

Freedom from Evil: Collective Liberation
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver
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Reflection on the Theme by Emily Layfield

I've always been really worried about imposing on people. My version of social anxiety is that my brain loves coming up with all of the ways I could somehow annoy or inconvenience or embarrass other people so it can preemptively try to avoid inadvertently creating that outcome. It also likes to help me out by replaying all of my minor interactions later on, to give me the chance to find new interpretations of events that could have included me annoying, inconveniencing, or embarrassing someone. Just in case I might have missed them when I was still in the moment.

One way I've handled my brain's special interest is by erring on the side of keeping my distance from people, especially if I don't know them well enough to be able to accurately predict what might annoy, inconvenience, or embarrass them yet. When I'm feeling charitable to myself I recognize that instinct as coming from a considerate and sensitive place, but when I'm feeling less charitable I tell myself I'm making excuses for staying in my comfort zone.

I've been thinking about this inclination of mine in the context of this month's theme of 'freedom.' When I think about freedom, I think of the removal of external constraints and I think of individual agency of choice and of action. My approach to social interactions with strangers and new acquaintances somehow inverts that model. I have often used my free choice to constrain myself, because I so often fear that by my own moving freely through the world that I will be inadvertently infringing on other people moving through the world in their own ideal ways. Even in as small ways as not having to be blocked in a grocery store aisle, or not having to deal with social awkwardness.

When I spell it out it sounds ridiculous, I know, and even more ridiculous to be talking about something like this in comparison to the scale of freedoms we're more often talking about - freedoms of nations and peoples and identities. But reflecting on freedom in my little corner of the world got me thinking about how much of freedom isn't just about removing the measurable and external constraints that exist in the world, but also about what constraints are chosen, or else are products of our own perceptions or fears. And how in seeking one version of freedom, I might be closing off another, or even making a decision of what freedom should look like on someone else's behalf.

Often, in the pursuit of supposedly providing others with greater freedom by not imposing my presence or contribution, I've in another way removed their freedom to choose an opportunity I might have provided. For example, if I don't reach out to an acquaintance who is grieving, telling myself that they probably don't want to have to interact with me at such a difficult time, I'm not offering to help ease the constraints of suffering or loneliness. If I don't speak out about what I believe in, telling myself that people might feel annoyed, or if I don't volunteer, telling myself that I might hold back the group's efforts, I'm not providing the opportunity to others to make use of what I might be able to offer to a cause.

At least for me, I find freedom is often not a very straightforward idea. The same situations can be looked at with many different lenses, choices can serve different agendas, and the right way isn't always clear, but reflection is worthwhile, and perhaps it will nudge me towards the ideas of freedom that are more collaborative and collective.

***Freedom from Evil: Collective Liberation*© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert**

Our February theme was Evil. We examined all sorts of evils such as war, genocide, climate change, unequal distribution of wealth, oppression, and the difficult feelings which arise from these and other bad and hard things in life. Poverty as an evil is implied in the unequal distribution of wealth, but wasn't treated as its own topic. Poverty is the backdrop to an exploration of Liberation Theology, which I've chosen this first Sunday in March as we enter the theme of Freedom. This also explains why, all of a sudden, we've been using Spanish this morning, which I know that not all of you are familiar with. So, I appreciate your patience if you don't speak Spanish— but I think it's good to nudge all of us out of our comfort zones *un poquito*.

The other context to my remarks this morning is that Friday marked the 63rd anniversary of the founding of the Peace Corps. The mission of the Peace Corps is to promote world peace and friendship by fulfilling three goals: 1) to help the people of interested countries in meeting their need for trained people; 2) to help promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served; and 3) to help promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans. To that end, each March 1st, Returned Peace Corps Volunteers in this country are asked to promote a better understanding of the people they served. I don't always remember to do that, but as this sermon evolved, it became clear that I was fulfilling that joyful duty as well.

But I'll back up a little: I began a love affair with languages other than English and the Spanish language in particular in 5th grade when Senorita Lu, came into our classroom to teach it. I had friends, Carina Gómez, from Cuba, and María Loomis, from Costa Rica, who spoke Spanish at home and I always felt it was a terrible deprivation that my family spoke at home the same language we spoke at school. Athena Wong's family spoke Chinese, and Shinya Akamine's family spoke Japanese, but in my family we just spoke English. In any case, this love affair with the Spanish language eventually led to my stint in the Peace Corps in which I was sent to Honduras. In preparation for that two years, I read just about everything I could get my hands on about Latin America and Central America. I had a cousin who warned me that I would be a pawn of the US government in the colonization and exploitation of the country, but my need was so great to travel and to learn if I could actually communicate in a language other than English, I dismissed her warnings and went.

