

Ruined for Life

Alexandra McGee

Alexandra McGee, a second-year M.Div. student, was awarded the first Starr King School Unitarian Universalist Current Issues Sermon Award for "Ruined for Life," which she first delivered Feb. 11, 2007 to the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Petaluma. Open to SKSM students, the contest challenged them to respond with vision and passion, whether agreeing or disagreeing, to Davidson Loehr's essay, "Why 'Unitarian Universalism' Is Dying," originally published in the spring 2005 issue of the "Journal of Liberal Religion." In that essay Loehr wrote, "[Unitarian Universalism] has no ontology, no distinctive understanding of the human condition, its problems or the solution; in a phrase, there [is] no religious 'salvation story.'" McGee's award, established through the generosity of Heather Hyde and Bruce Stowell, came with \$5,000, which McGee plans to use for her education. Read more about McGee in the April 2007 issue of the e-Journal, available at this website.

I once joined a program which promised to ruin me for life.

When I was 21 and graduating from college, I wanted to make a difference for people who didn't have very much. This led me to the Jesuit Volunteer Corps. I was assigned to work at a homeless shelter in Des Moines, Iowa, and I shared a house with four other volunteers in an inner city neighborhood. We were paid a simple stipend. Now, some people think that Des Moines doesn't have an inner city. But, we were awakened in the night by the sound of gunshots when drug deals went bad. It was a chilling experience and I wish no one had to endure that. One of my housemates worked with farmers and saw the daily reality of losing livelihoods to multi-national agricultural corporations. I wish no one had to endure that, either. To keep from being overcome with despair, we reflected on social justice, spirituality, community and simplicity during the retreats given by

the Jesuit Volunteer staff. They began the year with a retreat called “Orientation” and ended with a retreat called ... “Dis-orientation.” I tell you all this because the motto of the program was ... “to be Ruined for Life.” I wonder how my parents felt about sending me off for a program which promised to ruin me for life.

The Jesuits wanted to ruin any of our assumptions that enough money could make a good life; to ruin our notions that anyone who worked hard enough would have housing and food and healthcare; and to ruin any notions that racism was a thing of the past. They wanted us to be ruined in the same way that Gandhi was ruined from wearing British clothes and living a middle-class Indian life as a lawyer. The same way that Adin Ballou, Universalist minister in the 1800’s, gave up private income for communal life in the Hopedale community. The same way that the late Senator Paul Wellstone gave up the comfort of a tenured job for a life of public service by running for office when his friends said he had no chance as an unknown, Jewish, labor union supporter in Minnesota.

Perhaps you have had times in your life where your assumptions were shattered. Where you realized that society just wasn’t working the way you thought. That the church wasn’t what you had hoped. That your intimate relationships weren’t what you had counted on. Sometimes we come up against the hard knowledge that our privilege is dwindling, or against the unnerving realization that our privilege is increasing. As we age, as society changes, as we move from place to place, this complex life unfolds our layers of awareness. The question is, how do we live with that new awareness in a way that continues to grow our soul and grow the souls of others around us -- so that we open to Life with a capital L?

Today, I would like to ask whether Unitarian Universalism is ready to be ruined for Life. What is it willing to give up in order to serve deeply? What faith and commitment will help it hold course?

Davidson Loehr, minister of First UU Church of Austin, Texas, has said that Unitarian Universalism is dying because it has no salvation story. After I read his article that was in the Journal of Liberal Religion last year, I have been testing his theory. I look around at my UU seminary. I listen as I sit in the pew on Sunday mornings. I read the UU World magazine. Do we have a salvation story?

What is a salvation story, anyway? Loehr says it is: that thing which answers our despair; that thing which fills our deep yearning; that thing which calls us to serve the world.

I believe that if we live without a salvation story, we risk having no footing when we face crisis. We risk living shallow lives. We risk being self-serving while we fool ourselves --- and each other --- into thinking that we are serving the world.

Some religious groups offer their members a salvation story. I don't think Unitarian Universalism does. But it does make space for each person to each know one's own salvation story and live by it. Some people get that salvation story from Christianity, some from Buddhism, some from the Seven Principles, some from other sources. Some never find a salvation story. I think that's a problem.

Each of us needs to know the source of our faith and plumb its depths. We need personal spiritual disciplines that fasten us to the Divine. A prayer life. A meditation practice. I'm not talking about a relaxation session, or a feel-good boost. I'm talking about a daily, honest, examination of our actions and intentions. Sitting still and staying for the whole show of our confusion and sanity. I'm talking about keeping the phone line to God open -- well, these days, I should say, the wireless internet connection to God. If we don't, then we are too susceptible to worshipping our ideas. The UUA acknowledges that we draw from many sources. Whichever you choose: read its poetry, let it guide your ethics, know your place in its unfolding history.

All of that prayer and meditation may sound pretty solitary. Here is where community comes in.

Consider the example of the Buddhist Triple Gem: Buddha, Dharma, Sangha: the teacher, the teaching, and each other. That means that community is one-third of the deal. The sangha. That's the other monks. The group that is committed to the spiritual path. That means when you join the Wednesday evening meditation group at the UU Fellowship, that you really do keep coming, not just for yourself, but to help others. That means we may need to ask each other, "How was your prayer life this week?" That means that when our spouses, partners and housemates tell us that they want to start a daily prayer practice, that we say, "Great. Which space shall we set aside?"

