

Starting to Get a Little Nervous
Sunday, April 12
Rev. Sylvia A. Stocker

Thought to ponder at the beginning:
“The real measure of your wealth is how much you'd be worth if you lost all your money.”
— Anon

Opening Words and Chalice Lighting

Sabbath Home, by Kathleen McTigue

Here in the refuge of this Sabbath home
we turn our busy minds toward silence,
and our full hearts toward one another.
We move together through the mysteries:
the bright sunshine of birth and the shadowed questions of death.

In our slow walk between the two we will be wounded,
and we will be showered with grace, amazing, unending.
Even in our sorrows,
we feel our lives cradled in holiness we cannot comprehend,
and though we each walk within a vast loneliness
the promise we offer here is that we do not walk alone.

This is a holy place in which we gather –
the light of the earth brought in and held,
touched then
by our answering light:

the flame on a chalice,
the flicker of a candle,
the lamps of our open faces brought near.

In this place of silence and celebration,
solemnity and music,
we make a sanctuary and name our home.

Into this home we bring our hunger for awakening.

We bring compassionate hearts
and a will toward justice.

Into this home we bring the courage to walk on after hard losses.
Into this home we bring our joy,
and gratitude for ordinary blessings.

By our gathering we bless this place.
In its shelter we know ourselves blessed.

Reading *Backside Redemption*, by Kathleen McTigue, abridged

Each August my family vacations for two weeks in a cabin on Mount Desert Island.... We explore the back roads on bikes, and one early morning I set out on my own. I wanted to explore a new route, but I got lost. Just as I was steeling myself to turn around and retrace the long, uphill road back to the cabin, I pedaled around one last curve and saw two things simultaneously. First, a tiny white church, with a small, perfect steeple and bright red doors, and then the prominent sign with lovely church-like calligraphy: "Backside Redemption."

I stopped, wheeled my bike to the side of the road, leaned on the handlebars and stared in awe at the sheer boldness of the declaration. Who were these people who could actually admit that the redemption they offered was the back-sided kind? A sort of come-as-you-are, seat-of-the pants, possibly not-even-fit-for-good-society kind of redemption?

Then I saw the little recycling hut off the the side behind the church. Belatedly I realized that the marvelous sign did not refer to the church at all but to the recycling hut, identified as “back side” because this side of the island faces the mainland, not the ocean. Sheepishly I looked around and spotted a smaller sign offering up the real name for the church, but by then it was too late. The little white building with its neatly painted red doors had forever sunk into my psyche as the “Backside Redemption Church.”

This image has become a touchstone for me, a reminder that the only kind of redemption we ever really get is the backside kind, the kind that doesn't come in the package or on the schedule we have in mind. Like getting lost on my bike and then stumbling upon the church, it's a backside redemption when a wrong turn takes us to a place that brings us up short and makes us stop and stare in amazement. Backside redemption can be waiting for us in the more drastic detours of our lives – such as the plans that don't materialize, the mistakes we make, the delays, disappointments and losses that somehow, over the long run, lead us to new insight and show us where we're really trying to go.

The little church and the recycling center offer a lovely serendipity – both have to do with redemption. What happens when we recycle bottles and cans? They are transformed. They are made into something else. Though it may seem a homely analogy for something as lofty as our souls, that's exactly what we're after. In our inconsistent and often clumsy ways, we're aiming for transformation.

Each time we take ourselves in hand and change direction, ask forgiveness and start anew, we reaffirm our belief that we are redeemable. We don't want to stay exactly as we

are. We don't want to keep being driven by the hair-trigger temper or the relentless, bitter, grudge, or by our impatience or harsh judgments. We want to loosen the pinching in our hearts and live with more wonder, serenity, kindness, and wisdom. We want to live so there's a little shimmer of grace left behind when we're gone.

Backside redemption isn't straightforward or easy. It doesn't fall down on us from on high or come in a flash of illumination. It is filled with false starts and wrong turns, lessons we learn but then have to learn all over again. Backside redemption isn't about saving us, but instead about shaping us, and it's the most certain redemption available in this sweet world.

Sermon: Starting to Get a Little Nervous (c) Rev. Sylvia A. Stocker

I don't often preach about redemption. It seems to me to be one of those religious words that sometimes makes people uncomfortable, and no one really quite knows what it means anyway. Kathleen McTigue, though, likens it to transformation, which I do preach about all the time. For my money, religious institutions like this one are all about transformation.

Some hold out the promise that the transformation will happen in the world to come – not necessarily this world. Who knows? They may be right about the world to come. Unitarian Universalists tend to take the view that if there is a world to come, it will reveal itself somehow, someday. In the meantime, *this* world needs our shoulders to the plow. *This* world is broken and aching and needs our help. *This* world is the one we know for sure about, and it needs our love and care and attention. The lives we are living, now, here, today, are the ones we know for sure we will have. We can use our time for good or for ill. We can build lives guided by selfishness or compassion. We can pull the blankets over our heads in the face of all that is broken in our world or we can get to work. We can wallow in self-pity for all that is broken in our lives, or we can work to recover from our wounds and build constructive productive, meaningful lives.

