

Redemption

There is a way to be good again.

— Rahim Shah, in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

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What is Hell? I've heard some say that a day at the DMV is akin to a day in Hell, but considering the calamities affecting people all over our globe, that seems like a very "first world" assertion! Hell, some believe, is an otherworldly place of unending torture and torment. Others assert that it manifests here on Earth when the worldly aims of mercy and compassion give way to the worldly aims of power and oppression.

The key for any definition is that Hell can't be easily overcome. Universalists argue with other Christians, asserting that the Hell of the scriptures is interminable, but not eternal; that it is for purification, not for punishment; and you can read more about that at www.christianuniversalist.org/resources/articles/salvation_conspiracy. However, for our purposes let's agree that Hell is only Hell because it can feel like one is trapped there with no freedom, no mobility, no redemption, and—in the phrase made famous by Jean Paul Sartre's play of the same name—*No Exit*.

In the Christian Evangelical tradition, no person can be redeemed from sin (cannot escape Hell) until he or she accepts Jesus as his or her salvation. Perhaps this is the sort of redemption with which you are most familiar. However, religious and secular moral traditions all over the world champion redemption, or

something very much like redemption, as a means to spiritual growth and freedom from hopelessness.

In this universal sense, what does redemption mean? Redemption is the act of saving or being saved from error. Drug users and dealers achieve redemption by getting clean and then leading others to do the same. Abusers of animals achieve redemption by ceasing to abuse and then housing or caring for brutalized animals.

Children who cheat on tests or steal candy achieve redemption by admitting the wrong then repaying their offenses to those whom they harmed. In all of these examples, redemption begins first by noticing and admitting a wrong, then doing something to rectify the loss.

We can be redeemed in big or small ways. For example, offering an apology to a friend you slighted can be a small act of redemption when your aim is not only to regain face but to reestablish and deepen your relationship. Redemption serves that which is bigger than yourself: redemption

serves you and your friend, but ultimately—and most beautifully—it serves relationship. And each act of redemption chips away at the Hell that can overcome us when we feel that there is no exit from our wrong. By choosing to serve something that is bigger than the self, redemption opens the door.

MINISTER'S MESSAGE

Hell, No Exit, and Redemption



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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Redemption Through Action



Bob Brown,
Board President

My first thoughts of redemption are closely associated with this definition I found in Wikipedia:

Redemption is a religious concept referring to forgiveness or absolution for past sins or errors and protection from damnation and disgrace, eternal or temporary, generally through sacrifice. Redemption is common in many world religions, including Indian religions and all Abrahamic

religions, especially in Christianity and Islam.

Although I know that this type of redemption varies in the various religions of the world, I believe that redemption is a fabrication when the concept is used to manipulate people's pain, fear, and uncertainty for the purpose of control and power over them. In such cases, I do not believe redemption exists.

However, redemption could also be defined as rescuing or delivering, and I do believe this form exists. This redemption comes from the soul, consciousness, God, or whatever you want to call it. This is the capacity to not exploit the pain and fear in others, but to recognize it and have empathy. And more important than recognizing it and having empathy is taking action instead of turning a blind eye. Empathy is our humanity; to act on it is our redemption.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Redemption in a Community of All Ages



Linda Weaver,
Director of Religious
Education

The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Sterling is a community made up of people of all ages who gather to celebrate the joys of life, to be comforted and to comfort others, to be inspired to be our best selves, to build a beloved community in which each person's uniqueness is embraced, and to join together to heal the world. It is a community that is redeeming individuals and the world.

I have been delighted to watch this multigenerational community joyfully live out its values, especially in the last two months. Adults, teens, children, and entire families gathered to crochet, knit, and make quilts for the UUUCS Prayer Shawl Ministry. They enjoyed wonderful food, conversation, and laughter as they created shawls, blankets, and quilts to give to members who especially need comfort. In January, several adults and children showed their concern for equal rights by walking in the Martin Luther King Jr. Day March in Leesburg and carrying signs that the children made in their religious education classes.

