

**“A UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISTS’ TAKE ON
SALVATION”**

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BEFORE MAYOR RUDY GULIANI TURNED 42ND STREET AND BROADWAY INTO A DISNEYLAND FOR ADULTS, IT USED TO BE A TOTALLY DIFFERENT PLACE. CHARLIE AND I USED TO TAKE OUR CHILDREN THERE ONCE A YEAR TO SEE A MATINEE – A BROADWAY SHOW OF THEIR CHOICE, I MIGHT ADD. EVERY YEAR WE WOULD MAKE THE TREK TO NEW JERSEY TO VISIT HIS FAMILY AND THE HIGHLIGHT WOULD BE OUR TRIP INTO NEW YORK CITY TO SEE A BROADWAY SHOW. BUT GETTING TO THE THEATER WITHOUT EXPOSING OUR KIDS TO THE HOOKERS WHO LINED THE STREETS – ALTHOUGH DURING THE DAY THEY WEREN’T QUITE AS OBVIOUS – AND THE ASSORTED SEX SHOPS WAS MORE THAN A LITTLE DIFFICULT. AS THE 70’S MOVED INTO THE 80’S, ALL MANNER OF HUMAN DEGRADATION INFILTRATED THAT AREA OF NEW YORK. DRUG DEALERS WERE EVERYWHERE AND DRUG USE WAS PRETTY BLATANT. BECAUSE OF THE SERIOUS FINANCIAL CUTBACKS IN NEW YORK’S WELFARE SYSTEM DURING THOSE YEARS – PEOPLE WHO HAD ONCE FOUND A HOME IN PSYCHIATRIC FACILITIES WERE NOW ON THE STREET. IT WAS NOT UNUSUAL TO SEE THE HOMELESS SLEEPING ON SEWER GRATES FOR WARMTH DURING THE WINTER MONTHS. I EVEN SAW A DEAD BODY WALKING TO THE HUMANIST INSTITUTE ONE SUNDAY MORNING – ON CENTRAL PARK WEST AT 71ST STREET – WHICH WOULD BE THE EQUIVALENT OF A BIRMINGHAM OR BLOOMFIELD HILLS NEIGHBORHOOD. APPARENTLY THE PERSON

HAD SLEPT ON THE STREET THAT NIGHT AND DIED OF EXPOSURE. THE POLICE WERE JUST COVERING HIM UP AS I WALKED BY. THOSE WERE THE PRE-GULIANI YEARS AND THEY WERE TOUGH. BUT THE THEATER DISTRICT WAS REALLY WHERE THE MOST AWFUL CONDITIONS EXISTED. COLLAPSING BUILDINGS WITH CORNICES HANGING LOOSE, TRASH ON THE SIDEWALKS AND DRUG ADDICTS BEGGING FOR MONEY TO THE PASSERSBY. IT WAS NOT THE GLITZY, EXCITING, ROMANTICIZED PLACE OF ASPIRING BROADWAY PERFORMERS. IN THE SUMMER OF 1985, AFTER COMPLETING FIVE DAYS AT THE HUMANIST INSTITUTE, CHARLIE'S MOTHER, TOOK THE BUS FROM HER HOME IN MAPLEWOOD, NEW JERSEY AND MET ME IN THE THEATER DISTRICT WHERE SHE TREATED ME TO A REVIVAL OF "42ND STREET" – STARRING JERRY ORBACH – WHO LATER BECAME MORE FAMOUS FOR HIS PORTRAYAL OF LENNY BRISKOL ON LAW AND ORDER. AFTER THE SHOW SHE TOOK ME TO THE RUSSIAN TEA ROOM – ANOTHER FAMOUS NEW YORK HAUNT – FOR DINNER. THEN SHE GINGERLY GOT ON THE BUS AND RODE HOME 20 MILES TO NEW JERSEY. I FIGURE IN 1985, SYLVIA PAUL WAS ABOUT 75 YEARS OLD. LOOKING BACK I REALIZE HOW TRULY REMARKABLE THAT WAS FOR A 75 YEAR OLD WOMAN TO DO. BUT THEN THAT WAS SYLVIA – SHE REMAINS, TO THIS DAY, A ROLE MODEL FOR ME ON HOW TO BE A SUCCESSFUL SENIOR CITIZEN. BUT I DIGRESS. AFTER I SAID "GOOD-BYE" TO HER I WALKED AROUND THE THEATER AREA FOR AWHILE BEFORE RETURNING TO MY HOTEL ROOM. IT WAS BEGINNING TO GET DARK AND I REALIZED THAT IT WAS TIME THAT I HEAD BACK TO A SAFER NEIGHBORHOOD. AS I WAS WALKING I SAW A

