

**Douglas Flat Unitarian Universalist Service**  
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**Redemption, Who Needs It**  
**By John H. Kramer**  
**(Preface by Singing Amazing Grace)**

Redemption makes me think of a movie called the Shawshank Redemption about a man falsely convicted for murder who lives a life in prison – say 20 years? He serves a corrupt warden taking kickbacks from construction contractors for the use of free prison labor, and he finally escapes with the loot. His “redemption” is getting even with the system, retiring in Mexico as a free man. So ... *is* that redemption? Is redemption vindication for some falseness or injustice? Getting even? Recovering to some former state of equilibrium after a fall?

In all cultures and times humans have used redemption to move on from mistakes.

1. We know people have been transformed by redemption; we hear it in the song Amazing Grace
2. We see redemption offered up daily to motivate and propagate dogmatic belief systems like Christianity.
3. We see the promise of redemption-after-death (martyrdom for suicide bombers) used to motivate shameful acts.

On this Easter Sunday, “redemption” brings to mind Jesus. Jesus is called the redeemer because through his crucifixion and ascension to heaven, he shouldered the burden of sin from all Christians. The Christian premise of the Easter redemption is that all men and women have basic sinful instincts that are shameful (Adam and Eve ate the apple). You are a sinner, we all are. We must be constantly vigilant to suppress our evil instincts and we must also be constantly aware of the redemption afforded us by belief in Jesus Christ the Lord. He suffered and died a terrible death, but not in vain. He died for the sins of others; he suffered for you (point), and you (point) and you (point). When you accept faith in Christ into your life, you are washed of sin by the blood of Christ; your sins are forgiven! You are redeemed! Judging from the popularity of Christianity, redemption is a desirable notion, may I say, a compelling human concept?

To be redeemed we must first be fallen and ashamed of ourselves. The song Amazing Grace has an interesting story that many of you probably have heard. As I heard it, the song was written in one sitting during the religious revelation of an English ship captain working the slave trade. His moral indignation was aroused with the realization of the evil he had perpetrated on captives in his hold, or worse – castaways drowned in the sea. Overwhelmed by shame and contemplating suicide beneath a fabulous ocean sunset, he was washed by God’s forgiveness in an epiphany: a viscerally spiritual moment that transformed his life. Grace redeemed him. He penned the inspired words. “I once was lost, but now am found” (He lived out his life as a vocal abolitionist).

My thesis today is that we can't understand redemption, without considering shame. Shame is a pretty prevalent human feeling, whether Christian, Jew, Muslim or non-believer. Shame comes in all sizes and all levels of intensity. I'll call it a shame continuum from mild to extreme. Redemption likewise shades itself according to the shame it redresses. I am mildly ashamed that I forgot your name, and am mildly redeemed when you aren't insulted. Shades and continuums of mildness aren't very exciting. Absolutists demand more, (that needs some explanation – bear with me while I digress for a paragraph).

*Human attitude can be divided roughly into two camps: absolutists and relativists. Absolutists tend toward simplistic dualisms: black or white, good or evil, law-abiding or not, with us or against us. Laws are simple statements that either you honor and obey or suffer the consequences. There is absolute good and evil. It is an unambiguous outlook. Absolutists know where they stand and who stands against them. There is no room for complexity, three way disputes, or shades of compliance. Absolutists are uncomfortable around ethical relativists who share their morals but deny their beliefs, because Absolutists don't trust in the strength of an individual's morals alone. They prefer a strict code of allegiance. They fiercely oppose Absolutists of different stripes. (Different absolutist camps are duking it out now in Iraq.) In an absolutist system many unrelated things are attributed to one enemy: the Haji, the Gooks, the devil. Forgiveness is available to absolutists, but it's a big deal. Forgiveness is part of redemption. Redemption from a fall from Grace requires finding it once again. Redemption requires a reaffirmation of the order. Such experiences are extreme visceral, religious, and life-changing.*

Shame sets the table for redemption. The capacity for deep shame can be learned and has been systematically taught. It is impressed upon people by tradition, mores, peer pressure and manipulators. The written religions in particular have codified their moral codes around fixed statements like the Ten Commandments. Practitioners constantly remind themselves of the letter of the laws and use them to define the boundaries of shame.