Community is not only supportive for the spiritual journey. It is also supportive during the hard knocks of life. I have seen UU congregations provide great logistical and social support to people who were ill and dying. I have heard many people say that the congregation helped them get through a troubled transition by bringing food, cards, and understanding.

Okay, so UUism can be a supportive community for us to pursue our spiritual path and a logistical help during hard times. But what in our UU experience gets us through despair? What allows us to cross the river of suffering, instead of sinking? What allows us to live with the broken and hurting parts of ourselves? And yes, the hurtful parts of ourselves? It is true that we as humans do hurt each other. What balm will help us? What tenderness will help us to look honestly at our shortcomings -- at the damage we do?

I was raised in the Presbyterian Church, and each Sunday morning, during the Order of Service, the Confession of Sins was right there near the beginning, with a silent time to think back over the week

about what we did and what we failed to do. I miss that. I agree with Davidson Loehr that a religion must address the fact that we humans have a capacity for evil.

I think UUism often overlooks and sidesteps facing this hard truth of our own capacity for evil. But, I have seen a few ways that we do face it.

I have seen UU groups do this by making space for telling. I have heard, during Joys and Concerns, a woman share about her son going to prison for being an accomplice to rape. I have read articles in the UU World about our group complicity in social evils such as the slave conditions under which coffee and chocolate are grown. I myself have spoken about my great-grandfather's slave plantation, and I was able to do this because I found the safe space in a class at Starr King School for the Ministry.

In addition to making these safe spaces for speaking, UUism helps heal our brokenness by making safe space for telling things that are not welcome elsewhere, perhaps because other people consider them evil. A gay couple's court battle for custody of their child. A woman's regret about her abortion. A Sikh man's spiritual journey. I am grateful that UUism can be a haven for people who have to make themselves invisible elsewhere. And yet, I think we can go further than we do now, and welcome more voices. To be a place where military families welcome home their children. To be a place where people who think abortion is wrong can talk about it. To be a place that people who voted for Bush are not closeted. To talk about the legal and illegal drugs wreaking havoc in our homes and businesses. So that silence does not create more brokenness.

There is an animated movie called "Brother Bear" about an Inuit boy named Kenai. In the beginning, he is given a totem to live by and told that he can be welcomed to manhood once he learns to live by it. But, Kenai's brother is killed by a bear. So Kenai kills the bear in revenge. The Great Spirits decide to teach him a lesson: they turn him into a bear. He learns to eat berries, learns to avoid traps, and realizes that other bears are afraid of humans. He gets to walk in someone else's paws for a while. He befriends a young bear named Koda. They journey together to find the gathering of bears at the annual salmon run at the river by the mountain. They cross glaciers, sleep on outcroppings, talk to moose, and even ride on mammoths. Well, it turns out that Koda is an orphan. And guess who killed his mother? Kenai. When he realizes this truth, he is so horrified that he runs away from Koda. Any of you that have ever realized that you have hurt someone deeply can relate to how he felt. But, he summons the strength to tell Koda. My question for each of us is: where do we get the strength to tell such things? How do we learn to be grounded enough to speak the painful truth? When we can name that Source, then I think we are naming our salvation story. And we get in touch with that by knowing a religious tradition and practicing it in community.

At the end of the story of Koda and Kenai, the Great Spirits give Kenai a choice: whether to return to human form or remain a bear. Hmmm. Imagine. After you have walked in someone else's shoes -- or paws -- for a while, do you want to climb back into yours? Once you have bonded with new friends, how do you combine that life with your old one? Kenai looks at young Koda and says, "He needs me." Kenai chooses to remain a bear. Would you say that he ruined his life? I would say he allowed himself to be changed for right relationship. The human tribe gives him a coming-of-age ceremony in which bears and humans are circled together.

Davidson Loehr is concerned that the current UU salvation story is based on cultural liberalism's habit of feeling good about helping victims. He is right to warn against such narrow vision. We make a mistake when we see the world divided into haves and have nots, into the people who oppress and the people who are oppressed, into the helpers and the victims, the killers and the orphans, the humans and the bears. But I believe that we are up to the complex task of speaking the truth about what we see from our point in the journey right now --- and the more complex task of listening.

At Starr King School this spring, we are having a course which examines the Unitarian Universalist Association's attempt since 1997 to be on a "Journey Toward Wholeness," of being authentically anti-racist and anti-oppressive. From what I hear, this has not been easy. From what I see, it is easier to look the other way. And yet, this is the type of moment when we are called to faith in something greater than ourselves, called to commitment to community. This is the type of moment when we are called to listen, to feel the regret, the betrayal, and the acceptance of what cannot be undone. But, perhaps, then, we can be like Kenai, and be open when the Great Spirits give us a choice. We can allow ourselves to be changed for right relationship. If we do not listen to a Higher Power as well as listening to each other, then we will be just as irrelevant as Davidson Loehr claims we are.

In summary, let us not blend the world's religions, but practice a spiritual discipline deeply and share it. Let us not try to simply serve victims, but steward our power to serve a thriving world. Let us not turn away from evil, but practice facing it.

I asked earlier whether Unitarian Universalism is ready to be ruined for life. What are we willing to give up in order to serve deeply? We can give up comfort and attachment to the way things are. What faith and commitment will help us hold course? Faith in something greater than ourselves and commitment to community. If Unitarian Universalism is dying, perhaps what it needs is the faith and commitment to be ruined for life. Perhaps that is what will save it.

Amen.

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