

Freedom and Accountability  
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Around the country today, folks will celebrate the passage of the Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776. On that day, thirteen colonies, signed the document stating that they would separate from England. I was reading about Thomas Paine and his pamphlet *Common Sense* the other day, which was a bestseller at the time and credited with convincing the general public to separate from England. In the words of John Adams, *Common Sense*, “like a ray of revelation, has come in seasonably to clear our doubts, and to fix our choice.”<sup>1</sup> Paine grew up Quaker, and later became a Deist, a close cousin of early Unitarianism. Paine was an abolitionist, though he said little *publicly* to support this, and supported a universal basic income and believed in the role of government to redistribute wealth through taxation. He was an idealist about the power of democracy, and wanted decisions to be made by the people, not just a small group of white Protestant men, rather than a king. Paine found himself in trouble during the French Revolution, which he supported, but did not support the execution of the aristocracy and was nearly killed himself. After help from then President Jefferson to get out of French prison, and back to the United States of America, which Paine had named, he got in trouble for his Deism, and for his rhetoric calling the new leaders of the country to be more radical in their governance. Paine was ostracized and at his memorial, there were six mourners, including his housekeeper and her two children.<sup>2</sup>

Religious freedom was fundamental to the founding of the United States, and Unitarian Universalism would not be here without it. Then and now there are great differences between ideals and practice and whose voices and experience are valued and protected. We have come far from 1776 and have much farther to go. And, within the structure of our society there *are* tools to make change. They are imperfect, designed for white Christian men with wealth, and, even so, folks over the last 245 years have slowly pushed and pulled us toward greater justice and representation for all people.

This day is often heralded as a celebration of freedom. Whether we are talking about climate, workers rights, white supremacy culture, the future of democracy, the prison industrial complex, a global pandemic, failed insurrection, half the country on fire, or any number of critical issues facing us today, it has become clear that some folks are operating with different understandings of what freedom means. Some think that freedom is to be free to do whatever they want, even if it hurts other people, without accountability or consequences. That there is some inherent right, based on their identity to take and do what they wish. That is not freedom, that is hedonism, or feudalism, or “the id” run wild. It is an understanding of freedom that does not take into account the experience of others and causes suffering. I would describe freedom as the ability to make choices free from fear of reprisal or coercion, by those who seek power over others. We are responsible for the impact of our actions and choices, we are accountable, as should be our government to us. In order to support the ability for us all to make choices in our lives, there are some things that we decide on together through laws and policies whose outcome ultimately we may not agree with, or would not support on our own. In fact,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.history.com/news/thomas-paine-common-sense-revolution>

<sup>2</sup> Mo Rocca, *Mobituaries*, 2019

there are a lot of things like that. And as part of a representative democracy, when that happens, we get to work.

In their poem we heard earlier, Rev. Soto writes:

Being free is not a license, but  
A promise.<sup>3</sup>

Let me say that again. “Being free is not a license, but a promise.” We are accountable for and to one another. Which is why we are continuing to wear masks together in worship, so that kids of all ages, and folks who might be immunocompromised can come to worship with us. And why we are doing everything we can to make sure that our folks on Zoom continue to be strongly connected to worship in the building, and why we are exploring how we do and do not meet the needs of folks with disabilities who are in our community, and why many of us are gathering to explore how bias and white supremacy culture impact our denomination, our congregation, and each of us. This is part of the promise to one another as part of a free faith. We need to pay attention, listen, and especially for those with privilege and power, to remember to whom we are accountable.

In his book *God Revised*, Rev. Galen Guengerich talks about freedom being the ability to choose. When people are less free, when systems of oppression are acting upon them, they have fewer choices. He writes, “my freedom increases only as the people and world around me expand my ability to choose and act. Freedom is a function not of independence but of reciprocity.”<sup>4</sup> Freedom is a lot of things. It is a state of being, an ideal, an organizing principle, and a call to change. In Unitarian Universalism we are called to work for justice and freedom for all people. And that requires action and accountability. Langston Hughes wrote in “Democracy”:

I tire so of hearing people say,  
Let things take their course.  
Tomorrow is another day.  
I do not need my freedom when I'm dead.  
I cannot live on tomorrow's bread.  
Freedom  
Is a strong seed  
Planted  
In a great need.  
I live here, too.  
I want my freedom  
Just as you.

Freedom is not the power and privilege to do anything. It is about options, about having a voice in the creation of laws and policy that govern our lives. Alongside white supremacy culture, *this* is the powerful thread *also* running through the founding of our country that we celebrate today. The founders of this country were flawed beings who did a lot of bad stuff. *And*, they helped create a representative democracy. Their work spread more choices, agency, and power to white men, and then, progressive folks, who often have shared our values and theologies, have been working to expand that access ever since.

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<sup>3</sup> Rev. Theresa I. Soto, “To the people who have mistaken freedom for liberation,” <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/poetry/freedom-liberation>

<sup>4</sup> Guengerich, Galen (2013-05-28). *God Revised: How Religion Must Evolve in a Scientific Age* (Kindle Locations 1587-1593, 2606-2615). Palgrave Macmillan. Kindle Edition.

Independence Day is a holiday to celebrate the founding of a state, but it is also an important day in our church history. The ideals of Unitarianism and Universalism, of work for justice being a theological and moral imperative, of freedom of belief, of our choices mattering, rather than being predestined by a controlling god, of the importance and value of each individual life, of the right to peace, liberty and justice for all. These ideas are bound together. The expansion of rights for individuals, and freedom from injustice, are part of our nation's history, and the history of our denomination. As we mark this day, may we lift up gratitude for the work already done, and take a real big deep breath as we prepare for what tomorrow brings. "Being free is not a license, but a promise." A promise we make to one another.

So may it be. Amen.