousness, deliverance, rescue, liberation or freedom.... [I]n the African American experience, the nature of salvation is to provide space—psychic, physical and spiritual—in which to function as a free being....

For [the African American theologian-author-mystic-pastor] Howard Thurman, the mark of a free being was the unshakable belief that ‘no experience, no event at any particular moment in time or space exhausts what life is trying to do’; there ought not be the sinking down of ‘our hopes and our dreams and our yearnings to the level of the events of our lives.’ Salvation, then, challenges each believer to assume responsibility for self and nurture within the society. Living one’s faith and transmitting the message of salvation are part and parcel of recognizing one’s responsibility for human nurture....

[S]uch salvation includes three critical elements. First, salvation is a revolutionary spaciousness and freedom through the assertion of inner authority, breaking bonds of confinement and invalidating the reality of dead-ends. To have salvation is to know through experience and faith that God will ‘make a way out of no way.’...

Second, to be saved is to have engaged in dissent and resistance.... Having salvation is to transpose terrors, absurdities, angst, depression, and all manner of external and mental demons into a new harmonious song. . . .



Third, salvation is...an abiding knowledge and confident expectation.... To be saved is to live acknowledging the reality of infinite creative possibilities, the inexhaustibility of hope, and a divine invitation for all persons—regardless of race, class or sex—to experience everlasting life.

*Excerpted from “Waymaking and Dimensions of Responsibility: An African American Perspective on Salvation” by Genna Rae McNeil. This essay was published by Beacon Press in 1999 in Courage To Hope: From Black Suffering To Human Redemption—Essays in Honor of James Melvin Washington, edited by Quinton H. Dixie and Cornel West. Dr. McNeil serves as Professor of History at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and is co-author with Dr. Quinton H. Dixie, et al. of the forthcoming history, Witness: Two Centuries of African American Faith and Practice at the Abyssinian Baptist Church of Harlem, New York, 1808-2008. ■*

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You asked for it—we did it!

Over the last year much work has gone into creating and refining QuestForMeaning.org, our site for people seeking liberal religion online. But we’ve realized we need another site specifically designed to serve our members and other committed UUs.

And so the totally new, re-designed [www.clfuu.org](http://www.clfuu.org) is born. There you’ll find news and updates; resources for individuals, families and small groups; archives and more. Come check it out! ■



## Saved by Love (Excerpt)

BY MICHAEL TINO,  
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The first time I attended a Unitarian Universalist church for worship, I was greeted by an incredible sight: 75 percent of the people in the congregation were wearing pink triangles on their name tags. I didn’t know what to make of it. I thought I’d died and gone to some sort of queer heaven.

I vividly remember looking around me and seeing all of the triangles: I wouldn’t have guessed he was “family,” I thought to myself, or her. That man and woman sitting together holding hands—I guess they could be bisexual. And that older couple with the same last name—maybe they came out to each other later in life and stayed married for reasons beyond sexual attraction. Good for them. Good for all of them.

I didn’t want to assume that people were straight. After all, they had their pink triangle on, proudly proclaiming their queer identity. And who was I to argue with people’s self-identification? So I made myself right at home amidst the pink triangle-bedecked crowd.

I sat there in wonder through the service as the female minister—also wearing a pink triangle—preached about the feminine face of the Divine. I was a third-generation lapsed Catholic who had long ago given up the notion that there would ever be a religious community that accepted my distinctly unorthodox theology, much less my sexuality.

During coffee hour, someone finally explained to me that in a worship service several months before, the congregation had been challenged to wear a pink triangle *whatever their sexual*

*orientation*. They were informed about the origin of the pink triangle to mark gay men in Nazi Germany, and told the story of the King of Denmark, who, in that era, wore a yellow Star of David even though he wasn’t Jewish.

At first I was disappointed. After all, I’d thought I had landed in a queer parallel universe. But the more I thought about it, the more I was amazed by the group of people who were willing to be perceived as gay, lesbian or bisexual to send a welcoming message to those of us who actually were queer. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that I had experienced radical hospitality at its finest, and that was something even more awesome than a church full of queer folks.

