



Salvation and the E-mail Mission

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Before the days of the various e-mail lists sponsored by the Unitarian Universalist Association, I subscribed to the “Unitarian Universalist” forum offered by the commercial e-mail service that I once used. Since the technology was still relatively new, the list was dominated by an assortment of computer geeks and early adopters whose real religion was probably influenced more by binary logic than the history and traditions of our liberal faith. I often found myself embarrassed by the messages I read from this forum, but never more so than when I saw the responses to a message asking what Unitarian Universalism was all about, which had been posted by someone who came across a reference to us in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

I sent a private e-mail to this inquirer – something I might not do today for fear of being thought a stalker – explaining to her that I thought she had been misinformed by the responses to her question. I indicated that I was a member of the staff of the Unitarian Universalist Association and offered to send her literature if she would tell me her address. After three weeks, I had given up hope that I would hear from her when a message appeared in my inbox. Yes, she would like to receive the literature I offered and she included her address, which was a post office box in a small town in Georgia. In the last line she wrote, “Please send the pamphlets in a plain, unmarked envelope.”

It seemed a strange request but I wasn’t inclined to ask questions. I was guest preaching in North Dakota the following Sunday, so I decided to mail the envelope from there, rather than from my home in Canada, since privacy seemed to be a concern. After all, who would find anything suspicious about a postmark from North Dakota? I felt like I was sending contraband through the mail!

Several more weeks passed before I received a message thanking me for the literature I had sent. Over the next few months, my correspondent revealed her story. She was a high school senior in rural Georgia who had been having doubts about her faith, something that was next to impossible to talk about in a small town where the Southern Baptist church was the most liberal one in the vicinity! Sadly, she had become convinced that there was something wrong with *her* and her thoughts had even turned to suicide. When her history teacher gave her an assignment on the United Nations – specifically, to write about its “shortcomings” – she stumbled upon an entry about

Unitarian Universalism on her way to the U.N. Maybe her thoughts weren't crazy after all!

When she confided to her older cousin, who lived in a nearby city and used a computer, they decided to check out Unitarian Universalism online. That's how she came to post her question ... and also why there was always a three or four week gap between the messages I received from her. She went on to college and then graduate school, the first member of her family to do so, and I continued to hear from her from time to time. Then the messages stopped, but not before she had told me that Unitarian Universalism had saved her life, both figuratively and literally! More than ever before or since, I realized then just how much our liberal faith can make a positive difference in people's lives.

Since then, whenever I've been asked to talk about why the growth and extension of Unitarian Universalism is so important, I almost inevitably tell the story of this young woman from Georgia. Many times, people have come up to me afterward and exclaimed, "that's my story" or "I'm like that girl from Georgia!" So I was quite unprepared when, following an event where I had related this story, more than a decade after mailing an unmarked package from North Dakota, a woman approached me, her daughter in tow. She had waited for the cluster of people surrounding me to depart and, with tears streaming down her cheeks, said "I'm your correspondent from Georgia." It took a moment for me to realize that she wasn't speaking figuratively. She *was* that high school senior from so many years before, now a bright and beautiful woman with a family of her own and a church that is at the center of her life.

Whenever I wonder whether all our efforts to create liberal religious communities really matter, I think of this young woman who entered my life quite accidentally and I find myself compelled to acknowledge that our ministry of kindness and hope really does offer salvation to people in need of it. We may avoid such words all we like but it doesn't change the fact of the matter: that Unitarian Universalism offers salvation to longing, sometimes broken spirits who stumble along in this fragmented world of ours. It saved a young woman in Georgia. It's saved me. And I'm willing to bet that it's saved you, too!

In our electronic age, it turns out that things aren't so different from the days of the Post Office Mission, when nineteenth-century Unitarians – women mostly – spread the liberal gospel through the mail. They witnessed to our liberating faith one person at a time, spreading words of comfort and hope to isolated inquirers and faithful alike, across the far reaches of North America. We redeem this world one person at a time and we never know when a letter or an e-mail, a telephone chat or a casual conversation with a stranger is going to make all the difference in the world to someone in need.