Recently people from the UUUCS community and beyond gathered to celebrate the opening of a member's art exhibit in our worship space. They enjoyed a potluck dinner and conversation, and the artist, Denise Dittmar, offered a collage workshop, generously inviting children and adults to use her beautiful materials to create their own works of art. A highlight of the last month was a faith in action worship service on February 9. Teens shared words and music during the service, the congregation listened to stories of love and justice and were then invited to share their own stories, and all ages created valentines to give during the Valentine's Day Witness for Love event to support the end of marriage discrimination.

We are looking forward to many more opportunities for all ages to gather to celebrate, reflect, serve, and heal. This congregation has so much to offer individuals, the local community, and the world, and we are now asking how we can offer our message of redemption, hope, and love to even more people. We are considering adding a second worship service and a second children's religious education session each Sunday so that we can reach more people. This is a wonderful opportunity for us to make sure that there is a place for every person who is looking for what we have to offer. May we welcome all into this beloved community and rejoice in the unique beauty each person brings when fully welcomed.

The Children's Religious Exploration Calendar and a list of programs and events for children and families is at the end of the RE column on the UUUCS website, www.uusterling.org.

A MONTH OF SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

March: Redemption

Members of our congregation are invited to engage the practice of *Lectio Divina*. *Lectio Divina* is Latin for divine reading, spiritual reading, or holy reading, and represents a traditional practice of scriptural reading intended to promote communion with that which is ultimately meaningful. It is a way of praying or meditating with sacred words that calls one to study, ponder, listen and, finally, rejoice within the soul. Unitarian Universalists embrace a wide-reaching definition of scripture, finding words of profound meaning in the works of the world religions, scientists, poets, and the experiences of our own lives.

Find the time in your day to read each piece every day. Read, pause, read again, pause, and then reflect. You may choose to write each quote in a journal and add notes from your reflections. You may choose to read each piece to your family at the dinner table. You may choose to read in the morning or before sleep. You may choose to use the piece to gather your spirit for prayer or meditation.

March 1–6

Any fool can be happy. It takes a human with real heart to make beauty out of the stuff that makes us weep.

—Grandpappy O'Donnell, in *Days of Magic, Nights of War* by Clive Barker

March 7–12

Now there is a final reason I think that Jesus says, "Love your enemies." It is this: that love has within it a redemptive power. And there is a power there that eventually transforms individuals. Just keep being friendly to that person. Just keep loving them, and they can't stand it too long. Oh, they react in many ways in the beginning. They react with guilt feelings, and sometimes they'll hate you a little more at that transition period, but just keep loving them. And by the power of your love they will break down under the load. That's love, you see. It is redemptive, and this is why Jesus says love.

—Martin Luther King Jr., *A Knock at Midnight: Inspiration from the Great Sermons of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.*

March 13–19

Contrary to what we may have been taught to think, unnecessary and unchosen suffering wounds us but need not

scar us for life. It does mark us. What we allow the mark of our suffering to become is in our own hands.

—Bell Hooks, *All About Love: New Visions*

March 20–26

I take literally the statement in the Gospel of John that God loves the world. I believe that the world was created and approved by love, that it subsists, coheres, and endures by love, and that, insofar as it is redeemable, it can be redeemed only by love. I believe that divine love, incarnate and indwelling in the world, summons the world always toward wholeness, which ultimately is reconciliation and atonement with God.

—Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays*

March 27–31

We can be redeemed only to the extent to which we see ourselves.

—Martin Buber

Want to share something in the April newsletter?

- ✓ Reflections or articles related to the April liturgical theme, *resurrection*
- ✓ Announcements (including those related to events that will take place in April and the first two weeks of May)
- ✓ Group or committee updates (what you accomplished, what's planned for next month, etc.)
- ✓ Recent photos taken at UUCS or during UUCS events.

