

Salvation in the Stacks

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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They were called the Stacks, the primary shelving area for the library at the University of California at Berkeley, one of the major libraries of the world. The Stacks had a character all of their own. Access to them was limited to faculty, graduate students, visiting scholars, and library employees. Hundreds of thousands of books with narrow aisles between, and surprisingly few people. The Stacks didn't have floors; instead they had tiers. Many years ago each floor had been horizontally divided into two tiers, so that the ceilings were very low, touchable. The tiers were made of glass — mottled, translucent glass — which you could not see through, but if there was someone on the tier above you, you could see the soles of their shoes, black silhouettes just above your head. You could also get occasional glimpses of the people on the tier above or below by standing very close to the shelves, for the shelving was continuous vertically, not ending at each tier, but rather uniting the whole building along an axis which extended from the nether regions to the highest heavens.

For a few years, I had a study carrel, a metal cubicle with a wooden chair, down on the very lowest tier of the Stacks. I very rarely saw another person down there on Tier One. People just didn't come down that far very often, at least not on purpose. It was a desolate land of outcasts, exiles, and a few lost souls looking for a way back into the real world, a passage only possible on Tier Four. The books on Tier One were outcasts too. Most of the books were PL-480 books, volumes which the library received in monthly doses from India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The United States had made a deal with these countries at sometime, known as Public Law 480, in which it promised to purchase copies of everything (literally everything) published by any state or federal printing house in any of these countries. It was a way for these countries to offset some of their debt to the United States. All of the PL-480 books in English were weeded out by the library for cataloging, and the rest, in Hindi, in Urdu, in Singhalese, and in a variety of other languages were simply deposited onto the shelves of Tier One, uncatalogued and unordered. Occasionally, I could observe an employee stacking PL-480 books onto the shelves, but I never saw anyone take one off, except myself. The only other books on Tier One were double-folios and triple-folios, all grossly oversized books which couldn't fit on the shelves where they belonged, and were therefore exiled to Tier One, where they lay heavily and disarranged.

If there is a Hell for bad books, this was it. And it was there, amid the dust-odoured air and the low drone of elevator engines, with jet-black feet walking just above my head, and with thousands of never-read books surrounding me, where I began to get some first inklings of a meaning of salvation.

One afternoon or morning — one could never be sure which it was when buried on Tier One — I decided that I had worked too many hours on a term paper, so I ambled over to the triple-folio section to pick up where I had left off. It had become my own private library to be used on breaks.

I even had a paper marker, never disturbed by anyone else, to show my progress as I methodically went through these mammoth books like a paleontologist marking each bone of some yet-to-be-constructed dinosaur. Yet this day was a little different, for even in the lowliest of places we are sometimes

struck with a new revelation. A huge book lay before me on the floor, the only place large enough for me to be able to read it. Facing me were immense, detailed, hand-coloured, black-and-white photographs of Istanbul at the beginning of the 1900's. The pictures were of the prominent sites of the city, but in some I could also see children playing in the streets, and in one photograph there was a beggar, just barely visible in a darkened doorway at the very edge of the print; a beggar of whom I still wonder whether the editing eye of the photographer missed him or saw him standing there. I was moved by these grand pictures of a very foreign city. On the inside back cover of the book, a yellowed circulation slip was neatly pasted. There were no marks upon it. I turned the heavy pages back to the front of the book, where a University of California stamp told me that the book had been acquired in 1921, and I realized that in all of those years, the book had never been checked out, not even once, not by anyone. Quite likely no patron had ever looked inside of it, and perhaps no one besides me, not even the photographer, had ever seen that beggar standing in the doorway.

