

THE SOURCE OF OUR SALVATION

A Sermon Preached by Cheryl M. Walker
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One of my favorite things to do as a minister is teach. I suspect it's because I come from a long line of educators. My great grandmother, taught other slaves to read in a time when it meant risking her life to do so. My grandmother was a teacher in a one room school house. My mother helped start an elementary school and was later director of a Head Start Programs. My sister is a professor of education. Teaching is definitely in my blood. So when I am asked by one of the classes in our Religious Education Program to teach, I always try to make the time. This year I had the privilege of teaching the fifth grade class. It was lots of fun for me and I hope they enjoyed it and learned something too.

There is one thing that they learned that I suspect most of you do not know. It's about this book - our hymnal. What they learned and what you might not know is how the hymnal is arranged. There really is a rhyme and a reason to the order of the hymns and readings. Take a moment and look at the Table of Contents on pages Roman numerals five and six. Do those sections look at all familiar? They should. Now, look at the back cover of your order of service and see where we list sources from which we draw our living tradition. The sections of the hymnal correspond to the first five sources of our living tradition . That's why the hymnal is entitled Singing The Living Tradition. You see you really do learn something new every day.

If you look at the hymnal and the sources you may also notice that only five of the six sources are included. Why so you may ask... aren't there any good hymns or readings based upon Earth centered traditions? Well, yes there are; it's just that at the time of the development of the hymnal, Earth centered traditions were not included in our bylaws as part of our living tradition. The amendment to add them didn't come until 1995 and the hymnal was copyrighted in 1993. Our hymnal supplement, that was published in 2005 does include Earth Centered traditions as a section for its hymns.

Adding a sixth source shows that the sources of our living tradition are not set in stone. We acknowledge that revelation is ongoing and that we might need to recognize new sources of inspiration. In fact the bylaws of our denomination state that if no amendment to our principles and sources has been proposed in the past fifteen years, the Board of Trustees of the UUA must convene a commission to examine them to ensure they are still relevant.

As we know them today, our six sources from which our living tradition we draws are:

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life
- Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love
- Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life

- Jewish and Christian teachings which calls us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves
- Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit
- Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

Our Sources as they are known often get short changed when we speak of Unitarian Universalism. We often cite our principles, if we can remember all seven of them, when we describe our faith community, but we rarely do we speak of our sources. In fact looking on the bookshelves of my colleagues the only book that I found that speaks of them at all is *Our Chosen Faith* co-authored by our own Forrest Church and John Buerhens a former minister of this congregation. Yet, I contend that it is our sources that provide us our poetry. Our principles may be the work of theologians but our sources are the works of poets. Without these six sources our seven principles are ideas without spirit.

I suspect the reason we often ignore them is because while our principles may be the ties that bind us together, the place where we find our agreement to walk together, it is our sources that often divide us. Our principles may articulate *how* we wish to walk together and *what* we strive for, but our sources articulate *why*. And our reasons why vary greatly from person to person.

For instance we may agree to have a respect for the interdependent web of all existence, our seventh principle, but *why* may be because of Jewish and Christian teachings that speak of stewardship of the God's earth, or Buddhist teachings that tell us each life is sacred - from the insect to the human, or because Pagan teachings recognize the sacred cycles of the nature, or because we read Rachel Carson's *The Silent Spring*. Any, or all, of these may be the source of our call to respect the interdependent web of existence. We may not agree on the sources of our motivations but we can come to agree on what those sources must motivate us to do. This is the essential relationship between our sources and our principles. We may not agree on the fundamental matters of faith, but we do agree on where our faith must lead us.

Our sources unlike our principles are not always in agreement with one another. I know we often try to find the common denominator between them, but this is a futile exercise. They do not agree and they need not agree. Ask two Unitarian Universalists about the issue of say something as fundamental as God and you will get ten very different answers. This is the nature of our people. This is the beauty of our community, this is what makes us a saving faith, not just for the world but for ourselves. It is also what makes being a Unitarian Universalist a difficult task, if we are to be honest and serious about our faith.

To be honest about our faith community we have to admit that we think the person sitting next to us is just plain wrong about some things that we hold to be true. If you don't think exactly as I do, then really, I think you're wrong. There are times when what we believe and what the other person believes cannot both be true. The theist cannot think that the atheist is right, and the atheist cannot think that the theist is right. They both think the other person is wrong.

My partner, Elizabeth, and I sometimes wander into the realm of theological musings and when we do the same thing usually happens. She'll start talking about her ideas of God and I'll get this look on my face that says – "you are so incredibly wrong about this. How can you possibly have come up with that. Where is the logic, woman?" I don't actually say out loud - honey you know I love you but that idea is just ridiculous, because hey I'm that not stupid.

But she knows me well enough to know what I'm thinking and she'll get a look on her face that says – "oh I know what you're thinking, and you couldn't be more wrong if you tried. I know you *think* I'm wrong, but missy, you are the one who's living out in left field all by your lonesome. For a woman who talks about reason and logic, your ideas are sorely lacking both and then some."

This goes on for awhile, both of us telling the other what we think and both of us thinking the other one is dead wrong. Finally, we'll get to the point where we ask the really, really important question -- so what shall we have for dinner? And then we move on.