Please send anything you'd like to include to newsletter@uusterling.org by March 15th.

SACRED STORY FOR ALL AGES

The Pastor's Birds (originally by Paul Lee Tan)



A pastor of a church met a young boy in front of the sanctuary. The boy was carrying a rusty cage in which several birds fluttered nervously. The pastor asked, "Son, where did you get those birds?"

The boy replied, "I trapped them out in the field."

"What are you going to do with them?" asked the pastor.

"I'm going to play with them, and then I guess I'll just feed them to an old cat we have at home."

When the pastor offered to buy them, the lad exclaimed, "Mister, you don't want them—they're just little old wild birds and can't sing very well."

Gordon replied, "I'll give you \$2 for the cage and the birds."

"Okay, it's a deal, but you're making a bad bargain." The exchange was made and the boy went away whistling, happy with his shiny coins. Gordon walked around to the back of the church property, opened the door of the small wire coop, and let the struggling creatures soar into the blue.

The next Sunday, he took the empty cage into the pulpit and used it to illustrate his sermon about redemption. "The boy told me that the birds were not songsters," said Gordon, "but when I released them and they winged their way skyward, it seemed to me they were singing, 'Redeemed, redeemed, redeemed!'" They were captive, but someone believed in them and let them go.

Questions for Discussion

Do you think the pastor made a bad deal? Why or why not?

We would never learn to do anything alone if someone did not believe in us and let us go. When have you experienced this? How did you feel?

When have you let a person or animal go? What happened? How did you feel?

Think of a time you did something you knew you shouldn't have done and then made amends. How did you redeem the situation—in other words, how did you make it right?

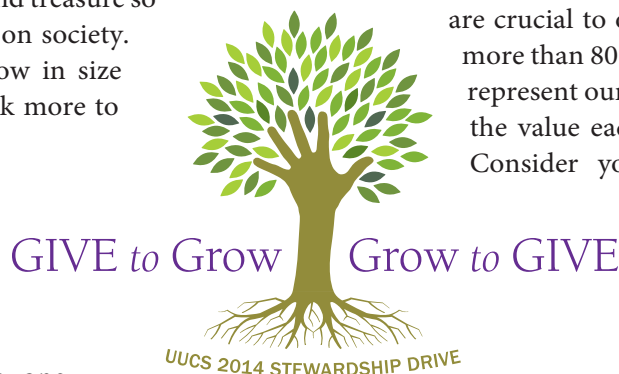
GIVE TO GROW—GROW TO GIVE

By Kaari Baluja

The 2014 Stewardship Drive runs from March 1–31. This year's theme is "Give to Grow—Grow to Give." We give to grow: we offer our time, talents, and treasure so that we can increase our impact on society. And we grow to give: as we grow in size and impact, we are able give back more to society and our community.

This year, each member and friend of UUCS will receive an invitation to one of our special events. At each event, we will share food and fellowship, celebrate our relationships with one

another and the church, and discuss those things we love about UUCS and those things we'd like to improve. Stewardship committee members will also make a short presentation explaining the financial needs of the church and invite members and friends to make their pledges for the upcoming year. These financial commitments are crucial to our church's survival; they make up more than 80% of our operating budget. They also represent our personal connections to UUCS and the value each of us places on that connection. Consider your commitment to UUCS, your income, and your needs, and then give as generously as you can! Every pledge is valued. Look for your invitation in the mail and please RSVP promptly.



REVEREND ANYA'S SABBATICAL

From whatever you wish to know and measure you must take your leave, at least for a time. Only when you have left the town can you see how high its towers rise above the houses.

—Friedrich Nietzsche

The Board of Trustees of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Sterling recently voted unanimously to offer Rev. Anya a sabbatical during her eighth year of service to our congregation. Rev. Anya will take her sabbatical leave, which is for study and professional development, in January, April, May, and June of 2015; she will return in February and March so that she can be with us during our busy stewardship season.

