

*O Love that wilt not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee;
I give thee back the life I owe,
That in thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.¹*

Redeeming the Power of God

by Donne Hayden

I admit to being resistant to the idea of redemption as it was presented to me when I was a child attending a Southern Baptist church, i.e., that because I was so bad and sinful, God (who seemed to know I was coming) had, 2000 years earlier, required his son, Jesus, to die on the cross to make up for my wrongdoing. Since Jesus had redeemed me with his suffering and death, however, it was possible for me to be forgiven and admitted into heaven. Even as a child I thought this intolerably cruel on God's part—not only that he would do such a thing to his own son, but that I should be saddled with the guilt of having made it necessary!

So redemption is not a concept that has attracted me in Christianity. This past week, however, I read some of *Between God and Man* by Rabbi Abraham J. Heschel, which is so densely packed with ideas I can read only bits of it at a time. The bit I've been focusing on is Heschel's explanation of the human response to the Divine through our deeds. He writes: "Something is asked of man, of all men, at all times. In every act we either answer or defy, we either return or move away, we either fulfill or miss the goal. Life consists of endless

¹Lyrics by George Matheson, "Love That Will Not Let Me Go," Hymn #177, *Worship in Song*.

opportunities to sanctify the profane, opportunities to redeem the Power of God from the chain of potentialities, opportunities to serve spiritual ends.”²

I understand “Life consists of endless opportunities to sanctify the profane,” i.e., we have many chances to perceive the holy in the ordinary and mundane—as William Blake said: “To see a world in a grain of sand, /And a heaven in a wild flower, /Hold infinity in the palm of your hand, /And eternity in an hour.” And I have no trouble understanding that “life consists ... of opportunities to serve spiritual ends.”

But the phrase “To redeem the Power of God from the chain of potentialities” stopped me. What in the world does that mean? How does one “redeem the Power of God”? First, what IS the “Power of God”? In the Jewish and Christian tradition, the “Power of God” is most powerfully apparent in love and compassion. Over and over we see the power of God related to the power of Love. Would “redeeming the Power of God” equate to redeeming love and compassion?

“He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8)

‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ (Matthew 22:37-39)

The word “redeem” has several meanings, among them:

1 a : to buy back : REPURCHASE **b** : to get or win back; 2 to free from what distresses or harms: as **a** : to free from captivity by payment of ransom **b** : to extricate from or help to overcome something detrimental **c** : to release from blame or debt.

² Abraham J. Heschel, *Between God and Man*, page 86

So “to redeem the Power of God” would mean to get or win back love; to rid love of whatever distresses or harms it; to free love from whatever holds it captive; to extricate or untangle love from whatever binds it. All interesting concepts based on the idea that the power of the God, i.e., love, may be bound by something—tangled up in a “chain of potentialities”—from which humans can release it through their deeds or actions.

What about the phrase “the chain of potentialities”? In this chapter Heschel focuses how humans respond to the Divine through our deeds or actions, so “potentialities” must refer to the choices we make, the actions we choose from all potential actions. Like links in a chain, each action connects to another set of potential actions, and that one connects to another, and so on. Each time I choose a particular action, I set in motion succeeding deeds or actions, each with its own subsequent cause and effect like rows of dominoes toppling. For instance, if choose to take revenge on someone who hurt me, that leads to more pain and less love; the power of God which is released in love is held captive by the desire for revenge. If I select a different potentiality and choose to forgive someone who hurts me, I set love free, thus redeeming “the Power of God.”

Heschel says our lives are filled with opportunities to choose options that lead to love and compassion, options that “free from what distresses or harms,” options that overcome what is detrimental, options that give back to life and allow us to redeem the power of God within us in every act of love and compassion.

I found instances of this kind of redemption in a couple of other books I've read recently. First a short book by one of my favorite authors, Thomas Cahill, *A Saint on Death Row: How a Forgotten Child Became a Man and Changed a World*.³

Dominique Green was executed in 2004 at the age of 29. He had served on Death Row at Huntsville Prison in Texas since he was 18 for participating in a robbery in which the victim was killed. Dominique admitted the robbery, but claimed he was innocent of the killing, though he refused to name the person who was with him.

In a brief description from an information sheet given to the press by his supporters, Dominique Green is described as "an unloved, African American young man, who was poor in spirit as well as material goods" (140) According to Thomas Cahill's research, Green's trial was a fiasco, characterized by racism and injustice, so much so, that Dominique's guilt or innocence of the murder will never be known. But that's not what the book is about. The book is about how Dominique Green spent the years in prison waiting to die. About how his life in prison "redeemed the Power of God from the chain of potentialities." Locked up on Death Row, Dominique had few potential choices, the most obvious being that he could succumb to bitterness and hatred, or he could be depressed, hopeless and drift through the last years of his time on earth. He chose to do something else, something that redeemed his life; his choice released love from the chain of potentialities.

First he got over his anger at the injustice. Then he educated himself. Finally, inspired by Desmond Tutu's book, *No Future Without Forgiveness* about the Truth and Reconciliation

³ Thomas Cahill, *A Saint on Death Row: How a Forgotten Child Became a Man and Changed a World*. (New York: Anchor Books, 2009).