As I sat in the sanctuary at the Eno River Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in early 1994, Unitarian Universalism saved me. There, amidst all of the pink triangles, I realized that the possibilities for my life included being a religious person. Since my childhood, I had had room for spirituality in my life, but I had long since given up hope that my spirituality could be expressed in religious community. Being invited to a Unitarian Universalist congregation changed that. Finding one



in which the members went out of their way to make sure I knew I was welcome was the first step.

This faith made it possible for me to be whole, love myself, and be loved. In the call to help create communities of radical hospitality, inclusion, wholeness and healing, I heard my call to ministry. In following that call, I pledged to work for the salvation of our world, a salvation that is possible only when all of us know the depth and breadth of love that is available to us without condition. ■



## From Your Minister

BY MEG RILEY  
SENIOR MINISTER,  
CHURCH OF THE  
LARGER FELLOWSHIP

When we were kids, we were all supposed to have favorites of everything. Remember that? People would say, for instance, "What is your favorite color?" And I would always feel completely stumped. To avoid the discomfort of that bewildered feeling I always said, as if it were a no-brainer, "Blue."

The truth was then, and is still, that whenever anyone asks me what my favorite anything is, I go stupid. My favorite book, movie, song, color, month, time of day, cookie, pie, kind of dog? Asking me my favorite of something is actually a pretty good way to quiet me down. Now, if someone says, "What are three of your favorites?"—that is much easier. Or even if they say, "At this moment, what song/color/tree are you most drawn to?" For me, the word "favorite" implies something static, unchanging, fixed. And nothing in my experience feels like that.

The word "salvation" affects me similarly. It sounds as if there is some static, unchanging, fixed experience when I should have been saved and therefore would remain saved ever after. As if I could answer someone who says, "Are you saved?" by responding, "Yes, I am saved" the same way I could say, "Blue." As if I could say, "Yes, I was saved in 1972, thank you very much."

My favorite color depends on so many factors. Just for starters, the color of what? And salvation feels the same way. Saved from what? And by what? If you asked me, for instance, whether the earth has saved me, I would say an emphatic *yes!* And we could talk about that. About my garden and how the time there has taught me patience and love and care, and the deep joy of co-

creation. And that my relationships with very particular plants in very particular soils and seasons teach me how, in fact, I am the earth, and the earth is me. About how trees and soil and worms and frogs and crows, especially in my own yard, have taught me so much that I need to learn.

If you asked me whether other people have saved me, I would say an emphatic *yes!* And we could talk about that. I could talk about kindness I have been shown when I didn't believe I deserved it, about how difficult relationships

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### I know life, including salvation and that mystery we might call God, in particular bite-sized moments and experiences.

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have called me to my deepest self-reflection and honesty, about how knowing people over years has helped me to see how complex and how simple we all are, how visible and invisible. Particular relationships and experiences have touched my deepest self, and in that contact they have saved me.

If you asked me whether my work for justice has saved me, I would say an emphatic *yes!* And we could talk about that. I could talk about how my relationships with the earth and with people have touched such a deep love within me that standing up for justice became the logical outgrowth of those connections. Taking action to fight injustice has grounded me in the power that has been given to me, given to all of us on this earth, to use on behalf of those communities we love.

If you asked me how dreams have saved me, how books have saved me, how music has saved me, how art has saved me, how prayer has saved me, how worship has saved me, how medi-

tation has saved me, how making mistakes has saved me, how animals have saved me, how parenting has saved me, how colleagues have saved me, how grief has saved me, how computer solitaire has saved me, I'd be ready for a great conversation.

I know life, including salvation and that mystery we might call God, in particular bite-sized moments and experiences. Sure, I've had mystical moments when I step out of time and see something much grander. And I wouldn't trade them for anything. But, finally, each of those experiences becomes just another moment, no matter how big. So when people talk about being saved by God, to me it means everything I've written about above and gazillions of other things, too.

So if you ever said to me, simply, "Are you saved?" I don't think you'd get much more from me than "Yes." And it would be as inadequate and, ultimately, as meaningless an answer (to a very inadequate question) as when I used to say "Blue." But if you want to examine the whole prism together, I'm good for an all-nighter. ■

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Please visit the CLF online or use the enclosed envelope to extend our loving faith by giving as generously as you can. ■

January 2013

## REsources for Living

BY LYNN UNGAR, MINISTER FOR LIFESPAN LEARNING, CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP

*Are you saved?* It's a question most of us have heard, whether the person asking has appeared at our door carrying pamphlets or is a friend who wants to talk about religion on the playground.

