

JLR Readers Respond to "Salvation by Character" by Davidson Loehr

We received a large number of responses to "Salvation by Character" (Vol. 1, No. 2) and have published some of them here. [Click here for Dr. Loehr's reply.](#)

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Bravo again D. Loehr -

I have always enjoyed individuals who say "Hey! that emperor has no clothes." As a religious educator who went to seminary in another religious tradition, I have found adapting the UU's RE program dismaying at times - What do you teach when God is not the center of your religion? Mr. Loehr has put into words my vague misgivings and crystalized my unease. Now all that remains is "How, then, shall we live?"

Kelly Depin
DRE at Murray Church in Attleboro MA

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I just want to say thank you for publishing such a thoughtful (and full of thoughts) article. This has articulated so much of what I've been intentionally becoming as a UU (and more so as a human being) and have, at times, found so difficult to describe to others. You've given me a language for the why I do what I do.

Now, when I'm asked why I celebrate with theists when I am an atheist, I can more clearly articulate the need for building bridges of understanding between all of the limbs on the body of humanity.

And it was very good to have my confusion over the propensity for describing "God" in far more ways than the word can clearly communicate explained. I've long preferred to leave deities, such as God, defined as beings, rather than as varying concepts. It has seemed to me to be more respectful to those who believe in deities and is also simpler when communicating in our common language. I may struggle for words to describe how I feel connected to all matter and space in the universe, but describing that as "God" does a disservice to my beliefs and to the beliefs of those for whom God is much more than a concept.

I also have a better understanding of what I seek in the religious home of Unitarian Universalists. I don't seek the hushed silence of no theological talk, as is all too common out of fear of offending or causing divisions. And I don't seek to remain in an insular group of like-minded people where I am never challenged to extend my understanding and love toward those who do not see the world through my eyes. Rather, 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.

Peace,
Susan M. Shaw
First UU Syracuse
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While I applaud much of what Loehr writes, I am not sure that "character" development can escape the limitations of other kinds of humanism, which I have come to understand as flawed by an insufficient awe in the face of a creative process in the universe that simply is still largely beyond our comprehension. Our "salvation" comes not by finding new ways to feel good about our progress, but rather by learning the deeper (and harder) lessons the creative process can teach us, about who we are, who we yet can be. We are well advanced as a species on the path of self destruction, and as other articles in this issue of the Journal point out, we need the discipline which can only come from facing all of the facts of our existence - facts which have nothing to do with character but everything to do with survival.

Dwight Brown - Retired!!

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Davidson Loehr's paper in the current issue of your journal is the finest exposition of liberal theology I've ever read. If it weren't politically incorrect to make something mandatory UU reading, that's exactly what I would do. I spent a great many months putting together my book "Redeeming Time" because I had a vision of liberal religion that was similar in many respects to Loehr's. I articulated my vision so imperfectly that it was little noticed. On the other hand, Loehr expressed his vision so clearly and powerfully that it commands notice--and action.

I had originally hoped that the UUA's Fulfilling the Promise initiative might be a concrete step in fostering a liberal religious theology such as Loehr outlines. Sadly, it has turned into just another means of promoting the same political agenda disguised as theology to which Loehr alluded so aptly.

Thank you for publishing a paper that I suspect will one day be regarded as holy writ along with those Channing and a few others. It should be!!

Walter Herz
First Unitarian Church of Cincinnati

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To: Davidson Loehr, author of "Salvation by Character"

Thank you for your excellent paper. I agreed with it almost entirely, but I have to take issue with your treatment of Judaism. You write:

"...Those myths and reflections contain wisdom that he and others don't want to lose (as well as containing many useless and some harmful teachings)."

More harm has been done to the world in the name of Christianity than all other religions put together! How can you denigrate Judaism this way? In your final conclusions, you write:

"...The search for a religious center doesn't have to start from scratch. Even a cursory study of the world's great traditions shows us that religion does have an enduring and empirical subject matter."

Yet you neglect to include any wisdom associated with Judaism. Are you saying that there is nothing to be learned from what is unquestionably one of the world's great traditions?

I believe this lack of appreciation for and downright hostility towards Judaism mars the otherwise important point of view which you have expressed. I have been a UU for about 15 years now, and am from a Jewish background. I have been struggling with just the issues which you present in your paper. Please don't make the major mistake of alienating those UU's from Jewish backgrounds in your future writings.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Marcus Wolfe

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I read the article with interest, and I agree with David's analysis. I do not agree that character is the sole answer. Attending and preaching in various UU churches, I have found by and large people of excellent character, people putting much time and effort into church programs. Character is a matter of individuals; my concern is that UUs of undoubted probity and good will outside of their churches are all too prone to squabble and nitpick inside their churches. I don't know why this is going on, but I do have one idea.

That is that people are looking for connectedness, some way to feel a part of a larger something. We know that in wartime differences tend to be forgotten or

overlooked, and people pull together in a common cause. It's hard to develop that same sense of oneness when there's no antagonist to fight. Can we make a case for a connectedness of the emotions - to our communities and their needs, to the earth as our home, to the universe as our birthplace and deathplace ultimately? UUs are already highly individualistic; this call for character as the center only reinforces that. I would call for connectedness, on a large scale, as more than a balance.

Maryell Cleary, retired UU minister and 50-year graduate of Meadville this year

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Davidson Loehr has provided a very good summation of the disappointment that my wife and I have experienced, having escaped a local Unitarian Church that completely interpreted Unitarianism as scientism (ie. an out-dated rationalism) and politics as a religion (and to make it worse, a politics stemming from an old-fashioned Marxism-Leninism), and facing little support from the remaining churches within the national association, many suffering from one form or another of theological double-talk, and certainly more concern to worship history than making it.

As Davidson says, there are well-intended people, good people, even a few individuals who have insight on these problems that besiege us, but there is no common language, and no clear unifying vision. Our religious pluralism is both our blessing and our curse. Unfortunately it is the worse type of pluralism that tolerates dysfunctional organisational behaviour. The result is that there is a lack of strategic thinking, a lack of ambition, drive, and vision, and a lack of good planning and management. There is little concern, as I have raised it, for being left out of the 'main game'; irrelevant to the current intellectual climate, irrelevant to main players in religion and public life.

The excuse is so often the organisation size in this region. It is a poor excuse because it merely is a cover for the satisfaction to be a loose assortment of inward looking small groups with no united purpose beyond their own individual and separate existence. I am not satisfied with that sort of organisational existence. I did not abandon orthodoxy only to adopt a cultish or sectarian status. Unitarianism once was considered at the cutting-edge of liberal/progressive/radical theology. It has long lost that position. Davidson Loehr article is a very good way for our national association to start to look at regaining a cutting-edge.

Neville Buch
Melbourne, Australia

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I approached Davidson Loehr's article with something less than enthusiasm -- I cannot help my suspicions that laments over our lack of a so-called theological center are nostalgia for other faiths. Instead, I find myself delighted by Loehr's dismissal of all the "ism's" we suffer and his call for everyday language in worship.

Does this mean, finally, that we can stop apologizing for expressing this Living Tradition in language that even children can readily understand? I think a good test of religious integrity is an explanation of Unitarian Universalism that our young children can understand which is at the same time worthy of a lifetime of academic study.

Joel Miller
Littleton, Colorado