



**NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN
UNIVERSALIST CHURCH**

A Velvet Bridge

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Like many of you, I grew up in a faith that focused on sin and salvation. Lutheran in my case. Even though we were Minnesotans, our church was not the grim sort where hell, fire and brimstone were preached; there was no Puritan image of humans as condemned sinners being dangled over the yawning pit of hell in the hands of an angry God. I heard mostly about a God of love, and Jesus was a gentle fellow who liked us, liked us a lot, especially us Norwegian Lutherans, I was sure. 'Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so ...'

But I also knew that I was a sinner, even before I knew what that meant, and that the wages of sin was death, even before I knew what wages were or death was. I just knew it was not good and that salvation was something good – we were for it rather than against it in Minnesota. Later, of course, I learned what salvation was from – that was the key – we were to be saved from eternal damnation.

It never made real sense to me. While I could imagine hell – the mental pictures were not that hard for a boy who loved Marvel comic books, I could never really believe in hell, or in heaven either. I could have as easily believed in the Fantastic Four or the Silver Surfer. In fact, I have never really believed in a life after death. Even as a kid, I did not and I do not now. Some of you might, and I can't say you are wrong – it is just that I have never believed in life after death. Death is the end and that is that.

So salvation took an early turn for me. Salvation is our theological theme for this month [in my draft I wrote salvation is our theological theme for this money!]. It is, however, appropriate for the month of our Canvass, because we know that money will not save us. Money can do great things – like keep us strong here and become stronger tomorrow – please turn in your pledge cards, and please be generous this year. Times are tight – we all know that and we really want to be able to continue all of our programs as they are and not cut them, and we really want to move our DRE Sara LaWall to full-time.

But money cannot save us.

So what do I mean by salvation? Do you need saving? Saving from what? A weird concept, this one is. Yes?

I was going to read a wonderful poem by Robert Penn Warren titled 'If' with the line 'if this is the way it is, we need, perhaps/ A new concept of salvation, who had long thought/ courage was enough to live by.' chew on that for a while, my friends] If salvation had nothing to do with what happens when we die, I wondered, then what? I was still faced with this life, and with all of my failings and fears. I was not afraid of hell after death, but of hell before death – about isolation and loneliness, about fear and cowardice, about failure, about the pettiness and meanness I saw too often in myself.

How could I be saved, I wondered, from the worst parts of me? I was mindful of the Apostle Paul writing in Romans 'For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do.' That was too often me. Maybe it is you as well. Saved from the worst parts of ourselves, saved from isolation and meaninglessness.

I imagine for all of us there is some moment, maybe some collection of moments, some time of disbelief, some time in our lives when the capacity for belief and perhaps for wonder is challenged. There is sometime when the images of childhood withdraw and we are left to make decisions about what we believe and who we are to become. Sometime when we come face to face with our mortality and our shortcomings, when we are confronted with our brokenness, our fallen nature – those times of existential struggle. I sure hope all of you have had them, or perhaps still do. They are not fun, but they are necessary.

For me it was when I was fifteen or sixteen. I was at a church summer camp swimming, canoeing, singing kumbaya, wondering desperately whether this girl from another church liked me, Bible study, sharing dumb jokes with the other boys. I have told this story before but it is pertinent. And struggling with a feeling deep in me that I was no good, that my sins were too great to be forgiven--whatever those sins might be--that I was unworthy of God. I felt lost. I felt a darkness in me. A little like the young woman in Stefan's story.

You see, I have struggled with this my entire life – with this darkness that sometimes edges toward despair. Not so much that it has kept me from a life I am so thankful for, from friends and family I can hardly imagine I deserve, from daughters who are a deep, deep joy and blessing, a wife--well she is the gift of my life-- from a career that has given me more than I have felt I have given it, to you here and this wonderful congregation. No, I have been richly blessed.

But there has been a dark hole, a deep pit of melancholy, a bottomless cave that has lingered on the edge of my life. It has been an existential or spiritual depression, not a clinical one. Even as I am an optimist and in love with people and life, there has been a shadow chasing me. Sometimes this dark dog of despair pursues me and seems close. So far I have kept ahead of it, but only just. Perhaps you have experienced this, too.