The book was quite a handful with its heavy photographic paper. I had to awkwardly cradle it in both arms as I lugged it up to the checkout aisle on Tier Four. I felt a bit of a cold shiver as I watched the innocent student employee methodically stamp a date in the back. Of course he had no idea what he was really doing. Then, I walked the book out into the lobby and around the desk, over to the return book deposit and slid it into the slot — only it didn't fit so I had to leave it on the counter. In a few days it found its own way back down to the Tier One sorting shelves, from where I personally took it back to its proper place on the shelf, right next to my paper marker. But before I put it back, I opened the back cover. There, clearly marked in black ink, were these significant words, "Due 30 days after the date stamped: May 2, 1972." And below that, in majestic purple ink, "Returned: May 2, 1972." The book was truly saved. Not only had someone used it for the purpose for which it had been created, but that fulfilment was also physically marked upon it in a way that could be universally recognized.

After that day, I spent many of my breaks wandering throughout all of the tiers of the library looking for books to save. It did not really matter what they were about; my only criterion was that no one had used the book for fifty years or more. I would take the books home for a few days, so that the check-out and return dates would not be identical, which could suggest some accidental borrowing rather than a true and meaningful use. Always, I would read a little in them to discover what they were about, and thus the stamp of use was honest and not a sham. I saved many books that year.

A number of years later, I happened to be stuck over night in Sacramento, California. I had a place to sleep, but it was such a hovel that I chose to walk around the city until it was very late and I was very sleepy. I passed a man sitting at a table in a park.

"Hey buddy," he called out to me, "what's the hurry?"

I hesitated.

"D'ya got a minute?"

"Sure," I said.

He was living on the street. He talked about his wife and children. He hadn't seen his son in twelve years.

"I'm just an old wino, I know. It's all my own doin', but it don't mean it don't hurt sometimes. Like I kinda wonder what my boy is doin'."

And we talked for about an hour.

“Thanks,” he said when I finally chose to leave. “Ya know, I ain’t never told this to no one before. Thanks.”

At the time, I did not think of the unused, unread, and unfulfilled books in the library, but I have since. I walked on alone, along the street paralleling the park.

Someone else called out, “Hey, you got a quarter you could spare?”

I raised my gaze and saw that there were quite a few homeless men in the park, some in groups, some alone. Tier One Sacramento — but it could have been anywhere — a place where people get deposited when they don’t fit on the normal shelves of our society. There were people there, people who might never get checked out by anyone who cared, people who might never again be cradled in someone’s arms, however awkwardly, however fleetingly. What power we have to stamp little marks of our presence on another’s life. And how breath-takingly important are other’s marks upon us. There is salvation in the human touch, salvation in the human connection.

Years later, I got a job in another library, one quite different from that of the University of California. I was hired to begin the process of reactivating an old library in a Benedictine seminary in Oakland, California. My sole duties were to keep the doors open and to be present for a few hours each day to serve the patrons in whatever ways they needed. Yet the patrons rarely came, as the library had been closed for twelve years and no one was in the habit of using it.

Alone, my attention soon became directed towards the books, covered with spider webs, thick dust and abandonment. I began the cleaning, the revival, shelf by shelf, feeling again a sense of salvation around me. Then, unexpectedly, a small card escaped like a soul from one of the buried books as I handled it. The bookmark of some aspiring priest, it was a religious card, marking a special mass. [Show slide.] To me it was a treasure, a mark of salvation. A short time later, a second card descended upon me from a book I was moving on a top shelf, and then another, and then suddenly I was being blessed with a shower of cards, obviously sent down from the heavens above in celebration of this period of salvation and jubilation. [Next two slides.]

These cards mark another kind of salvation, the discovery of those amazing little treasures which lay hidden within our leathern covers. People are full of unseen treasures; we are full of them ourselves. Sometimes they are simple treasures; sometimes they are more profound. They surface within transitions: from being closed to becoming open, being untouched to being cradled; they surface when relationships are formed, new decisions are made, or change is taking place. Within these transitions we often discover unrealized talents and resources within ourselves, see with a different vision, or feel emotions that had been dormant, and as such, we release the little treasures we have kept within the pages of our experience and thus feel this form of salvation.

