

Preparation for Universalism, Goodness, Salvation

This is a tale paraphrased from the Universalist tradition:

A distraught father in a small town approached a Universalist circuit rider. He said, “My son is a terrible person. He lies and cheats and steals. He is unfaithful to his wife and cruel to his children. He listens to no one. I am afraid he will be damned for all eternity.” The circuit rider answered, “He sounds like a terrible person who causes no end of trouble for those around him. Tonight we must build a bonfire and ambush him and throw him into it. It is truly what he deserves.” The father exclaimed, “I cannot do that. No matter how bad he is, he is still my son and I love him.” The circuit rider responded, “If you cannot do that to your son because of your human love which is imperfect, why do you think that God with his infinite and perfect love could condemn any of his children, no matter how bad, to an eternity of suffering?”

The Universalist idea that all people were good enough to be saved in God’s love was revolutionary in the decades when most churches preached about avoiding hell and earning a place in heaven. Thomas Starr King (1824-1864), who was both a Unitarian and a Universalist minister long before the two denominations joined in 1961, humorously described their different views on human goodness: “The Universalists believe that God is too good to damn people, while the Unitarians believe that people are too good to be damned by God.” While many of us now do not fear eternal damnation, we do deal with goodness and badness within ourselves and the people we encounter.

As children, many of us learned concepts of sin and salvation from church or from what the adults in our lives taught us. We also drew our own conclusions as we interacted with nice kids and mean kids and observed how society dealt with both. As adults, we still ponder the questions of good, evil, and salvation. We grapple with the question of whether it is nature or nurture that makes people behave the way they do. We question the difference, if any, between evil and mental illness. Although we seldom classify ourselves as evil, we deal continually with our own imperfections. We wonder how good is good enough. Although we may not use traditional religious terms such as salvation, sin, penitence, atonement, forgiveness, redemption, and grace, we experience them as we work through our way through life. There is a lot to think about.

Below are a variety of thoughts for you to consider as you ponder aspects of Universalism.

There is not eternal damnation, the only rewards and punishments are right here in this world.
Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz

On days where I feel the karma is in balance I’m not afraid of death. And when I feel it’s weighing heavily on the negative side, then I get very scared and just think about eternal damnation and how unpleasant that would be. *Will Oldham*

I do not believe you can threaten people into goodness. *Cassandra Clare*

Clarence Skinner pushed to expand the notion of Universalism that his spiritual ancestors had developed. He called us to a “cosmic mind-set” in which we all realized our connection with – indeed our unity with – everything that is, everything that has been, and everything that ever will be. *Rev. Michael Tino*

Speaking of salvation, Jesus and a host of other spiritual luminaries have weighed in on the subject with some counterintuitive and paradoxical wisdom. In a nutshell, it is this: “Don’t focus on saving yourself . . . Focus on serving, saving, helping others. For if you try to save yourself, you lose yourself, yet if you seek to save others, you save both the other and yourself.”

Richard R. Davis, Unitarian minister

Always do good to others. Be selfless. Mentally remove everything and be free. This is divine life. This is the direct way to Moksha or salvation. *Swami Sivananda*

The upright, honest-hearted man Who strives to do the best he can, Need never fear the church's ban Or hell's damnation. *Robert Burns*

Questions to Ponder

1. What childhood teachings did you receive about the innate goodness or evil of humankind? How have your views changed as an adult?
2. How would you describe a truly bad person? Is redemption possible for such a person? If so, what does the redemption look like?
3. Do you know any truly good people? How would you describe them?
4. If you think people are a mix of goodness and imperfection, how good is good enough?
5. Many of us were raised in the Christian church, where concepts of salvation, sin, penitence, atonement, redemption were pivotal to the Christian faith. What, if anything, do these terms mean to you now?
6. If a person does not believe in hellfire and damnation or karma or a god who can love us, does goodness have any importance? Explain.
7. If we believe that all or most people are basically good, but might not believe in a supreme being as the source of goodness, what is the origin of this basic goodness?
8. “I believe in people’s essential goodness.” – “I believe in the worth and dignity of every person” (the UU First Principle). How are these phrases the same for you? How are they different?

Words of the Day

Before coming to the gathering, think of a few words, phrases, or metaphors that describe ways that the Universalist message resonates with you. The prompt for the Words of the Day activity will be to complete this sentence:

“A part of the Universalist message that resonates with me is . . .”