

Religion—It's All About Redemption

By Michael A. Schuler

December 21, 2008

A Selection from *Learning to Fall* by Philip Simmons

I recall boyhood nights when I went sledding by moonlight. This went best when several feet of snow had been followed by rain and then a freeze, forming an icy crust that was dangerously fast and just hard enough to bear the weight of children and dogs. The poet Wallace Stevens had it right: “Snow sparkles like eyesight falling to earth, like seeing fallen brightly away.”

Walking out to the top of the sloping field, my younger brother and I with the neighbor's kids, we filled the night with our noise: boastful chatter, the dull booming of our molded plastic sleds held and struck like gongs. But there came a moment at the top of the field when we fell silent, looking down over that creamy slope toward the dark woods waiting at the bottom. In silence we lined up our sleds, lay flat on our bellies, noses just inches above the snow. It was a sobering business, and that was how we wanted it.

For me then, 12 or 14 years old—the essence of good sledding was fear. Speed mattered, and anything that amplified the sense of speed was welcome. Hence, darkness, cold, the absence of grown-ups and waiting woods. Like all adolescent boys, we were in love with our own annihilation.

There was no end to those woods, we knew. They sank into swamp, rose over hills, and in our minds swept on forever into Canada and the frozen north. Our goal was to plunge into them, to be swallowed up, and then to return victorious. The key was not to bail out too soon and so be cheated of glory.

We knew that on this icy crust, on sleds of hard plastic, we would quickly reach a terminal velocity of several hundred miles an hour. We knew, too, that our glossy nylon parkas had a coefficient of friction only slightly higher than that of plastic, so that when we did bail out, we could continue sliding on our backs, watching the wall of woods rise over us like a dark wave until we tore through the brambles at the field's edge, broke through the alder and willow saplings, and carried on to keep our final appointment with a stone wall topped with barbed wire. *This* was good sledding.

And when the run was over, and I lay bruised and torn and unbearably happy, the silence would fall. And that's when I would hear it: the winter wind breathing from the miles of forest at whose

edge I lay, that chill spirit mingling with my own breath rising in plumes toward the brilliant moon, the cold stars. I would lie there a long time, feeling my back cool, my whole body cool toward the temperature of snow, listening to that wind that was hardly a wind, that subtle non-sound....

All separateness falls away, and I am one with snow and stars, rooted as pine, imperturbable as stone.

Reflectons

One could characterize Philip Simmons' adolescent experience of high-speed winter night sledding as a lark, an adventure, a test of one's skills, or even a rite of passage of sorts. But as he describes it, this rather reckless seasonal activity had a profoundly redemptive quality about it. Far from being mere horseplay or an occasion to impress ones' peers, moonlight sledding acquired for its devotees a quasi-mystical significance.

Although ostensibly an act of play, the daredevil nature of the activity lent it a certain gravitas. The boys fell silent as they approached the hilltop, each preparing, steeling himself for the test to come; each hoping to get through the ordeal successfully.

The intention here was not simply to “have some fun.” As Simmons points out, “the essence of good sledding was *fear*, and that is precisely what made it memorable and profoundly meaningful. That's what made it redemptive. Fear is one of life's great enemies, a powerful psychological hindrance to freedom and peace of mind. Any activity that provides the opportunity to face and overcome our deepest fears—including the fear of annihilation—has the potential to lift us to a new level of being.

A similar insight can be found in the Gospels. Well aware that he was asking his followers to accept significant risks—loss of reputation, social disapproval and even physical harm—Jesus encouraged them to confront their fears and stay the course. If you would follow me, you must take up your own cross, he said. But remember:

whosoever would save his life will lose it;
and whoever loses his life for my sake and
the gospel's will save it.

This theme—redemption—lies at the heart of most religions. The way they handle it differs sig-

nificantly, however. To begin with, the world's great faith traditions do not necessarily agree on the nature of the problem. What do human beings need to be redeemed from? Is it fear? Sin? Ignorance? Alienation? Death? And then there are the actual *mechanics* of redemption, the means by which it is achieved. Is outside intervention by a divinely appointed supernatural savior necessary? Or do humans, with proper instruction and training, possess the ability to accomplish the task on their own?

But let's step back for a moment and define our terms. What does it mean to be "redeemed?" *Webster's* offers a smorgasbord of possibilities. to liberate by payment; to release from blame or debt; to free from bondage of sin; to change for the better or "reform."

When an apparent misfortune turns out to be a blessing in disguise or an evil force is defeated, redemption could also be said to have occurred.

The term can be used in a secular as well as religious context. We're presently in a very difficult, deteriorating economic situation that many people fear will grow even worse. How will we get out of this mess, people wonder. Who or what will "redeem" the situation, save us from our present calamity? Will massive expenditures by government and a new public works program do the trick? An expanded and more aggressive financial regulatory system? A marked increase in consumer confidence and spending?