These belief traditions also provide redemptions such as:

- Christ's overall sacrifice for your inherent sinfulness
- Catholic confessionals for specific sins
- Martyrdom for jihadists
- Prayerful atonements and sacrifices

Belief in the devil creates an enticing pull to the shameful.

My friend's brother, a Catholic priest once said, "If I didn't fear the devil, I'd do all sorts of horrible things."

To which my friend responded, "Why don't you just fear the horrible things?"

For the priest, many small shameful acts can build into one hugely shameful pattern of cooperating with the devil – resisting the devil is somehow easier than resisting many small shameful transgressions of the code.

In religion, redemption is part of a push-pull relationship between sin and forgiveness. The one needs the other and they swing in concert. The harder they fall, the greater their

redemption. Note this next time the news covers a charismatic evangelical who falls from grace in some sex scandal to be reborn humble and contrite. It is a powerful addictive cycle, not unlike like domestic violence, (how sweet the forgiveness – do it more, harder, to get more forgiveness).

For non-religious ethical relativists, soul-shaking redemption from deep shame is more rare because there is no forged path to redemption. Each extreme shame has its own peculiar twists. There is no method to explore the soul. No tradition of prayer, no scripture, no guideposts. Picking up the pieces from deep shame must be much harder for these people. I think it a likely time for them to convert to a system that formally sanctions redemption. So, are the relativists in the world the unconverted who have not yet felt the shame of their sinful nature? Have sinners among them found redemption on their own? Can we?

Have you been ashamed – I mean solidly, irrevocably, suicidally shamed? Shame is not regret. This is not something that you regret, like an action caused by circumstance, like ...I regret not going to Church because it was a nice day. That's not deep shame. Deep shame is from mortal sin. You have to know mortal sin to be fully shamed by yourself. Have you killed another without honorable cause? Committed adultery? Stolen? Betrayed a family member or a trusted friend? These actions can sink to the level of deep shame. Deep shame occurs when something is taken away never to be returned (like virginity), when the damage done cannot be repaired (like death or dismemberment).

Adultery is a more or less common sin that helps us understand redemption. In our current culture, adultery is often only regretful, not deeply shameful as it once was thought to be. Who feels deep shame from adultery these days anyway? Two types of people do: those who esteem family honor, and those who deeply love the injured party. Adultery has the force of full mortal shame for people who respect tradition or who betrayed true love. That is probably a prerequisite for feeling redemption-level shame from any sin. To experience shame suitable for redemption one has to care. You have to esteem something, or love it deeply enough such that if you caused it's loss, your shame is great.

We all have the potential to feel deep shame from mortal sin. This is a natural condition stemming from caring: caring about family, fairness, order, predictability, morality, life. Each of us can probably think of specific, or hypothetical circumstances leading to deep shame.

For example:

1. Someone else is punished for a crime you committed because you remained silent.
2. You transmitted AIDS because you carelessly neglected to test yourself.

Any others come to mind? (pause) This is intensely personal.

People who feel deep shame must live with it if they can't forget it. The only relief is through recognition, confession and asking forgiveness. This may help or it may not help. Some things are unforgivable. The path to redemption is not clear, or easy.

The question before us this Easter is who *really* needs redemption?

Soulful redemption is really needed by people who have fallen, really far, from their ideals: people who are so shamed only blessed forgiveness in their soul can help them to cope.

Life transforming peak experiences are seductive. I tend to want such things, to have lived life to the fullest. Wouldn't it be cool to experience redemption? But hey! . . . Think of the price. This is not a picnic. To need redemption, you must realize and regret a terrible mistake in your life. Redemption will change your life completely, because you did something dastardly to deserve it.

Unless you are ashamed of yourself already, you don't really want to go there. If you live in shame, you need to. May we have the wisdom to choose rightly for our own lives and the compassion to help those who haven't.

Please join in singing. "We need one another"