Rev. Anya's contract stipulates that after four years of service, she is eligible to take paid sabbatical leave equal to one month for each year of service with the congregation, and sabbatical leave may accrue for a maximum of six months. This temporary time away from the congregation has been well-earned.

A sabbatical team has been meeting and planning for several months to aid in every area of the undertaking, including identifying the various areas of need (budget, guest ministers, congregational concerns, etc.) and developing pathways of communication that will serve us during this preparatory phase and during the months Rev. Anya will be away. Communication will be very important!

In the very near future, you will have many opportunities to have your questions answered and to share concerns through meetings with Rev. Anya and the sabbatical team. The team will provide regular information and be available to hear your concerns and needs. During Rev. Anya's time away, our pulpit will be filled by excellent preachers from across our region.

The sabbatical team is excited for how our congregation can come together and grow while Rev. Anya is away doing that very same thing! We believe that with change comes dynamic growth—and when Rev. Anya returns to us at the end of her sabbatical break, we can all compare notes!

An investment in knowledge pays the best interest.

—Benjamin Franklin

The Sabbatical Team

Bob Brown, Board of Trustees
Rosalie Clavez, Worship Associates
Gus Douoguih, Committee on Ministry
Patty McKay, Communication Team
Bonnie Lepoff, Pastoral Care Team
Stephanie Roche, Religious Education Council
Deb Rose, Covenant Groups

PLEASE WELCOME OUR NEW PRESCHOOL–KINDERGARTEN RE TEACHER

Hello! My name is Barbara Jefferson, and I am excited to be a part of the RE program at the UU Congregation of Sterling. I am a native Virginian who grew up in Fairfax, but I have lived in Sterling for the past 23 years with my husband Brent, our four sons, and a dog and two cats. Our “family” changes on a regular basis due to the foster kittens that join us temporarily! Our household is truly one adventure after another!

To keep even busier, we do a lot of volunteering through Lost Dog and Cat Rescue Foundation and within our community, Sterling Park. During the week, I am part of the teaching team at The Auburn School in Herndon. It's a wonderful school for students managing life with autism and Asperger syndrome. I am looking forward to getting to know all of you!

EXCERPT FROM THIS MONTH'S COVENANT GROUP TOPIC

Covenant groups at UUCS engage the monthly themes (like “Redemption”) in deep and meaningful ways. They read passages together then respond to a set of questions, offering one another the opportunity to reflect unchallenged. Here is an excerpt from this month’s topic, compiled by Ana Vegega, a covenant group facilitator. If you would like to join a covenant group, contact our Covenant Group Coordinator, Deb Rose, at drosept@gmail.com.

From a sermon called “A Life Redeemed” by Unitarian Universalist Minister Rev. Josh Pawelek

Imagine you’re a sculptor and your life is the sculpture. Each day you mold, form and fashion your sculpture, you shape your life, and in the evening you review your work. Some evenings you like what you’ve created. The sculpture captures exactly what you envision for your life. But even so, you recognize [that] the next day may bring new experiences, new insights, new feelings, and thus the work of shaping continues. Of course, some evenings you review your work and realize you haven’t gotten it right. You’re close, but not quite there. Or you’re way off the mark. The way you’ve lived, the decisions you’ve made, the way you’ve treated others, the way you’ve presented yourself to the world—none of it aligns with your vision for yourself. You want to do better, not because you fear divine punishment, but because you feel in your heart you can do better.

So, the next day you start to reshape your sculpture: new angles, new edges, new interplay of light and shadow, a different expression, a different posture. This opportunity to make changes, to try again, to reshape your life, is the path to “this-worldly redemption.” Each time we take ourselves in hand and change our direction, ask forgiveness and start anew, we reaffirm our belief that we are redeemable.

Each day we have the opportunity to exchange the life we needed to live yesterday for the life we need to live today. What redeems us in light of the reality of injustice and oppression are our collective efforts to subvert and transform them. What redeems us are our collective words and deeds that help shape a more just society. What redeems us are our collective attempts to build the beloved community.

