

Human Salvation Is Not a Solo Act February 27, 2011

A week ago Wednesday I sat down over a cup of chai to talk with Angela Baker, a volunteer leader with Austin Interfaith. Angela is a Catholic woman in, I would guess, her seventies, who has been doing community organizing for about 35 years. *She* was meeting with *me* that day to pursue the question of Wildflower's continued participation in Austin Interfaith. As most of you know, Austin Interfaith is a broad based organizing network of congregations, schools, and unions, which is part of a larger national body called the Industrial Areas Foundation. Wildflower Church has been a member of Austin Interfaith since December 2008.

But for the past several months, for several reasons, I had been doing some soul searching about how or whether I could continue to be a leader from Wildflower in the work that Austin Interfaith does. Could I continue on, being spread so thin with all that Austin Interfaith demands? Could I find the spirit of love at the core of the work, even when needing to be confrontational? Could I bring my whole self to the interfaith community that Austin Interfaith is, without worrying I might be judged for my religion, my sexual orientation, so on and so forth?

Members of Wildflower Church who are active in social justice met with me twice this winter to discern how to move forward, not only with *my* vision, but with their individual visions and with a vision for Wildflower justice work as a whole. The night before I met with Angela, we concluded finally that we would stay on with Austin Interfaith, while also committing to involve ourselves with other good organizations, such as i-ACT, formerly known as AAIM.

So when I sat down with Angela last week, I let her know she wouldn't need to do a sales pitch, that we were back in. This freed up Angela and me to talk less about the ups and downs of Austin Interfaith, and more about the importance of organizing itself--the nature of it, and how it is intrinsically different from doing only acts of charity. At one point, Angela said, "After all, 80-90% of charity is for lack of justice."

"80-90% of charity is for lack of justice." That struck me hard. For, in my months of discernment, as I stated in my December semi-annual report, I kept returning to the conscience-prodding fact that, "I am called to look at how *easily* I can afford to step away from the work that Austin Interfaith does, while for many, their very well being depends on this very kind of grassroots organizing." I also noted in that December report that, "the practice of charity, of giving money, goods, or time to those less fortunate than us, does not necessarily change systems. Without work

towards change in systems, the poor, the sick, the homeless remain dependent on the charity, the love, of those willing and able to give.”

So Angela’s statement that “80-90% of charity is for lack of justice” grabbed my attention. “Where did you hear that?” I asked. “Lou Snead,” Angela said. Now, Lou Snead happens to be the pastor at Faith Presbyterian Church, where we met several times around the winter holidays, and with whom we are in talks about sharing their campus at least on an interim basis. And it happened to be that that night I would be seeing Pastor Snead. So I when I sat down next to him that night I mentioned that he’d been quoted earlier, and I repeated what Angela had said. Pastor Snead gave me a slightly different version of the quote, which is this: “Too often in the hands of the Church, charity has been an apology for injustice.” He then went on in later correspondence to say, “Feel free to use [this quote] whenever and as often as you can. No need to quote me, because I heard it from a pastor friend of mine who was doing inner city ministry 25 years ago before he died of AIDS.” Thank you, Pastor Snead, for sharing this quote with me, and thank you to your friend who used it before you. And I *will* quote you, again: “Too often in the hands of the church, charity has been an apology for injustice.”

If that is the case--and I believe that too often it is--I feel compelled to step back and ask, "If churches *are* too often caught doing charity instead of justice, just what is the *true*, underneath-everything-else purpose of the church?" As we still reverberate from the joy of our ten-year anniversary celebration a few weeks ago, and as we continue work pursuing a home of our own, what are we striving to achieve, what are we striving to create? What, in other words, are we here for?

Most often, what I hear people seeking and finding and wanting to be a part of, here at Wildflower Church, is community and, at its best, *beloved* community. That alone is something, I believe, worth striving for: a place to belong, a place to befriend, a place to be who we each authentically are.