It has not been debilitating. I don't want to make more of this than I should but it has been a fearful presence just out of the corner of my eye ever since I remember. The darkness within. It is one of the reasons I love Melville. He has given me words and images about my interior life that I could not find on my own, as well as providing a way to place it outside of me. It is why I loved Kierkegaard so much when I was in college.

And when I was sixteen, that summertime, I felt that that shadow had caught me, that I was falling into that hole out of which I might never climb. I had lost my faith. So I prayed and opened my heart up to God and was saved. I felt found. It was the moment, I think, when I first lost my faith and then found it. I discovered, only vaguely and still imperfectly, that faith was something far deeper than images and words, even deeper than just ideas. It had something to do with the deep down things, with the depth of life. It was like crossing velvet bridge of Milozs'.

Before we can believe, we often need to lose our belief. How to get to this? Paul Tillich, one of my favorite theologians called religion the 'depth dimension' in life. He talked about God as the 'ground of being' that we meet the holy in the deeper dimensions of living. The great Quaker educator, Parker Palmer, talks of this too when he writes:

The underground is a dangerous but potentially life-giving place to which depression takes us; a place where we come to understand that the self is not set apart or special or superior but a common mix of good and evil, darkness and light, a place where we can finally embrace the humanity we share with others.

For almost all of my life, and certainly since I became a UU, I have been taught that everything that is good is 'up.' The phrase from UUism from the 1900s, is the 'progress of humankind, onward and upward forever.' And while I believe that the arc of the universe, though long, is bent toward justice, and that we live in a better world now than our ancestors did, not everything that is good is up.

Annie Dillard said it this way:

In the deeps are the violence and the terror of which psychology has warned us. But if you ride these monsters down, if you drop with them further over the world's rim, you find what our sciences cannot locate or name, the substrate, the ocean or matrix or ether which buoys the rest, which gives goodness its power for good, and evil its power for evil, the unified field: our complex and inexplicable caring for each other and for our life together here. This is given. It is not learned.

Into the depths. I don't really want to go there, into the labyrinth of the soul, but it is there that the religious journey takes us, and where our faith will be found.

This is what salvation is, this journey into and out of the depths, into meaning and belonging. We need to be on this journey into the depths together; as alone as we may feel on this journey, it is best, and perhaps only done with

others. And when done with courage and love, we will find that complex and inexplicable caring for each other and for our life here together. This is the journey Dante described 'when in my middle years, I found myself in a dark wood.' This is the journey of the Buddha, the journey of Jesus, of Moses. This is the religious journey into the wilderness, into the depths.

That summer when I was a teenager I experienced that I am not alone. Everything in my life since then has confirmed that experience: we are not alone. This is the promise of all religions and it is the promise of Unitarian Universalism for me. For me, this is what God is and what God means, the promise, built into the very stuff of the universe, that we are not alone.

Does this make sense? The heart of my faith is this: that at the center of the universe itself, just as in the deepest part of our lives, there is something that is good and light and filled with love. That at the center there is not darkness but light, there is life and not death, love and not indifference. It does not mean the darkness does not exist, not at all, nor that life is not often tragic because it most certainly is, but that in spite of the darkness, there is also light; in spite of the tragedy there can be hope. There is meaning in who we are and what we do.

And this is what salvation is and how we are saved – we are saved by each other from isolation and despair, from being disconnected and the loss of meaning. We can be saved from the worst parts of ourselves. We save each other.

That is why we are here – to save our lives and other people's lives. This is the new concept of salvation – requiring more than courage, it also requires love.

The poem by Milosz – On Prayer – is an important part of the journey for me. I am writing a prayer every day, and those little prayers have become a velvet bridge between me and the world, between you and me.

Milozs writes:

Notice I say we; there, every one, separately,
Feels compassion for others entangled in the flesh
And knows that if there is no other shore
We will walk that aerial bridge all the same.

In other words, in spite of anything and everything, it ends with love, with compassion, with that old Universalist affirmation, of love. With deeds, not creeds. With deeds done in love. Love the earth, the sun and the animals, love your God with your heart, your soul, and your mind and love your neighbor as your self. Love mercy and do justice. Love one another. You'll never go wrong if you love one another.

And if you do, you shall be saved.

Amen