Questions for covenant group discussion:

1. Has the idea of redemption ever played a role in your life or in the life of someone close to you?
2. What do you feel is the relationship amongst redemption, forgiveness, and love? Have you witnessed this in action?
3. How do you think the topic of redemption fits with the UU seven principles? Do you think there are people or acts which are beyond redemption?



DOG BISCUITS FOR LOUDOUN INTERFAITH RELIEF

Loudoun Interfaith Relief is now providing pet food so that people experiencing economic challenges can care for their animals. On March 16, the children’s religious education groups will repackage dog biscuits to donate to Loudoun Interfaith Relief. To help pets and their owners, please bring in dog biscuits before March 16 and leave them in the labeled bin in the Social Justice Nook. This is down the hall from the fellowship hall, past the kitchen and nursery.

CREATING AND DEEPENING CONNECTIONS AT UUCS

There are many opportunities to get to know the children and adults of UUCS better and to share the gift of your presence, perspective, or talent. All can be one-time activities, so this is a great way to get involved if you do not have much time or if you want to try out a new role. You can choose from helping in a Sunday morning religious education class with children in preschool–kindergarten, first–third grade, fourth–sixth grade, or seventh–eighth grade or helping before or during a special event, such as the Easter Egg Hunt or a game night. If you would like more information about these opportunities or if you are interested in sharing a special talent or interest with children or families, contact Linda Weaver at re-director@uusterling.org.

CALENDAR

Stay Up to Date With UUCS Events

M A R C H	////////////////////////////////////
Saturday, 3/1	6:00 pm — Stewardship dinner at the Douoguih home
Sunday, 3/2	<p>10:30 am — Worship Service: “The Risk to Blossom” Spiritual growth sounds more like a buzzword than an actual, attainable reality—yet it is attainable, especially in community over time. We’ll reflect on the sometimes risky means to this attainable end. Our choir will sing and we’ll kick off our stewardship drive.</p> <p>Noon — Inquirer’s Class in Rev. Anya’s office All newcomers are welcome.</p>
Saturday, 3/8	6:00 pm — Stewardship dinner at the Baluja home
Sunday, 3/9	<p>10:30 am — Worship Service: “One Wild and Precious Life” In this beloved annual service, UUCS members and friends from across the age spectrum reflect on what they wish to do with their own wild and precious lives. Special music provided by guitarist Scott Findley and violinist Teagan Kutz.</p>
Sunday, 3/16	<p>10:30 am — Worship Service: “A Way to be Good Again” Our service with special choir music, invites us to re-imagine the gift of redemption. We may not understand a supernatural function of redemption, but can we find worth in this spiritual calling?</p> <p>1:00 pm — Emerging Stewards Brunch at UUCS</p>
Sunday, 3/23	<p>10:30 am — Worship Service: “Not in My Lifetime” Dueling reflections from our two ministers will engage the themes of institutionalism and antiauthoritarianism. Our service will include a question and answer period and a celebration of our newest members.</p>
Sunday, 3/30	<p>10:30 am — Worship Service: “Did They Step Out of Their Places?: Hopeful Universalist Women” Our religious heritage includes many women who worked for reform, for change, and for social justice despite critics who said that female reformers were stepping out of their proper spheres. Come to this service, hear the voices of women of our past, and celebrate women’s history month by getting to know some of our female Universalist ancestors. Rev. Dr. Barbara Coeyman (currently serving the UU Congregation in Reston) will lead our service.</p>

A P R I L	////////////////////////////////////
Friday, 4/4	6:00 pm — Congregationwide “First Friday” event TBD... but it will be good!
Sunday, 4/6	10:30 am — Worship Service Noon — Inquirer’s Class in Rev. Anya’s office All newcomers are welcome.
Sunday, 4/13	10:30 am — Worship Service