What is salvation? Here I am talking about checking-out old books, stopping to talk with strangers in a city, and dusting off old libraries of personal potential? Not the kind of salvation generally discussed today. The word, “salvation,” comes from the same Latin root as the word, “salvage,” and my stories of salvation this morning are more about salvaging than they are about transcending. I believe that the resources for salvation are all around us and within us — in things overlooked or not yet fully seen, in crannies yet to be explored, treasures yet to be unearthed, hands yet to be touched, and in feelings yet to be resolved. The root of both salvage and salvation is *salus*, which in Latin means “safe,” “whole” and “healthy.” Salvage is the reviving of health, the restoring to wholeness, the retaining of the best. Salvage is about being saved.

When I was a child, long before I began saving books from an eternal shelf-life, I used to take periodic trips with my family to The Peck Road Wrecking Yard, a huge depository for the potentially saleable pieces of buildings demolished throughout the Los Angeles region. Again, it was rather like a type of paleontology, with the bones of extinct buildings strewn randomly throughout the site, many even buried beneath the remains of more recent mammoths meeting the same fate as their forerunners.

My father was big on salvaging. For many years, he worked on “fixing-up” the old house in which we lived. “Fixing-up” usually meant the finding of usable bits of buildings from the Peck Road Wrecking Yard and then somehow integrating them into our home. There were some beautiful things that were thus saved via the salvage yard. Our living room was panelled in old, solid wood doors, with the thick, sun-cracked paint simply varnished over, giving them the appropriated texture of dinosaur hide. We found porcelain door knobs and brass plumbing fixtures, tongue-and-groove flooring and purple, sun-tinted glass. I thus grew up surrounded by expressions of salvation without realizing it.

Salvation is salvage. In bringing the lustre back to a tarnished relationship, in replacing a worn gear so that a broken pattern of behaviour becomes smooth-running again, in finding the missing part which makes us whole again, in these we are saved, in these we become more whole, more healthy and more safe.

Of course, I am playing with the word salvation a bit today, stretching its definition to explore the breadth of its meaning, sensing that there is more to this concept than what is conveyed through its common usage. Today, the word salvation is more or less owned by the religious right, and describes either a post-mortem release from suffering, or a sudden conversion to fundamentalist Christianity which, in itself, implies the same eventual release from suffering. To me, salvation similarly means a release from suffering, only I consider this to be a worldly ideal rather than an other worldly one. The pathway to salvation lies in becoming more healthy and more whole emotionally, spiritually, humanly. The resources for our salvation are right here within our human reach and right here among our human interactions, whenever we tune into the personal and interpersonal truths of living. Salvation is a lifetime journey, but we do not have to wait until death to experience it.

We are saved over and over again, or can be saved, by discovering in where we are, the connections of the moment that will take us further along towards where we want to go, towards our wholeness, towards our health. It doesn't even matter all that much where we are. Back when I was wandering around the desolate aisles of Tier One, it was relatively easy for those who did not belong there to find salvation. Occasionally, when someone accidentally came down to that nether region looking for the real exit, I could simply point them towards the elevator and explain that the release from their suffering was really on Tier Four.

No one ever came back, and my assumption was that all were saved. But for me, I sought no such release. Tier One was the place where I belonged, and my salvation in that place involved a process of immersion rather than one of escape.

A path to salvation is everywhere. There are unlimited connections which can be made wherever we are. We are each showered with unsolicited bookmarks, gifts of connection to other people and places and times, blessings which can carry us another step forward along the way. We are always surrounded by possibilities, and yet it is too easy to make no connection at all, touch no one, and go nowhere. Our

salvation depends upon our conscious and creative choices to see the treasures which lie beneath the dust, to hear the human truths even within broken lives, to find those connections which lead to healing, or in other words, to salvage the meaningful hidden beneath the strata of the everyday.

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