



## Redemption

Each month worship, religious education, community outreach ministry, covenant groups and Wellspring Wednesday programs will offer opportunities to contemplate, consider, contend with and discuss an intergenerational curriculum based on monthly themes. Our hope is that this approach will bind us more closely together and inform our lives in effective and positive ways. April's theme is...Redemption.

We like to think of ourselves as a free people. I certainly do, and as a liberal religious person living in a democracy, I don't want to diminish the many ways in which we are. But the truth is, when a newborn child draws her first breath in the United States today, she already owes well over \$35,000 – the amount every one of us now holds as our share of the growing national debt.

As we consider the theme of redemption this month, it may be fitting, if uncomfortable, to begin by thinking about debt. Because any talk of redemption requires something that needs to be redeemed – something borrowed to be repaid; something lost to be recovered; something enslaved to be released.

As a theological concept, redemption differs from salvation in that it carries with it this added notion of exchange or repayment. Its origins in old French refer to “re-buying” or buying back what had been owned previously. In Christian theology, redemption is sometimes described as God buying back what belonged to God before – namely, humanity before sin ran off with our original state of goodness and belonging. And the price paid for this repurchase? In traditional Christianity, it is high, nothing less than Jesus' own suffering and death.

Universalists and Unitarians rejected this notion of sacrificial redemption centuries ago, as articulated by

Universalist Hosea Ballou in his *Treatise on Atonement* in 1805. Many liberal Christians have since followed suit. What makes Jesus a redeemer, said our forebears, is not how he

died but how he lived his life.

What then is the redemptive exchange of Unitarian Universalism today? And what is the currency with which it is paid?

As a pay-as-you-go kind of person, I am among the first to recoil from linking notions of debt to redemption. I do not like being indebted, financially or otherwise. But I have been reminded by more than one wise teacher that, in its healthiest form, debt is actually one of the threads holding all of us together in the weave of relationship. After all, love by its nature carries its own terms of exchange. When we are loved, it is hard *not* to be compelled to pass it on to others. Whether we pay it back or pay it forward, in matters of love, there really is no way to bank it or to hoard it. Just as when we breathe, every inhalation carries a debt of exhalation that must be paid, so too every gift of love we receive incurs its own debt to be paid back out again.

Is this not redemption? As Unitarian Universalists, ours is a covenantal faith that affirms the imperative of right relationship. Perhaps our participation in the work of justice is how we reclaim our belonging. And the currency with which we make our payments? The currency is love. Love calls us out. Love breaks down the walls of self-imprisonment. Love buys us back from our enslavement – to consumerism, to selfishness, to oppression. Love, with eternal patience, recovers the belonging we keep losing.

This redemption, then, is not a one-time occurrence. It is a process. It is a way of being in the world, a way of living which recognizes that all our time is borrowed time and that we pay it back by choosing how we spend it, day by day, hour by hour. As Forrest Church points out,

redemptive meaning lies within and not beyond the boundaries of this earthly life. When we, as he puts it, live “lives worth dying for,” we redeem what was given to us, debts and all, on that day when we each took our first gusty lungful of air.

— Karen Hering,  
Assistant Literary Minister

### Worship Theme Resources

#### BOOKS

***Growing an Inch*** by Stanley Gordon West (2003)

***Peace Like a River*** by Leif Enger (2002)

***A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*** by Ishmael Beah (2007)

#### FILMS

##### ***Shawshank Redemption***

Falsely imprisoned for the murder of his wife, Andy DeFresne tries to find meaning and ‘salvation’ in the Bible.

##### ***The Negotiator***

Danny Roman (Samuel Jackson) and Chris Sabian (Kevin Spacey) seek justice and redemption in one another over lines of race and the presumption of guilt. These two 21st-century hostage negotiators labor to discover the truth about corruption in the Chicago Police Department and the truth about our real-life imprisonment and the possibility of redemption.

##### ***The River Wild***

Meryl Streep, Kevin Bacon and David Strathairn star in an action film about a woman's passion, her faith in family and her sense of deep courage. Gail Hartman (Streep) tries in earnest to create a way-out-a-no-way for her marriage to succeed.

FAMILIES!  
Read about  
redemption and  
the Dark Side  
on page 13.