

Freedom
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A couple of years ago I went camping and hiking in Shenandoah National Park for the first time. I was delighted to learn that the trail to the highest point in the park, up over 4,000 feet, did not involve any fancy gear or cliff edges. There is a really pretty, and relatively easy, trail that takes you to the peak. I went on the trail early in the morning just before dawn, with my dog Deja, because the morning before she had woken up the campground at dawn, letting everyone know that there were deer around. Anyway, we were on the trail, and there were also deer in the woods having breakfast, but they must have been upwind and Deja didn't notice them. When we got to the top, there was a lot of wind. The sun had just cleared the peaks around us and it was one of the prettiest sights I had ever seen. I was awestruck, looking out at the sun, and clouds, a pink and blue sky, green mountains all around, and a little stone platform and wall that the Civilian Conservation Corps had built during the Great Depression so that folks could go to the edge without having to worry about getting blown off the mountain. We sat and looked out for quite some time. I took a million pictures, we had a snack and headed back down to the car to pack up and drive home. I didn't see another person until we were back down the trail.

There are a lot of freedoms layered into that experience, and privileges. The freedom to hike, to travel away from my home and cross state lines, to bring my dog with me, to drive a car, to travel unaccompanied, to carry bear spray, to set my own schedule and do something joy and awe-filled. Some of the privileges were to have vacation time, to own a camera and camping gear, to have been taught how to navigate in the woods and read a map, and lots more.

What does freedom mean? Does it mean that we get to do whatever we want? That would be hedonism, right? Does it mean we are entirely without constraint? In part, freedom means that we are able to make choices without the constraining factors being a result of oppression or unjust laws. In our Second Sunday School class last week, we also discussed how feelings of personal freedom can change over time. For example, we explored the experience of loss of some physical freedom in aging. Is freedom a process, a destination, a state of being?

The Church of the Larger Fellowship is a congregation without walls that offers worship and resources online. Some of its members are Unitarian Universalists who are incarcerated, and for many years we have sent holiday cards to those folks in December. Those of you who were in class last week heard this reading, but I wanted to share it again. This is a reflection from George, an incarcerated member of Church of the Larger Fellowship:¹

What is freedom? Is it an ideal, concept or right? Why are there so many people who are locked up inside themselves?

I've seen those who had to come to prison before they could learn what it meant to be free on the inside—it's liberating.

¹<https://www.questformeaning.org/quest-article/free-on-the-inside/>

True freedom starts when we remove self-doubt, stop limiting ourselves, and find the things that empower us. Freedom is not the pursuit of happiness—that pursuit is in opposition to freedom. Seeking happiness is like trying to get to tomorrow. It never comes!

Freedom is being free from restrictions, limitations, social norms, expectations, false hopes, etc. Freedom also is knowing that we are made of God. Every cell within our body is infused with God's energy.

Therefore, we are created to be divine. We are more powerful than we know—we are free!

George writes that freedom is not the pursuit of happiness, freedom isn't getting everything you want – for George, freedom is a state of understanding the relationship of each of us to the universe and the power in that relationship. Some limitations on freedom come from circumstance, some from society and oppression, from ability, and some from our own expectations of what is possible or probable. When our movement and choices are restricted because of age, ability, incarceration, patriarchy, or any number of -isms, we experience less relative freedom than others, and perhaps than ourselves in another time and context. George argues that we are more powerful than we know, that we are free. And he is right, at the deepest level, in our relationship with mystery, we all have the potential for connection with all that is. Connecting with that mystery, engaging in deep self-reflection can be hard to do. This is probably why he also notes that, in his experience, some people had to come to prison before they could feel free on the inside. I can only imagine what that experience of both controlled and endless time might feel like in a space like prison. Finding internal freedom, freedom in connection, doesn't mean that we don't grieve access to freedoms we may have once enjoyed or that we continue to seek.

Collective freedom and liberation offers another kind of opportunity for reflection and action. Brittany Packnett is an activist, leader, scholar and teacher who I encourage you to learn more about if you are unfamiliar with her work. She was the Ware lecturer at our Unitarian Universalist General Assembly 2018 and these are some excerpts from the conclusion of her talk:²

AND THIS-THIS IS THE MOST IMPORTANT PART: BUILD. SOMETHING. NEW.
OUR MYOPIC VIEW OF REVOLUTION IS CENTERED IN DESTRUCTION.
DESTRUCTION OF SYSTEMS AND STRUCTURES AND OUTMODED STATUS
QUOS THAT WERE NEVER MEANT TO SERVE ALL PEOPLE WELL.