But remember the words of Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley, which we read together earlier: "If, recognizing the interdependence of all life, we strive to build community, the strength we gather will be our *salvation*." Salvation. How often do we use *that* word in our daily Unitarian Universalist conversations? Did any of us first walk through these doors saying to ourselves, "I hope this church offers me some salvation"? Actually, while that may sound like a rhetorical question, I would be delighted if several hands shot up in a sign of, "Yes, I came here seeking salvation." Because that would say something to me about how seriously you take being a part of this religious community.

Even if you half jokingly believe, as Eric Miller mentioned at our birthday celebration, that the answer to the question, “What are Unitarian Universalists?” is “atheists with children,” my guess is that you have *serious* desires for the personal, spiritual, moral, ethical, and communal well being of those children--that you *seriously* want them to recognize the interdependence of *all* life, and that you very much want them to gain strength through creating and sustaining community that teaches them those very ways of well being.

Whatever your theological beliefs--whether you're an atheist with children, a Pagan with cats, a Buddhist with attachments, a Catholic with questions, or an agnostic with doubts--whatever your theological beliefs, I want us *all* to take enough time this morning to ask ourselves, how seriously are we taking our own and our collective salvation? And how are the two--the individual and the collective--connected?

They are *disconnected*, I believe, when charity alone is substituted for justice. They are disconnected, I believe, when we become self-satisfied by our charitable acts alone, as if, once we feel good for giving a person a fish, as opposed to teaching a person to fish, we will be on our way to the gated community of heaven. They are disconnected in those situations, for I believe, in the words of Unitarian Universalist theologian Thandeka, that, “Human salvation is not a solo act.”

Walter Rauschenbush, whose words we heard Laurie read from earlier, was a pioneering voice in this country regarding such a message of what he called the Social Gospel. “The most pressing task of the present [Christian Church] is not individualistic,” he says. “Our business is to make over an antiquated and immoral economic system: to get rid of laws, customs, maxims, and philosophies inherited from an evil and despotic past; to create just and brotherly relations,” Rauschenbush continues, “between great groups and classes of society....”

Though his original audience was early 20th century German Baptist immigrants living in New York City’s Hells Kitchen, Rauschenbusch’s message of the social gospel was then and is now easily applicable on a universal level. In fact, more specifically, for us, it is applicable on a *Universalist* level. For remember that the term Universalist originally spoke to the notion of Universal salvation--no loving God would send any of his/her/ its creation to eternal damnation. In Universalist theology, all are saved. That’s why you hear of Unitarian Universalist churches such as All Souls New York, or All Souls D.C., or All Souls Tulsa. *All* souls are welcome and cared for by an all-loving God.

But, or and, while universal love and a universally loving God are central to the origin and meaning our Universalist name, there is also that call for universal effort on the part of we human beings--universal

intention of recognizing the interdependence of all life, not just of our lives in our closest circles, not just our lives within our comfort zones, but all life. Without recognizing that interdependence, there will be no real salvation. Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley provides conditions for salvation, remember? “If,” she says, “If, recognizing the interdependence of all life, we strive to build community, the strength we gather will be our salvation.”

Without that recognition of the interdependence of all life, we are right back where Universalist theologian Clarence Skinner said we were in 1915: “The sectarian divisiveness of to-day is more than theologically deplorable,” he says. “It is a social sin.... The vast and impressive mechanism of the churches, representing an enormous outlay of capital and an *unimagined* power for good, is rendered socially ineffective by a lack of unity and practical application for common ends. There are a hundred institutionalized evils,” Skinner says, “undermining the integrity of the national life, poisoning the springs of character, which could not exist a single month if the *latent* powers of righteousness were hurled against them.”

Now, some may argue that it’s exactly religion that has caused so many problems in the first place, that it’s religion which ranks among the highest of the “institutionalized evils.” And I would be remiss if I were to argue there was no truth to that. But let’s not distract ourselves too much

with that debate, because another truth is, you haven't given up on religion completely because here you are, and whether you call us a church or a congregation or something else there's no denying that what you did this morning was got up and went to church. So. Assuming that, yes, all churches--all *religions*--have their institutionalized shadow sides, let's move on to look at the church's latent powers of righteousness that are yet to be hurled at the world's evils. In other words, let's take a look at the justice we have the *potential* to manifest along with, or even in place of, the charity we human beings too often settle for.