*Are you saved?* I confess, for me the question conjures up the picture of tucking leftovers into the refrigerator for tomorrow's lunch, or clipping a coupon that might come in handy later. But there are a lot of ways to imagine being "saved."

The traditional Christian version, the one people are usually checking on when they ask if you are saved, says that people are saved by God's giving his son Jesus to die on the cross as payment for our sins. If you accept this truth in your heart, then you're saved and get to go to heaven.

Not surprisingly, most Unitarian Universalists want nothing to do with this idea of salvation. How, we wonder, does someone else's death have anything to do with what *we* have done wrong? And what kind of a father would agree to forgive people's sins by having his son suffer and die? And who wants to go to heaven if it's just an exclusive club for people who all believe the same thing?

By contrast, Unitarian minister James Freeman Clarke suggested in 1886 that Unitarians believe in "salvation by character." That is, we don't believe that faith in Jesus dying for our sins will save us. Instead, we believe that salvation comes from the inside. As we practice what William Ellery Channing called "Self-Culture," we save ourselves by learning to be more kind, more compassionate, more honest, more courageous, etc. Rather than calling upon God to save us, we spend our lives trying to make ourselves more like God.



It's a nice idea, salvation by character. It assumes that everybody starts out basically fine, with "inherent worth

and dignity," and that we spend our lives getting better and better, so that, as a group, we can embody what Clarke called "the progress of [hu] mankind, onward and upward forever."

You may have noticed a problem with this lovely idea, though. Yes, humankind seems to be making some progress on certain fronts, but it would be hard to point to a whole lot of evidence that we are heading onward and upward forever. Sometimes people do incredibly noble and selfless things and other times people act like just the most amazing set of jerks and imbeciles you can imagine. Just looking at the comments section of any internet news site is enough to convince you that "the progress of [hu]mankind" has definitely stalled out somewhere along the onwonds and upwards.

### Salvation is a journey, not a destination.

I'm afraid most of us are not so different on an individual basis, either. Some moments we're generous and kind, or passionate advocates for justice, or incredibly patient in the face of hardship. But then, in other moments we really can't bring ourselves to care about anything more than the mint chocolate chip ice cream in the freezer, and woe betide anyone who stands in our way. Sometimes we manage a pretty good likeness to God, and sometimes it's a little bit closer to Godzilla.

So, am I saved? I am not counting on Jesus to save me, and saving myself seems like a pretty hit or miss proposition. But here's the thing. I don't think that being "saved" is an either/or—you are or you aren't—kind of thing. I believe that rather than asking, "Are you saved?" it would make more sense to ask, "Are you engaged in salvation?" The root meaning of

salvation is *healing*. And we, all of us, are never fully well and never fully sick. Salvation is a journey, not a destination.

We're in the process of salvation whenever we take a deep breath and manage not to lose our temper—and then take the time to figure out the real reason we were about to go over the edge. We're working on salvation every time we reach out to a stranger, trusting that there is some



human connection that holds us together. We practice salvation when

we pause to admire the pattern of light and shadow in the leafy canopy of a tree, and when we plant a tree for future generations to enjoy. We are engaged in salvation when we help to cook a meal for the homeless, or when we choose to eat in ways that are sustainable for the planet, or when we stop and give thanks for the food that sustains us. We are saved, step by step, as we make choices that allow us to grow, to care, to connect, to build. Salvation is the entirety of that journey.

And it's a journey that we don't have to take alone. Sure, no one else can save you, and you can't really save anyone else (as many of us have found out through painful experience in dysfunctional relationships). But we can offer one another support as we walk together. We can remind each other of our strengths and we can offer perspective on what healing looks like. We can hold one another accountable for our actions and choices and we can encourage one another to take the next step toward whatever "likeness to God" might look like.

*Am I saved?* No, not really. But I'm glad to be on that journey toward salvation with you. ■





Church of the Larger Fellowship  
Unitarian Universalist

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## 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?



by **Lynn Ungar**, minister for lifespan learning,  
Church of the Larger Fellowship. This poem appears in her  
new book of poetry *Bread and Other Miracles*, which is  
available at [www.lynnungar.com](http://www.lynnungar.com). ■