Many have pinned their hopes on the president-elect—a man who will enter the White House riding a tide of great expectations. Ably assisted by a "dream team" of financial advisors, Obama will make the wise and visionary choices necessary to put things right. That, at least, is what many people seem to be hoping.

But some have far less confidence in secular solutions and savvy political leaders. As the economy falters, they are looking instead to that "old time religion" for redemption. Last Sunday's *New York Times* reported that attendance at evangelical churches in the New York City metropolitan area has risen significantly since summer. Anxious brokers and investment bankers who once earned seven figures have turned to the Lord for help. "It's a wonderful opportunity for us," a Brooklyn minister enthused. "When people are shaken to the core, it can open doors [to conversion]."

What sort of redemption are these disconsolate folks looking for? A new source of meaning—an alternative to the material values that they had pre-

viously embraced? Sometimes. But most, the *Times* reports, turn to religion simply expecting God to help them keep or find a job.

The concept of redemption is relevant to economic and political, as well as spiritual situations. The United States invaded Iraq, George Bush told us, to "redeem" the Iraqi people from the brutal rule of Saddam Hussein. The Second Chance apartment project, which this congregation supports, redeems families by providing a stable living situation.

Religion, however, addresses deeper, more persistent, and intractable human troubles. Economies rebound, oppressors are overthrown, and social safety nets repaired, but the basic existential situation in which humans find themselves doesn't change. Sin, ignorance, self-centeredness, fear, suffering, and death remain firmly and stubbornly in place. Helping human beings come to terms with these disturbing and disabling realities has been the historic task of religion.

As individuals and as a species we are plagued with many problems. But which of them is the most basic? Which the most in need of remediation? Christianity puts its emphasis on the *will*. According to the Bible, our ancient ancestors deliberately turned from God and made a faulty, fatal choice. Humans have been making bad decisions ever since. Unless something can be done about the propensity to act in opposition to the divine will, the human condition will remain unredeemed.

As individuals and as a species we are plagued with many problems. But which of them is the most basic? Which the most in need of remediation?

Muslims see the issue somewhat differently. It is not the will that is at fault, but the *memory*. At one time, humans possessed a much clearer understanding of God and of themselves as "like unto God." Men and women lived by and through the *principle of unity*. They understood that all things are of God and that all of life must reflect and glorify God. But successive generations lost touch with this truth, departing from the ways of God, gradually creating a thick veil between the human and the divine. It is our forgetfulness, Seyyed Hossein Nasr argues, that has created the need for redemption.

For the Hindu/Buddhist tradition, the locus of the problem is our ego, that which creates this separate sense of "me" and "mine." What aspect of self finds continual fault with the world—always crav-

ing what it doesn't have and afraid of losing that which it does possess? Clearly, the ego. As Martin Lowenthal writes:

In this vicious cycle of fascination and struggle the ego grabs at any possibility of solidity, fights with any threat to its identity, and ignores everything that is emotionally inconvenient.

Redemption consists in release from identification with and bondage to the ego—the principal source of suffering and dissatisfaction. Egoless, it just might be possible to experience peace, equanimity and security in all conditions and under all circumstances.

These, then, are just a few of the ways in which the *need* for redemption has been understood and articulated. We'll look next at the solutions religion proposes.

A Selection from *Looking in the Distance* by Richard Holloway

It was well after ten on a late June evening. I was driving back to Edinburgh from North Berwick, which is about 20 miles east of the city on the edge of the North Sea. It was one of those clear-as-day nights we get in Scotland in mid-summer, when it never really gets dark. I could see across the Firth of Forth to Fife and the mountains of Perthshire beyond.

I had the car window down so that I could smell the poppy-studded hayfields lining the road. On the car radio, Holst's *Planets* were being broadcast in a concert, and they had just gotten to the Jupiter theme. Suddenly, my right arm was out of the window and I was shouting "Yes" to no one.

I felt that if my life had contained only that moment, the brief visit of a mayfly, my time on earth would have been justified. Early that same morning I had asked myself who there was to praise for the mystery of Being. Here I was at the end of the day simply giving thanks to the perfumed Scottish night, saying "yes" to the absence that felt like presence. It was enough.

Reflections, Part Two

If our ordinary, everyday life experience proved satisfactory, and if it reliably generated positive feelings of fulfillment and well-being, there would be no need for redemption. Human beings seek insight, solace, and reassurance because something feels out of joint. We are not all that comfortable

with life as it is. This is the predicament religion tries to address. Life is precious, but so often it also proves to be unpleasant. What needs to happen to "make things right?"

Sometimes all it takes is a small epiphany. "If my life had contained *only* that moment ... my time on earth would have been justified," Richard Holloway exclaims. On that perfumed summer evening everything unsettling and troublesome seemed irrelevant, beside the point to Holloway. Whether or not God was in his heaven, still all felt right with the world. In complete harmony with his surroundings, the solitary driver experienced a rush of gratitude so intense that a joyful cry of affirmation escaped his lips.