We are both Unitarian Universalists so we know how to live in peace with each other while being in total disagreement on the sources of our faith. It isn't always easy but our salvation lies not in agreement on matters of faith but in the ability to be in peaceful disagreement. Our beliefs about the nature of God are very different, but through our disagreements we come to agreement on how we should be with one another and in the world. Because we are serious about our faith we also learn how to hear each other's differences and what we might learn from them.

Clearly, we do not give each of the six sources equal weight and some we may not give very much weight to at all, but we are willing to explore them and learn from them. More importantly we are willing to live in the tension between belief and disbelief together. The question for our salvation is not what happens when we die, but what's for dinner. For to save ourselves in this world we must eat. Of course this is just a simple example and a simple question, but when we look beyond our personal, everyday lives we recognize that at the heart of Unitarian Universalism are these disparate sources that make us a World Saving Faith. If we show the world anything it is not our principles, as lofty and important as they are, but it is the fact that we, Unitarian Universalists, with our conflicting ideas about God, religion, salvation and the meaning of life, have learned how to live together as a community of peace accepting of our differences.

The world needs our faith today as it has never before. We do not need for the entire world to become Unitarian Universalists, that would defeat our message. What we need the world to do is see us as an example of how we may live in harmony while we are disagreed on the most fundamental questions of faith. Perhaps then the world would understand that it need not agree on one world religion, or no religion at all, in order to live in peace.

Our sources cover the gamut of the humanity's religious expressions and each person here relates differently to them. Yet somehow with our differences, week after week, we attend worship service and find a way to relate to what we may find sacred in this world. Maybe we find it in the music or find it in the sermon or the silent moments within our time for prayer. Or maybe we find it in coffee hour when we meet and greet our friends. Wherever we find the sacred we try to

live in harmony with our sisters and brothers, not just in this place but everywhere we may go. This is what makes us a world saving faith.

And the world needs salvation. I know we don't like to use that word we would rather talk of changing the world rather than saving it, because the word salvation conjures up too many images of the world hereafter rather than the world here and now. But the world here and now needs saving. We are past the point of just thinking about change. Change by itself is not a desired goal. If my car stalls on the side of the road because it needs a new radiator, and I replace the battery, well the car has been changed. And a new battery might even make it better, but that doesn't mean I can drive the car. The car needed to be saved. The world doesn't need change it needs salvation.

We need to save ourselves from the madness of violence and destruction we reap upon ourselves in the name of God and religion and even non-religion. We need to save ourselves from destroying what sustains us on this earth. It is not the earth that needs saving, it will continue long after we have destroyed all that which would sustain our lives, it is we who need saving. We are long past the point of thinking about changing the world. It is time for us to start thinking about saving the world. And we Unitarian Universalists have in our faith the source of our salvation -- the ability to make peace in the midst of disagreement.

Those six sources of our living tradition are the firmament upon which the salvation of the world rests, only if we are willing to accept that we need not be in agreement about them but that each of them has something to teach us. Over the next few weeks we will explore each of these sources in depth to see what they may each teach us. We will look at what it means to say there is a transcending mystery and wonder affirmed in all cultures, is this true - what is the mystery? Who are the women and men whose prophetic words and deeds shape our justice making? We will look at several world religions and how their wisdom inspires our ethical and spiritual lives. We speak of Jewish and Christian teachings that call us to respond to God's love but what teachings are they and which God of the Bible do they represent? In recent times we, Unitarian Universalists, have critiqued Humanism's tendency towards the secular, but need that be so and what must reclaim from this important part of our history. And finally we will embrace the wisdom that our earth-centered pagan brothers and sisters bring to our understanding of our responsibility to our planet. Each of these sources has something very important to teach us about ourselves and our responsibilities.

In the end you may still think that some of them are just plain wrong, wrong, wrong. The goal isn't for you to take them all as the source of your own salvation, the goal is to appreciate the differences. To celebrate the fact that we do not, will not and must not all think alike to be in communion with each other. Where salvation lies is not in learning how to pray the same prayers to the same God, but in learning how to be still while someone else prays to a God you do not believe in and when they are finished praying joining with them in creating a world where our differences are not feared but exalted.

Who we pray to if we pray at all matters deeply to each of us personally, but it is not what matters for the world. For the salvation of the world it is what we do when our prayers are done. Today we celebrate and recognize the many women and men who give of their time and energy

volunteering in some way in this church. Their names are listed in the order of service and on a banner in Friendship Hall, there are over 600 hundred names listed.

These are people who when their prayers were done decided that they would put their prayers into action to give back something to the world. Some of them gave their time to feed the hungry, some gave their time to make sure that you had a seat in this sanctuary. Some gave one time, some give time after time again. All of them and all of their work is important. Not just to this church, but to the world. Through their actions they are helping to save the world.

What is the source of their inspiration? I suspect if you asked them you would find a lot of different reasons. No one answer would fit each and everyone of them. No one answer should fit every single one of them, for it is the diversity of our inspirations that gives our work its richness.

Whatever the source of their inspiration, ultimately, it is the source of our salvation. What is the source of your inspiration? What calls you into creating a just and loving community for all humanity? Heed the call, save the world.

Amen and blessed be.