We walk through a world that is much in the grip of hopelessness – and with good reason. Our world is plagued by hunger, cruelty, violence, hatred, greed. Our earth suffers under the strain of human living that seems far more a curse than a blessing with the path of destruction and demise human beings leave in their wake. But to accept the fearsome underbelly of life as the whole picture is to deny the possibility and power of transformation – the prospect that we may so live as to let our days shape us into vessels of good and courage and healing and love. It is to deny the hope of backside redemption.

Weaving your life with the life of this congregation can offer many things: friendship, fun, laboring, creativity, enlightenment, growth. But I believe the greatest gift this congregation has to offer is transformation, backside redemption. Backside redemption, transformation, above all, is why we are here.

Today this congregation officially kicks off its annual pledge drive, in which we make our financial promises for the coming year. For the last several weeks, parishioners have given testimonials describing what this congregation means to them. Now it is my turn. Like some of those who have shared already, I have a love story to tell.

I grew up in a Unitarian Universalist church. My family attended every week, and all of us were active in the congregation.

In many ways, my childhood was far from easy. I was shy, sensitive, and an easy target. I hated those moments in the school day when the kids were less closely supervised, because that was when my tormentors would move in. I was taunted on the school bus and in the lunch line. On my report card, my first grade teacher wrote this comment: “What a sad little girl.” In fifth grade I would go out for recess with all the other kids and simply stand there on the playground, alone, enduring those lonely moments, just praying for the bell to ring that would bring us back to class again.

These days, people would say I was bullied, and I was. Our culture has made great strides in recognizing and working to eliminate bullying behavior. Back then, I endured. I had few places of support. I had my family. And I had my church.

Now, my church was like many others, offering the same smattering of worship services, pot luck suppers, auctions, classes for children and adults, music, and interfaith gatherings that many churches offer. It was filled with very human people, much like all other religious institutions. They argued, they made mistakes, they sang off key, they confused their own private agendas with the purpose of the larger institution. But they consistently remembered that part of their job was to create a place where young people could learn and grow, feeling surrounded by the arms of community and love. Where I was so lonely in the wider world, I had a place at my church.

At church, you didn't have to be the teacher's pet to have a part to play on religious education Sunday. You didn't have to be popular at school to be greeted with genuine affection at church or to be given an important job to do in a special service. You didn't have to wear the right kind of clothes or know the right people for the members of the congregation to wrap you in a cloak of concern and love and care.

For every week I walked through my lonely days at school, my church offered up heaps of affection on Sunday. They helped me to loosen the pinching in my heart and to live with more wonder, serenity, kindness, and wisdom. They helped me to value my sensitive nature and to transform into compassion the hurt that could so easily have turned to bitterness. They taught me that love heals, and then they loved me. The love they gave me was a significant factor in shaping me, transforming my loneliness and pain into something else. Their gift was a backside redemption for which I will always be grateful.

They were just people, those folks. Just ordinary, quirky, messed-up, fallible people. People who lived with their own fears and disappointments, their own loneliness and

confusion. Just people gathered to form community together, in the hopes that in doing so they would shape their souls, transform their lives, and bring one tiny speck of transformation into the world with them wherever they went. People kind of like the people here today, gathered to be a spiritual community, to welcome all, to nurture one another, to work for justice, and to care for the earth.

I get nervous when we launch our pledge drive because I so want this congregation to continue to create the kind of community that gathers in those who seem lost or broken, the kind of community that will see the beauty and possibility in a child who hurts inside, the kind of community that will gentle one another as we face our last illness and final days, the kind of community that evaluates the world outside and determines to bind up the fractures and bridge the chasms.

Someday, a sad little child may walk through these doors. Perhaps that child is here already. Perhaps that elder is here already. Perhaps that harried, young parent is here already. Maybe sitting right beside you. Maybe sitting inside your skin. You know they say loneliness is one of the greatest scourges of our times. I want our church to be here to provide an antidote to these lonely times.

We have no outside source of money – just what we give ourselves, or raise ourselves in various fund raising events, or collect in rent for this building. Like so many religious institutions, we have to be economical and prudent, because our budget is always tight. That's OK. Thriftiness is a good thing. But, in our giving, let's make sure we are generous enough to support the incredible dreams we are privileged to share with one another.

I give generously to this church as I have to the others in my past. I never miss the money. Besides, what I receive in return is worth so much more. I receive a vibrant community of people that, with all their foibles and human frailties, tries so very hard to love each other into their best selves. In this world, it's hard to find communities that put

love at the center of things.

I receive a varied community, where the generations make meaning, explore, and have fun together. In this world, where the various ages and stages are usually so segregated, I value that cross-generational pollination.

I receive a spiritual community that stops to breathe, be in silence, and contemplate together. In this world of bursting calendars and the stress of over-commitment, those moments when we have an opportunity to slow down and reach deep into our hearts and souls have worth beyond measure.

I receive a thoughtful, conscientious community that is committed to doing right by one another and by the world beyond these doors. In this world where egotism and greed, both, can too often hold sway, what a relief it is to find myself with people who have chosen a different path.

Here we get to test out what it means to live so that there's a little shimmer of grace left behind when we've gone.

“Backside redemption isn't straightforward or easy. It doesn't fall down on us from on high or come in a flash of illumination,” says Kathleen McTigue. And here we are, just ordinary folks, engaged in creating the miracle of transformation here, together, in this, the Backside Redemption Church. And I am filled with awe and wonder and gratitude.