What caused this rapture? Was it the transporting music he was listening to? Music has certainly been described in redemptive terms. Plato, for instance, argued that there is an order in "authentic" music that reflects ultimate reality. Through it we are freed from bondage to the care-worn world. Martin Luther's outlook was similar. "Next to the Word of God," he wrote, "the noble art of music is the greatest treasure in the world" and even Satan stands helpless before its power.

Music's power to redeem is limited, however. For most people it serves as an analgesic, not as a remedy for what really ails us. Martin Luther would certainly agree that religion holds out the prospect of a more complete and permanent solution to the human predicament. How then, have various religions handled the issue?

Redemption is achieved in Judaism through adherence to the Biblical commandments or *Mitzvot*. Far from being a burden or an instrument of oppression, *Mitzvot* brings the human and divine will into alignment, generating a sense of security and strengthening the bonds of community. Whether at home or in exile, Jews know that God is with and for them when they observe His Commandments in fear and in love. By consecrating themselves to God, Jews partake of God's holiness and become themselves a "holy people."

Christianity has traditionally denied to human beings the power to put things in proper order. Slaves to the flesh and subject to a corrupted will, we routinely violate God's commandments and as a result have fallen into disfavor and stand condemned.

Powerless ourselves, we must hope that God will reconsider, "forgive our trespasses," and save us from the fatal consequences of our own sinful

choices. In order to have life and have it more abundantly, an act of grace will be necessary. And that “graceful” reentry of God into the world is what Christmas celebrates. With His coming, as one popular carol puts it, “sins and sorrows” cease to grow and “righteousness its glory shows.”

What constitutes Christian redemption? The word that stands out in the gospels is “love.” God’s graciousness, his overflowing love for the world, finds full expression in the Incarnation. In response to this grace-full gesture, we should be moved to respond in kind, completing the circuit of love, as it were. Fallen though humans may be, we do possess an inborn capacity for love, and if that love could become the law of our lives, much that is wrong about us and the world could be made right.

But important though it might be, human love will not suffice to deliver us from the ultimate evil, which is death. Christianity sees death as unnatural, a consequence of and penalty for disobedience. To be *thoroughly* redeemed is to be deathless, to live eternally in the presence of God, and that requires a divine gesture of pure, undeserved grace.

Islam also disapproves of death and presents the prospect of everlasting life. But then Islam heads off on a different tangent. Islam teaches that human beings are fully capable of knowing God and choosing a life that conforms to God’s will. An act of grace isn’t necessary for our redemption. Jesus and Muhammad were both messengers, instilling in us a fresh awareness of God, reminding us of His presence and his requirements.

For Muslims, redemption vouchsafes a future life in Paradise, but it also has profound implications for life on earth. If people diligently bring God to mind through daily prayers and conduct their affairs in a way that reflects and supports the divine Unity, they will experience personal peace, social harmony, and stand in right relationship with Ultimate Reality.

Buddhism attempts to deal with life exactly as it presents itself, without any reference to divine beings or the afterlife. Suffering surrounds us. Impermanence is an immutable law; everything we perceive is in process and inherently unstable, including our own identity. Death is real and inescapable.

Although it may not be possible to change the *conditions* of mortal existence, perhaps we can change our outlook. The Buddha saw redemption

as a psychological issue. The unsatisfactoriness of existence causes suffering. But what is it that suffers? From whence do these feelings of distress and discomfort arise? Where are they rooted? The answer, of course, is the ego—that separate identity we each create for ourselves and that we go to great pains to strengthen and protect.

Greed, hatred, jealousy, and resentment; the fear of death; that awkward sensation of separation from the sentient world—all of these ills are bound up with the ego construct which, according to the Buddha, is really nothing more than a house of cards. Relief comes when we recognize the game we’ve been playing with ourselves, the illusion we’ve been creating for ourselves, and begin the slow process of dis-identifying with this source of perpetual complaint. If no substantial abiding “self” really exists, there is nothing to be defended, inflated, or enhanced. By assiduous meditation and ethical effort, Karen Armstrong writes,

The Buddha found an inner haven ... which enabled him to live with pain and dissolution, take possession of it, affirm it, and experience a profound serenity in the midst of suffering.... It was a still center than gave meaning to life.

These, then, are a few of the ways in which the term “redemption” has been applied. There are, of course, many others. In Homeric Greece redemption came on the field of battle when exceptional warriors created immortal names for themselves and thus avoided the curse of obscurity.

Learning to live in a fashion that harmonizes rather than clashes with the first principles of the universe is the Taoist version of redemption. To be yielding, supple, flexible, humble rather than obstinate, aggressive, demanding, and arrogant is the prescription ancient sages such as Lao Tse and Chuang Tse offer.

As Unitarian Universalists we enjoy the privilege of pondering these various proposals and comparing them to our own experience. Which diagnosis of the human condition makes the most sense? Where are the roots of my own discomfort? What answer would serve to settle my soul and provide a “peace that passes understanding?” Love? Insight? Surrender? Adventure? Everlasting life?

That is the riddle of redemption—one that, for better or worse, each of us is obliged to solve for ourselves.