Commission in South Africa, Green “realized this was the path that he and his fellow inmates must take.” “Under Dominique’s influence,” writes Cahill,

many, perhaps even most, of the inmates on Death Row in the State of Texas have now forgiven everyone who has harmed them and, insofar as they can, have asked forgiveness from those they have harmed. Dominique is convinced that he has a vocation to inspire the kids who turn up on Death Row to drop their petty hatreds and to morph into larger, more generous human beings—in the same way that older inmates, since executed, once provided spiritual models for him to follow. (4)

By the time he died in 2004, Dominique Green had met Bishop Desmond Tutu and, through tireless letter-writing and correspondence, had helped launch a world-wide movement against the death penalty. Eventually, Desmond Tutu, who visited Green in a Texas prison, and at a press conference afterward, spoke against the death penalty in the United States: “You are a very generous people, Americans, and it is very difficult to square with your remarkable vindictiveness, which doesn’t square with your remarkable generosity. . . . Don’t dehumanize yourselves as a society by carrying out the death penalty!”⁴ Because of the life-in-prison of Dominique Green, a few more countries moved toward abolishing the death penalty. Ironically, his own country, the United States, shares its continued commitment to the death penalty with such nations as China, Iran and Saudi Arabia.⁵

⁴ Cahill, p. 84.

⁵ Cahill, who was in Italy when Dominique Green was executed, looking out over some Roman ruins, writes, “The Romans were intensely proud of their accomplishments, and they built the longest-lasting empire the world has ever known. . . . Though they knew they were great, they didn’t know they were cruel. That was something they kept carefully hidden from themselves.”⁵ Though Cahill does not state the connection to our own country, it is unmistakable.

I'm only half-way through *In the Place of Justice* by Wilbert Rideau, but already I can see that in Rideau's 44 years behind bars he also has redeemed his life, ransoming it from meaningless violence, redeeming "the Power of God from the chain of potentialities." Like Dominique Green, Wilbert Rideau is African American and like Green, he also was 18 years old when—during a botched robbery—he killed a woman. Though Rideau did not claim to be innocent, his trial in Louisiana during the 60s was filled with illegalities and violations of his rights. Like Dominique Green, in his years on Death Row, Rideau began reading to pass the time and in this way, educated himself. He writes:

*Reading ultimately allowed me to feel empathy, to emerge from my cocoon of self-centeredness and appreciate the humanness of others It enabled me finally to appreciate the enormity of what I had done, the depth of damage I had caused others. ... That I did not mean to kill Julia Ferguson did not change the fact that she had died because of what I did.*⁶

Becoming aware led Rideau to despair; "weighed down by guilt, remorse, and the impossible situation" he found himself in, he considered suicide. When he expressed his feelings to Thomas Goins, a fellow prisoner on Death Row, Goins challenged him.

*"How is your dying supposed to benefit your victim? Or your momma? You can justify it any way you like, but it's all about you, not the people you jerked around. How can you make up for what you did if you're dead? If you wanted to do something for them, you wouldn't let their suffering be in vain. You'd fight to make some good come of it, and try to make things right. Nothing's impossible, man—until you quit."*⁷

⁶ Wilbert Rideau, *In the Place of Justice: A Story of Punishment and Deliverance* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), p.45-46.

⁷ Rideau, p. 47.

Goins' words led Rideau to recall books he had read about Malcom X and others who spent time in prison, "scoundrels who had been as empty and worthless as I," Rideau writes, *who had gone on to re-create their lives, redeem themselves, and become respected by their fellow humans for their good works . . . I found hope, a burning need to live to redeem myself, to do something meaningful with my life in partial payment of the debts I owed—to Julia Ferguson and her loved ones, to my family, to society, and to God, who gave me free will to make better choices than I had.*

*The world could define me as "criminal," but I did not have to live its definition of me. I resolved that I would not let my crime be the final definition.*⁸

In 1972, the Louisiana Supreme Court ordered all condemned prisoners to be resentenced to life imprisonment instead of execution. Wilbert Rideau eventually served 44 years in Louisiana prisons; he was finally released in 2005. During his years in prison, Rideau was editor of *The Angolite*, "a prison magazine that during his tenure was nominated seven times for a National Magazine Award." While in prison, he was a correspondent for National Public Radio, and he "co-directed the Academy Award-nominated film *The Farm: Angola, USA*." He has received various awards including the Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Award, and was awarded a Soros Justice Fellowship in 2007. He currently works as a consultant with the Federal Death Penalty Resource Counsel Project.⁹

I've always struggled with the death penalty, one part of me thinking there is some justice in it, the other part knowing the hypocrisy of killing people to punish them for killing people. Reading these two books has opened my eyes and heart to the idea that a person may

⁸ Rideau, pp. 47-48.

⁹ Rideau, book dust jacket, back.

find redemption, may choose to release love, the Power of God, even in prison. It is not my place, nor anyone else's, to prevent the possibility of redemption, the possibility that the Spirit can work even with those the rest of us have condemned. Granted, some may be beyond redemption, but which of us can make that determination? I am not comfortable doing so.

We owe something for our life—something is asked of us in exchange for the gift of life. Does this bother you? That this gift you didn't ask for requires something of you? Can we yet say, "I give thee back the life I owe"? Do we experience a burning need to do something meaningful with our lives in partial payment of the debts we owe? Many of us resist the idea of being "in debt" to the divine simply by virtue of existing. But if we accept the responsibility for releasing the power of love, we give meaning to our lives. When we give back for "the life we owe," when we steer our lives in the direction of good, when we make choices that lead to the highest, kindest, most compassionate outcomes, we not only "redeem the Power of God," we redeem ourselves.