READING FOR SESSION 4

The words *Unitarian Universalist* connected to sin and salvation are somewhat akin to oil and water. Since the great bulk of us came to our movement from some more orthodox group, it is not surprising that many have a visceral reaction to the mere use of these terms. Many join our movement at least partly to escape such theologically suspect notions.

But what do Unitarian Universalists have against salvation? Evidently, everything. We are a people who do not want to be saved, judging from how often UUs place that term dead last in Milton Rokeach's value survey. Saved from what? For what? We perhaps agree with George Bernard Shaw who observes, "Heaven for climate; Hell for company."

Nonetheless, are we in danger of throwing out the baby with the bathwater? In rejecting the creedal concepts of sin and salvation, we may also reject the valid core of experiential truths they contain. Are we rejecting intellectually what we may have to admit experientially?

Sin is fundamentally a religious concept, most often describing the relationship between God and humanity. Hence sin has come to mean variously rebellion against God, alienation from God, or simply falling short of our best selves.

Salvation most often means a kind of reconciliation between humanity and the divine. This theme has many variations: Salvation can be earned by humanity or given by God or some combination. It can be of this world or other-worldly; individual or social; instantaneous or gradual.

In the Jewish and Christian traditions sin began with Adam and Eve and their rebellion in the Garden of Eden. There is really no original sin in the Jewish tradition; rather the myth illustrates humanity's disobedience of God's will. In Judaism sin is breaking the Hebrew people's covenant with God. One gains salvation from sin in this world by good works toward the one sinned against, or in the case of sins against God, through sacrifice or prayer.

Christianity was a reaction against the idea of salvation by works in this world. Originally grounded in the high ethical tradition of the Old Testament prophets, salvation by works came to mean salvation by ritual, and it was this temple religion against which Jesus inveighed. Unfortunately, the followers of Jesus, most notably Paul, distorted this attempt at ethical renewal and created a whole new system of sin and salvation. Salvation was to be attained by conversion in Jesus Christ, not by a process of reconciling oneself to God by good works. It became a salvation *from* the world instead of *in* the world. The prototype was not the ethical life pleasing in God's sight but the dramatic conversion experience of Paul on the road to Damascus. It was a matter not of humanity's action but of God's grace.

St. Augustine refined this doctrine in later centuries. He contended man's basic sin was pride—"a perverse desire of height." It did not mean merely a sense of exaggerated self-esteem "but the general inclination of all to overestimate their virtues, powers and achievements."

Most of us accept a conventional Unitarian Universalist view of human nature that holds we are essentially good and that our progress is "onward and upward forever." We tend to believe in "the power of men of good will and sacrificial spirit to overcome all evil and progressively establish the Kingdom of God," as the 1935 Universalist General Convention put it. This liberal spirit is captured in the late Leonard Mason's limerick:

> Come return to your place in the pews,
> And hear our heretical views:
> You were not born in sin,
> So lift up your chin,
> You have only your dogmas to lose.

Yet is it not one of our tasks as theologians to come to terms with sin, or human finitude, and salvation, our attempt to live with that finitude? How can we explain the creeping greed of American culture, the increasing incivility among us, the growing coarseness of our society, the prevalence of war in the world? How can we explain the "sins" of sexism, racism, homophobia, ageism, ableism, and a host of other examples of people who have missed the mark and missed it badly? How do we account for the perversity of individuals? And how do we respond to theologian Reinhold Niebuhr's words, "Actually the view that men are sinful is one of the best attested and empirically verified facts of human existence"?

Perhaps we will conclude with theologian Paul Tillich that human nature can best be described as "finite freedom." Human nature is finite; it has limitations of genetics, history, and culture. Within those limitations it is free—free to choose to exterminate six million Jews, free to face the gas chambers with a song on the lips, free to serve one's cause by suicide attacks, free to respond to evil with courage. Religious liberals, in placing so much emphasis on freedom, have tended to forget about finitude.

Somehow we must account for sin and salvation —Unitarian Universalist style. Sin is a fact of life. Sin is our capacity for excessive pride. It is no mystical quality passed from some mythical Adam to succeeding generations. It is simply an existential reality, a manifestation of our human finitude, an egocentrism that blocks human growth. Sin is a condition in which we think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think or have any right to think. It is the deception of equating ourselves with God, or if we reject that concept, equating ourselves with Promethean Man.

This sin of pride is pervasive. Ben Franklin writes in his essay on "Moral Perfection,"

> In reality there is perhaps no one of our natural passions so hard to subdue as pride; disguise it, struggle with it, beat it down, stifle it, mortify it as much as one pleases, it is still alive and will every now and then peep out and show itself. You will see it perhaps often in this history. For even if I could conceive that I had completely overcome it, I should probably be proud of my humility.