BRIGHT NEON SIGN – WITH THE WORD JESUS GLOWING – RISING HIGH ABOVE THE END OF THE STREET, ANOTHER WORD BEGAN TO COME INTO FOCUS. AT THAT POINT I WAS SURE THE SIGN WOULD READ JESUS SAVES – BUT IT DIDN'T. INSTEAD IT SAID “JESUS KNOWS.” I REMEMBER THINKING THAT WHOEVER PUT THAT SIGN TOGETHER SHOULD GET THE REALIST OF THE YEAR AWARD. TALK ABOUT A PRAGMATIST. I FIGURED THAT WHATEVER CHURCH OFFICIAL CREATED THAT SIGN TOOK ONE LOOK AT 42ND STREET AND REALIZED THAT EVEN THE OTHER-WORLDLY SALVATION OF THE CHRIST THEY PREACHED WOULD HAVE LITTLE MEANING TO PEOPLE ALREADY LIVING IN HELL. JESUS KNOWS – IN OTHER WORDS “LET’S NOT EVEN TALK ABOUT SAVING ANYBODY FROM THIS PRESENT HELL, BECAUSE WE CAN’T IMAGINE HOW THAT COULD BE DONE. ALL WE CAN HONESTLY SAY IS THAT JESUS MUST KNOW AND SIMPLY WEEPS WITH YOU.” I THOUGHT THAT WAS PRETTY ASTUTE – AND SHOWED A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF HUMILITY ON THE PART OF THE CHURCH TO REALIZE THAT EVEN JESUS HAD HIS LIMITATIONS. THIS, UNFORTUNATELY, IS NOT MY ONLY EXPERIENCE WITH HELLISH PLACES. BUT I DO ADMIT THAT I HAVE LED A VERY PRIVILEGED LIFE THAT HAS PROTECTED ME FROM SO MUCH OF THE MISERY THAT OTHERS ENDURE ON A DAILY BASIS. MY CHILDREN CALL THAT BEING IN THE “LUCKY SPERM CLUB” – AND I DON’T DISAGREE. BUT I HAVE CERTAINLY SEEN THE MISERY THAT PEOPLE HAVE PUT THEMSELVES IN BECAUSE OF THEIR DRUG OR ALCOHOL ABUSE. OR THE PAIN AND SUFFERING WOMEN LIVE WITH WHEN THEY WON’T LEAVE

THEIR ABUSIVE HUSBANDS OR BOYFRIENDS. I HAVE SEEN WHAT POVERTY AND IGNORANCE CAN DO TO PEOPLE'S LIVES AND HOW NEGLECTED AND MISTREATED CHILDREN CAN BE. I HEAR STORIES SOMETIMES ON THE PHONE THAT SOUND AS IF THEY ARE COMING UP STRAIGHT FROM HELL, SO HORRIBLE AND IMPOSSIBLE ARE THE CIRCUMSTANCES THEY DESCRIBE TO ME. AND WHENEVER I VISIT THESE HELLISH PLACES, I FIND MYSELF THINKING ABOUT THE POSSIBLE MEANINGS OF THE WORD "SALVATION." THOSE OF US RAISED IN TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN CHURCHES ARE ALL FAMILIAR WITH THE WORD SALVATION. WE WERE TAUGHT THAT HELL COMES AFTER DEATH AND THAT SALVATION HAS TO DO WITH JESUS SAVING PEOPLE FOR THE NEXT LIFE – NOT THIS LIFE. THE NEW EXPRESSION IN CATHOLIC CHURCHES NOW IS THAT WHEN ONE DIES – THEY GO "HOME TO THE KINGDOM." THERE IS LESS EMPHASIS ON THE "FIRES OF HELL" WHICH USED TO BE THE CORNERSTONE OF THEIR FUNERAL MASSES. IN OTHER WORDS – "SAVE THIS SOUL FROM THE FIRES OF HELL" HAS NOW BEEN REPLACED WITH "GOING HOME TO THE KINGDOM." APPARENTLY IT IS MORE ACCEPTABLE TO ASSUME THAT THE DECEASED IS "SAVED" – AS OPPOSED TO NOT BEING SAVED, WHICH SEEMED MORE THE NORM WHEN I WAS A YOUNGER PERSON. TRADITIONAL CONCEPTS OF SALVATION WERE NOT WHAT UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM WAS ALL ABOUT. WAY BACK IN 1928, WILLIAM ELLERY CHANNING, THE SO-CALLED FATHER OF NORTH AMERICAN UNITARIANISM, WROTE THE FOLLOWING: "HUMAN IGNORANCE IS SEEN IN THE LOW IDEAS ATTACHED TO THE WORD SALVATION. PEOPLE THINK THAT SALVATION IS

