

Saved, by Rev. Tandi Rogers

I am paid to evangelize, to grow current congregations, and plant new congregations. I've been lurking on internet sites of fundamentalist evangelists, because, quite frankly, they have systems for planting new congregations. I mean, *they've got systems!* They have trainings and boot camps and coaches and conferences just for planting. I have a hot case of holy envy.

So, I thought about attending such a conference, as an add-on activity in a city where I was already working on behalf of our Association. Well, attending it didn't work out, but on the plane back home, guess who my seatmates were? That's right, two fundamentalist, evangelical men who had been to the church planting conference.

I strained my ears to hear what they were saying. The older man seemed to be in charge, and the younger one deferred to him. The elder quoted scripture and talked a lot about saving people. Their whole mission is converting people to Christianity so they may be saved and get into heaven.

I wanted to jump in, interrupt with all of the questions I had for them.

For a split second a voice in my head warned me: *Stop...foreign land...don't go there...possibilities for hostility...what are you going to do once they find out you're Unitarian Universalist?* But the words burst out of my mouth: "I couldn't help but overhearing. Do you plant congregations? Did you just go to the church planting conference? I wanted to go so badly, but had other work to do. I plant congregations for my denomination. I'd love to hear more about what you learned."

The younger man asked, "Which denomination are you?" I replied: "Unitarian Universalist." The younger man looked blank. The older man grinned like he had something on me. My heart fluttered a bit.

"Jason, you've never heard of Unitarian Universalists? They're the ones with all the ethics and none of the doctrine. They do good without believing in hell."

My breathing stopped. Jason looked at me as if he'd just discovered I was a unicorn.

"You don't believe in hell?!" The older man smiled to himself as he put his headphones over his ears and settled in. I shook my head, and, before I could get a word out, the young man asked if I believed in Jesus.

"Jesus the Christ or Jesus the radical, fierce, loving rabbi? I love Jesus the Rabbi and consider him one of my greatest teachers. But I don't have any belief of use for the Christ part. No offense. I'm glad it works for you, but I just want everyone to find his or her or zer own way that amplifies love and brings out his, her or zer authentic self."

He still looked at me like I was a unicorn. “But how do you reconcile John 14:6?” he asked. “*Jesus said to him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man comes to the Father but by me.*”

I lit up. I know this chapter and love it. At the Jesuit seminary I attended, I spent a lot of time meditating on it with my Christian cousins in faith. I said, “I can reconcile it by the four verses prior to that. *In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you.* There are many mansions for so many expressions of the Spirit of Life and Yahweh and Allah and Ultimate Source and Most Awesome Goodness and Fierce Love and Holy Yes!”

We stared into each other’s eyes for a long time. I had a melting experience. I broke the silence by asking him about his conversion story. (Everyone has a story of some epiphany or conversion of some sort. These fascinate me.) Over the course of about an hour Jason told me his tale of parents who weren’t enough, his own drug abuse and domestic violence and giving up, and how someone invited him to church. The church’s very clear doctrine held his despair and gave him direction and hope. It was a moving and beautiful story. We each had tears in our eyes throughout his telling.

He asked if Unitarian Universalist believe in conversion. Some do, I replied. I’m one. I was converted. As a queer, I felt early on that my sexuality was very tied to God, but that’s not what my church of origin was teaching. And the Unitarian Universalists took all of me, and saw me as whole (even in my brokenness), as holy (even at my base self), and precious (even when I felt unlovable). Jason nodded. Teary eyes again. Mutual understanding of the possibilities and blessing of religious communities.

He asked me if I was a minister, and I nodded. I also noticed he was now staring at my *Star* magazine. Yes, an obvious incongruence by most standards. I blushed and explained that I like to keep up on pop culture and that I also pray down the magazine, like I regularly pray down the newspaper and pray down the congregations in our Association.

Jason wanted to pray with me right there on the spot. Yes, at 30,000 feet above the earth, I led a prayer for Miley Cyrus, pop culture character with a tongue that needs an exorcism, holding hands with someone I would usually think hates me and what I stand for. Except for that day.

As we were leaving the plane, I overheard the older man ask Jason if he saved me. “Nah,” Jason said. “She was already saved.”