As the first atomic bomb went off in the desert at Los Alamos, New Mexico, its creator, Dr. Robert Oppenheimer, could think only of a passage from the Bhagavad Gita: "I am become death, the shatterer of worlds." He has written that the aftermath of that experience left with him "a legacy of concern. In some sort of crude sense, which no vulgarity, no humor, no overstatement can quite extinguish, the physicists have known sin, and this is a knowledge which they cannot lose."

Contrary to what we who have put all our faith in reason, intellect, and education may think, knowledge is no guarantor of righteousness. Ovid says, "I see the right, and I approve it too, condemn the wrong, and yet the wrong pursue. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." The apostle Paul said much the same thing. Or as Huck Finn says, "Being good is so much trouble, while bein' bad ain't no trouble at all." So it is with us.

If we wish psychological verification, we might turn to the late Abraham Maslow, who describes the "wonderful frontispiece" in an "awful textbook on abnormal psychology. The lower half was a picture of a line of babies, pink, sweet, delightful, innocent, lovable. Above that was a picture of a lot of passengers in a subway train, glum, gray, sullen, sour. The caption underneath was very simply: 'What happened?'" Indeed, what did happen? These innocent though self-aggrandizing babes became not-so-innocent adults who had failed to transcend their egocentrism. It's an old story, a result of the interplay of nature and nurture in as-yet-undetermined proportions. But the important point is that sin as stagnation is a human reality. It is a condition of the soul.

We are born in "original sin" then, not in some metaphysical sense or because theologians say we are, but because every individual is born with a powerful egocentrism. Sin abounds when we are unable to grow beyond that egocentric perspective. The wages of sin are death—not in the Pauline sense of eternal damnation but in the sense that sin is that egocentric self assurance that blocks human growth. Spiritually, then, we are as good as dead. Our greatest sin is in not admitting we are sinners, not admitting our human finitude, not admitting we need to transcend ourselves.

As we turn to consider salvation, however, it becomes clear that we are inextricably wrapped up in the paradox of our humanity, for the same dynamic in human nature produces both egoism and altruism. The same drives that emerge out of our perception of the world as our oyster and ourselves as its pearl also give rise to altruism, to a sense of service.

Take the helping professions as an example. While they are praised as the most altruistic of callings, they can satisfy the ego in a number of very powerful ways. The same drive that moves us to altruism can also lead us onto the tempting paths of self-regard and self-glorification. The secret of salvation is growing in some kind of healthy balance so that we are aware of our finitude and at the same time aware of our capacity for self-transcendence.

Salvation, in fact, means wholeness or health, and health, we know, is not static but dynamic. It

is a metabolic process, and illness is an interruption of that process. The body, as we know, is finite and cannot escape mortality. But we also know it tends toward health. The cut on the finger tends to heal; the body throws off respiratory illness normally; the individual fights for life and has amazing staying power. Similarly, salvation is a process of growth, which sin interrupts. We are not sinners or saints; rather we are characterized by states of being that may be good or evil at any given moment. The growth that is salvation can be seen in three stages:

- Admitting that one is a sinner—that is, prone to actions that block growth. In this stage one recognizes that preoccupation with the self prevents one from expanding beyond the self.
- Seeking to expand one's understanding of the world beyond the egocentric view.
- Living so as to optimize one's own growth and contribute to the growth of others.

Most of us fulfill what Abraham Maslow calls "deficiency needs," such as the needs for security, status, and love, without which we simply cannot survive physically or psychically. These needs are on a hierarchical scale from basic survival needs on up. At the upper end of the scale "deficiency needs" become what he calls "being needs," the need to grow, to transcend the self, to serve causes beyond the self, to discover some meaning in one's life, to have "peak experiences" that transcend the ordinary events of everyday life.

Salvation, then, is not a point of arrival in either this world or the next. It is a process of growth energetically undertaken. Sin is yielding to our all-too-human tendency to see the world solely from the perspective of the self and to see that self at its center. To grow is to expand one's world beyond the self, or put another way, to extend the self to one's fellows, to the cosmos that is our home. Salvation is not a destination but a journey in which, as an unknown poet puts it, "great truths are dearly bought and dearly won."

Salvation for religious liberals is a kind of contract with ourselves that we will seek to be more tomorrow than we are today. No church, no creed, and no person holds the key. The contract is with ourselves: with the sometimes pitiful, sometimes powerful people who live inside our skins.

The highest mountain in the world is Mount Everest. For a good many years people have tried to climb to its crest. A growing number have succeeded. But the significant fact about Everest is not the fact that people finally reached its summit. It is the heroic and magnificent feat that for decades climbers have tried to reach that summit, and in the trying, as a score of books have testified, they developed the strength and insights of giants. The actual success, the business of standing for a few frozen moments on top of a pile of rock, had little more than a symbolic significance. The great meaning of Everest was in the trying, in the attempt. Salvation doesn't mean we have reached the summit or realized all of our visions. It does matter—very much—that we try.