Why look at this? Because it seems to me that *if* we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and *if* we affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part, and *if* we believe that the way to practice those affirmations is through justice, equity, compassion, acceptance, the free and responsible search for truth and meaning, the right of conscience, the democratic process, and working for world community, then justice--setting things right when they are not right, balancing the scales of well being-- then justice is at the root of our very reason for being. Otherwise, we really are just a social club, are we not? Come on in. Join us, befriend us, belong to us, be authentically yourself with us. We'll have fun! This is beloved community! Like that.

But you know, as I recall, when I first got to Wildflower Church I generally didn't speak of beloved community. Instead I spoke of beloved *and just* community. Then somewhere along the line I fell out of that habit. Maybe beloved community has a better rhythm to it. Maybe the "and just" creates a jolt to the flow of the phrase. But can we truly be a beloved community without being, or at least striving to be, a just community? Does our religion allow for that?

The lazy, and really, incorrect response is to say, "We Unitarian Universalists can believe whatever we want." The *truer* response, the response that demands we wrestle with ourselves is, "We Unitarian Universalists believe what our consciences say we must." What does your conscience say, then, about the interdependent nature of life on this earth? Is my salvation--my wholeness, my wellness--completely independent of yours? Is your salvation--your wholeness, your wellness, your *heavenliness*--completely free from and unrelated to that of the poor, the lonely, the marginalized, the disenfranchised?

Human salvation is *not* a solo act. Nor is it a one time act or an act of instant gratification. It is long, hard work of the soul and of the community. An example: Shortly after public service workers began to strike in Wisconsin in response to the governor's proposal to ban collective bargaining rights, I read two different pieces about the crisis, one written by a friend and colleague, one written by a former seminary

president. Both called for solidarity with the people of Wisconsin, and both referenced one of the most poignant articulations of the social gospel in modern history. That was the sanitation workers' strike in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1968.

Do you remember the signs that the workers carried? They said, simply, "I am a man." No slogans about rights or deals or benefits. Just a simple, soulful proclamation. "I am a man." The statement demanded that others see that these people were not just conveniences or machines or cheap labor or servants or slaves. "I am a man." Today, that sign might read something more like "I am a human being." And we could read into that, "I have inherent worth and dignity." Or we could take it even further and imagine a sign saying, "I am a living, valuable thread of the interdependent web of all existence."

The sanitation workers of Memphis stuck together and stood together and marched together and the people saw them and their signs and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., came to be with them and it was in his speech there in Memphis, fatefully his last, telling the story of the Good Samaritan, that he demanded we ask of the wounded man on the Jericho road not, "If I stop to help him, what will happen to me?" but, "If I do not help him, what will happen to him?"

And now, these 43 years later, maybe we need to add, "If I do not help him, what will happen to him, *and* what will happen to me?" This is

not a heavy guilt trip I am trying to lay on you. I am not implying that the gates of heaven may be locked when you get there if you don't help the man on the road to Jericho. Because honestly, I don't know if there is a heaven to go to after we die. But if there is to be any hope of salvation *here on earth*--if there is to be wholeness and wellness for this living, struggling, beautiful earth and all her inhabitants, then we, from all corners of the earth, must be salvation creating, beauty sustaining, wholeness and wellness celebrating people. If we wish to turn the world around from tired, entangled divisions, we must, in the words of Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley, "join spirits as brothers and sisters..." We must, in her words, "build community"--beloved *and just* community-- "and move toward restoration."

Human salvation is not a solo act. It is an act of the people, by the people, for the people. So let us rise together in body or spirit and work together, and heal together and right now, let us awaken our righteous power by using our voices to sing together hymn #1074 Turn the World Around. Amen.