SOMETHING WHICH ANOTHER MAY ACHIEVE FOR THEM. THE WORD HELL HAS DONE UNSPEAKABLE INJURY. IT HAS POSSESSED THE DISEASED HUMAN IMAGINATION WITH THOUGHTS OF TORTURE, AND TURNED THEIR THOUGHTS TO JESUS AS SOMEONE OUTSIDE THEM WHO WILL DELIVER THEM. BUT THE SALVATION WHICH HUMANITY NEEDS IS NOT FROM OUTSIDE THINGS, BUT IS FROM THE EVIL WITHIN THE MIND, WHICH HARDENS ITSELF AGAINST LOVE, WHICH MAKES GAIN ITS GOD, WHICH SHUTS ITSELF UP IN A DUNGEON OF SELF-INTEREST, WHICH CONSENTS TO BE A SLAVE, AND WHICH ALLOWS ITSELF TO BE FORMED BY CUSTOM, OPINION AND CHANGING EVENTS. TO SAVE, IN THE HIGHEST SENSE OF THAT WORD, IS TO HEAL THE DISEASED MIND AND RESTORE IT TO FREEDOM OF THOUGHT, CONSCIENCE AND LOVE.” YOU SEE, OUR ANCESTORS ALWAYS KNEW THAT HELL WAS A FIGURE OF SPEECH AND THAT WE DID NOT NEED TO BE SAVED FROM A FIGURE OF SPEECH. FOR OUR ANCESTORS, JESUS’ DEATH WAS NO DIFFERENT THAN OUR OWN, HE WAS JUST A HUMAN BEING. HIS DEATH SAVED NOTHING. IT STRIKES ME AS SAD THAT SO MANY PEOPLE THINK HELL HAPPENS AFTER WE DIE – AND NOT BEFORE. IF THE REALITY OF THE HOLOCAUST IN AND OF ITSELF DOES NOT CONVINCING EVERYONE THAT HELL IS ON THIS SIDE OF THE MYSTERY OF DEATH – THEN I FOR ONE CANNOT COME UP WITH ANY BETTER EVIDENCE. I FIRMLY BELIEVE THAT HEAVEN AND HELL EXIST RIGHT HERE, RIGHT NOW, IN THIS LIFE. AND TO SAVE OR BE SAVED IS SIMPLY TO BLESS LIFE – NOT DEATH. TO SAVE SOMEONE OR TO SAVE OURSELVES IS TO ENHANCE THE POSSIBILITY OF LIFE – TO MAKE LIFE EASIER – SAFER. THE SALVATION THAT

HUMANITY NEEDS IS NOT FROM OUTSIDE THINGS, BUT IS FROM THE EVIL WITHIN THE MIND, WHICH HARDENS AGAINST LOVE AND SHUTS ITSELF UP – AS CHANNING WROTE: “IN A DUNGEON OF SELF INTEREST.” BUT WE NEED TO ADDRESS THE REAL HELLS THAT EXIST – NOT JUST THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ONES. HELPING TO “SAVE” ANOTHER IS NOT ABOUT PREACHING LITTLE HOMILIES ON LOVE TO PEOPLE WHOSE LIVES ARE OUT OF CONTROL AND HELLISH. HANDING A DRUG ADDICT OR AN ABUSED WOMAN A SELF-HELP BOOK THAT LISTS TEN WAYS TO BOLSTER YOUR SELF-ESTEEM – IS NOT SAVING ANYBODY FROM ANYTHING. IT’S ACTUALLY ARROGANT – IT’S THE ACT OF SOMEONE WHO TRULY HAS NO EMPATHY FOR PEOPLE SUFFERING IN THEIR OWN PRIVATE HELL – WHETHER IT WAS OF THEIR OWN MAKING OR THE RESULT OF FATE. BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE EVERY DAY AND THEY FIND THEMSELVES IN SOME HELLISH SITUATION. LOVING AND CARING PEOPLE LOOK FOR WAYS TO HELP THAT ARE REALISTIC AND USEFUL. UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISTS LOOK FOR LOVING AND CARING WAYS TO HELP THAT ARE REALISTIC AND USEFUL. THERE ARE OPPORTUNITIES THAT PRESENT DAILY TO EACH AND EVERY ONE OF US TO BE A SAVIOR. THERE IS NO ARROGANCE IN CHOOSING TO CALL ONESELF A SAVIOR. THINK OF IT THIS WAY – DON’T SAVIORS “SAVE THE DAY.” REMEMBER WHEN YOU MADE A DONATION TO AN ORGANIZATION THAT YOU KNEW WOULD HELP SOMEONE’S LIFE – WASN’T THAT “SAVING THE DAY.” OR THE TIME YOU STOPPED AND HELPED SOMEONE WITH A FLAT TIRE – DID YOU NOT “SAVE THE DAY?” OR WORKED AT A HOMELESS SHELTER, FIXED A MEAL FOR A SICK

FRIEND, DROVE A FRIEND TO AN AA MEETING. WERE THOSE NOT ACTS OF “SAVING THE DAY” – AND WHO SAVES THE DAY BUT A SAVIOR. CAN WE SAVE THE ENTIRE WORLD FROM ALL OF ITS PAIN AND SUFFERING. PROBABLY NOT. BUT WE CAN DO A LOT TO ENHANCE OUR CORNER OF IT. WE ARE RELIGIOUS PEOPLE, WE UU’S. AND AS RELIGIOUS PEOPLE OF GOOD WILL WE HAVE BEEN CALLED TO DIMINISH HELL HERE ON EARTH AND LET THE HEAVENLY ASPECTS OF THIS LIFE FLOURISH. SO BE IT.

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