

Reply to Reader's Responses to "Salvation By Character" Davidson Loehr

I have tried to pick a few that might offer some interesting directions.

Maryell Cleary associates "character" with radical individualism, and so sees a strong emphasis on character as a problem, rather than a solution, in our narcissistic age. I think this is a matter of definitions. My notion of character comes from the *Paideia* culture of ancient Greece. And for the Greeks (as for me), a "radical individual" isn't a very interesting or complete human. In fact, the Greeks had a word for our "radical individual" who feels no need for an organic and responsible connection to society, history or the future. Their word for this kind of person was "idiot" (still the root of words like "idiosyncrasy" and "idiopathic"). For the Greeks, we are profoundly social animals, and we aren't completed as humans until we have established organic and responsible connections with others through our allegiances and behaviors. I think the Greeks were right here. So I want to endorse Maryell's concern that we need to aspire to becoming more than just "idiots," but to suggest that the ancient model of "character" did it pretty well.

I think this fuller understanding of "character" also dissolves Dwight Brown's concern about whether character can "escape the limitations of humanism." *Humanitas* was the word Cicero coined to translate *paideia* into Latin. *Paideia* referred to the highest ideals of Greek culture. *Humanitas* referred to the essence of what it meant to become most fully human. Understood in these historically accurate ways, it's hard to imagine "limitations." Granted, the word "humanism" has been used, in many of our churches, in the degraded sense of a narrow rationalism that is just Christian fundamentalism's dark twin. But if we return to the scope that Cicero had in mind when he coined the word, the current limitations of the word dissolve.

Amy Stockwell wants immanence, and ties it to the concept of "God." We need to keep reminding ourselves that "God" isn't the name of a critter or even a set of dynamics (whether natural or psychological). It's a way of talking, not the name of something. It's a symbol which long habit has suggested is a useful way of alluding to our most enduring yearnings. Religion isn't about gods, but about those yearnings. There are many other ways of talking about them, and the more ways we have of expressing these things the better we understand them. So I'd suggest backing off from the symbol "God" and forcing ourselves to ask just what it is we're trying to say.

I think it's helpful to compare Western with Eastern religious stories. (Western/Eastern is a gross oversimplification, but one that seems partly useful here.) I think the "salvation" (or wholeness) possibilities of a religion are largely contained within its creation story. In the Bible, for instance, God was divine and we were dirt -- not made of the same stuff. The endgame of this play, then, can

only be a kind of relationship to this God, usually mediated by beliefs, rituals, behaviors or priests. In Eastern theisms (including the Greek myths), on the other hand, we were born of the gods rather than manufactured by them. Heaven and earth mate, everything is born of that. So now the endgame (as it is in most Eastern theisms) is not to find a relationship with the sacred, but to recognize our identity with it. The "advanced" Hindu teaching "That art Thou" is the shortest expression of this. I think this framework acknowledges Amy's need for a kind of immanent religion while expanding it to a framework that can encompass the vast majority of the world's theistic language-games.

I'd turn Joel Miller's rhetorical question around. He wonders if we can stop apologizing for "expressing this Living Tradition in language that even children can readily understand." I'd say that if only we would work to express it that way, the tradition might have a chance of coming alive.

Dr. Buch's remarks tie to some of Walter Herz's, and open another important area that deserves an essay rather than a quick paragraph. I believe it is terribly important to understand how and why the politics of cultural liberalism (and thereby UUism) are, as Buch says, coming from "an old-fashioned Marxism-Leninism." Very briefly, we have chosen a few groups ("our kind" of blacks, e.g.) as our "token proletariat" groups. Our salvation, in good Marxist style, comes from speaking on behalf of these few token proletariats. But it's a devil's bargain. We have said, to blacks and others, "Let us define you by your differences from us. Then we'll give you great attention within our tiny group. In return, you must feel grateful, so we can feel virtuous." But as in most Marxist salvation schemes, the proletariat wouldn't be useful to us if they actually succeeded. So it's a perpetual, and self-perpetuating, victim culture.

When Walter Herz says that the "Fulfilling the Promise" initiative became "the same political agenda disguised as theology," he is alluding to the same Marxist soteriology. Some have begun naming the naked faux-emperor by identifying the UUA's "anti-racism" programs as deeply racist. They are racist because they still define people by their race (rather than, say, by "the content of their character"). But cultural liberalism is handcuffed to this kind of racism, because being able to speak for a grateful proletariat defined by its race is the necessary center of cultural liberalism's (and the UUA's) salvation scheme. I think it's evil, but that's another essay.

Herz also mentions Channing, and the reference can't be allowed to stand without reminding ourselves that Channing, Parker and Emerson et al would have hated UUism. (A personal confession: I'm not, and have never been, a Unitarian Universalist. I'm a religious liberal who preaches within this association because it still offers the greatest freedom for exploring what I believe to be honest and relevant religion. As an association, it's the best of a bad lot. As a religion, "UUism" is, in my opinion, just embarrassing.)

Finally, Kelly Dupin asks "How then shall we live?" -- which Susan Shaw answers: "I am seeking the engaged interest of others as we learn how to affirm and celebrate our ability to fulfill our aspirations to be the human beings we know we can be: loving, honest, authentic, morally courageous, responsible, and known for integrity." There it is: character, health and accountability to the highest and most enduring ideals, expressed in ordinary language even a child could understand.