THE TEARING DOWN IS SEXY, BUT THE FREEDOM COMES IN THE BUILDING.
IF WE ONLY BATTLE, AND WE NEVER BUILD, WE WILL STILL BE LEFT ON
THIS PATCH OF THE UNIVERSE TO LIVE WITH ONE ANOTHER AMONG THE
RUBBLE. YOUR HOME SHOULD BE DIFFERENT BECAUSE OF YOUR WORK.
YOUR CHURCHES SHOULD BE MORE INCLUSIVE BECAUSE OF YOUR
LABOR. ...

2 <https://www.uua.org/ga/past/2018/ware> (this is unedited text from the closed captioning system)

I DARE YOU TO SHIFT YOUR SPIRIT OF EXPECTANCY ABOUT WHAT THIS WORLD CAN BE BY EXPECTING THE CHANGE TO COME FROM YOU. ... I DARE YOU TO RESIST THE URGE TO DO THIS WORK BECAUSE YOU WANT TO SAVE-DO IT BECAUSE YOU WANT TO SERVE. ...

I LEAVE YOU WITH THIS, WITH A SPIRIT OF EXPECTANCY. ... WITH EXPECTATIONS ABOUT WHAT WE ARE PROVOKED NOT JUST TO THINK, BUT TO DO ON THIS DAY AND EVERY DAY, KNOWING THAT ANTWON ROSE AND CHIKESIA CLEMONS AND MICHAEL BROWN REQUIRE US TO COME AS ONE, BUT STAND AS 10,000. I LEAVE YOU WITH A SPIRIT OF EXPECTANCY, THAT WHAT WE WILL BIRTH TOGETHER WILL BE FREEDOM. RIGHT HERE, RIGHT NOW.

GOD BLESS YOU. LET'S GET FREE.

It was a powerful moment. “The tearing down is sexy, but the freedom comes in the building.” Ms. Packnett offered some tough love and inspiration for our denomination that night. We, like many institutions, and people have a propensity for trying to think our way out of problems and not focusing enough on the doing. And we have a hard time with change. If we are to have a denomination and a society with broader freedoms for all people, not just some, requires change in ways we cannot fully imagine because we have never experienced it before. However, we do have the wisdom and experience of history, reminding us how we and our institutions changed at times of building for freedom in the past.

452 years ago the Edict of Torda was signed by King John Sigismund in Transylvania. It promised religious toleration, freedom of the pulpit, and freedom of thought in his community, the first of it's kind in Europe. When John Sigismund died and a new King came to power, the Edict was rescinded, but there was no putting free thought back in the bottle. It may have taken a couple of centuries of painful bloodshed, but Protestantism by nature, like republics and democracy, has at its foundations, the requirement that it be open to change and interpretation, for better and worse. Underpinning these traditions is a belief that human beings have a right to self-determination and that no one person owns truth.

In their founding Unitarianism and Universalism broke open ideas of biblical interpretation, theology, and the roles people are called to play in shaping a just society. In the 1830s William Ellery Channing preached against slavery in a community of wealthy, newly Unitarian people in Boston who benefited directly from the slave trade, through banking and industry. In the 1850s, Theodore Parker was more direct and called his large Boston congregation to civil disobedience in fighting fugitive slave laws. Together with the Congregationalists, we were the first to ordain women in 1863, almost 60 years before women's suffrage and Unitarian and Universalist women organized aggressively to gain the freedom to vote. Seeking greater freedom – personal freedom, political and social freedom, religious freedom, freedom of thought, is part of our Unitarian Universalist history, and will be part of our future.

Freedom is a lot of things. It is a state of being, an ideal, an organizing principle, a call to change—it is in reflection and in the doing. In Unitarian Universalism we are called to work for justice and freedom for all people. And that requires action and change. And we are called to find internal freedom. We may not experience every freedom ourselves – but we all need the experience of some, of moments of awe, of self-determination, of choosing, and of connection to all that is. In “Caged Bird” Presidential Medal of Freedom recipient, Maya Angelou, reminds us that free birds do not *need* to recognize their freedom, because they are free to fly, hunt and sing, but that the caged bird, the imprisoned bird, all they can do is sing for freedom.

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.

May *we* recognize the privileges of the freedoms we experience because of the bravery of those who have gone before us willing not only to fight for change, but to build freedom. To build something. Our theological foreparents built Unitarian Universalism as a religious home for heretics and free thinkers, for justice seekers to work for freedom for themselves and others. What are we called to build in our own lives, in this community, and in our world?

Let's get free.
Amen.