For the first year of my service, I lived in a Garífuna, Black Carib, village. Garifuna people descend from Africa and Amerindian natives. They arrived on a slave ship that wrecked among Amerindians – Carib and Arawak Indians - on an island far off the coast of Honduras. In that shipwreck they were freed, but later – like so many Black and Indigenous people, they were moved against their will to other places, and in this case, the North Coast of Honduras and Belize.

In any case, this little village I lived in was called Travesía. There was a single Catholic church, a post office, a community center and a school. There were a few *pulperías* – general stores run out of the homes of residents. But the church and post office were both run by Doña Concha. Priests only came around occasionally – maybe annually or biannually, so the church was run by lay people and specifically Doña Concha. Unlike any Catholic church I had ever been to, the people would sit around in a circle and sing terribly out of tune – I couldn't even tell what the melody was, and then Doña Concha would read from the bible, talk about the story a bit and invite conversation. The experience of these stories in this context was so different from any reading from the bible I had heard in churches – even Catholic churches – nobody standing in a raised pulpit reading from a big traditional Bible, but a lay person

reading from her well worn and read bible – likely one of the only people in the room who could read – and reflecting on the stories in real time. I remember how being “fishers of men” took on a whole new significance in this fishing village and how much closer their lives were to the stories of the lives of people in the bible – it actually felt relevant in a way I had never found the stories from the bible relevant to my life.

When I say that Doña Concha was one of the only people in the room who could read, that was not exaggeration. My job as a Peace Corps volunteer in that village was teaching reading and writing to the women. The men were generally literate, having gone to school longer and then, if they weren’t fishing locally, many of them served on big ships – from cargo ships to cruise lines. The women, like Doña Concha, ran the village because the men were away most of the time.

Perhaps this is a good time to mention that we called her a saint, *Santa* Concha because she did so much around the village, with her ability to read and write, she was the local post mistress and helped people with all kinds of government documents or personal letters. It was her deep interest in helping her neighbors, I believe, that landed the village not one but two Peace Corps volunteers. For a village to get assigned a volunteer, you have to have local interest in things that volunteers could help with. There has to be some support and enthusiasm for bringing in that help. We were recruited by the *Organización Fraternal Negra Hondureña* (OFRANEH) which is sort of equivalent to the NAACP. I was a literacy volunteer and my friend, Teresa, was a health volunteer.

Doña Concha, Santa Concha, was an amazing community organizer. I don’t think she had the language of liberation theology to describe what it was she did, but she would extrapolate and was articulate about the need to remove barriers that prevented her people from thriving. And she took action. She led the community meetings. She ran the post office, the church services. She did the work. That is a theology that is liberating. She artfully used the stories from the bible on Sunday to illustrate her point, though – perhaps unlike other base Christian communities in Latin America – the bible wasn’t her only source of story or inspiration. Her Catholic faith was mixed with an indigenous spirituality of *dügü*. Everyone in the village, including the American Peace Corps volunteers, understood that it was *dügü* that was the true religion, and that Catholicism was adopted as a – I’d say – welcome as a second layer of understanding. Though I’m sure it was forced upon them initially, leaders like Santa Concha had fully embraced it. The priests who came into the village once or twice a year had no idea, I believe, that they were fulfilling important rituals in a *dügü* worldview, but that is how it actually worked, from the Garifuna perspective.

Freedom is and has been an important principle among Unitarians – it was 20th century historian Earl Morse Wilbur who identified the three foundational principles of Unitarianism as being freedom, reason, and tolerance. Yet, freedom in the context of a connected community is very different from freedom in this culture committed to the extreme individualism that has developed in the United States. As humans we are ever toggling between belonging and authenticity, or connection and individual identity.

I’m not sure “toggle” is the right verb – because that implies choosing one mode or another. It’s not all or nothing, but rather a continuum and a swing – moving closer to one end of the continuum and then swinging back to the other.

In our families, at first we belong – we are cared for, and then at some point, our individual needs or wants begin differ from the family group which has cared for us – and we assert our individuality and authenticity. My indignation over the fact that my parents only spoke English was a kind of assertion of my growing identity as a kid. Though it's not like they disapproved of other languages – they just didn't speak any, so it's a mild example. Sometimes that journey leads us to find new families more authentic to us – families of choice, or we struggle with the family we have and how to belong while asserting our differences. Sometimes, the choice made is to hide our difference in order to belong, and other times the choice is made to cut-off from our family of origin entirely – and every imaginable choice in between. This is a human struggle. We are all of us, I believe, searching for a place where we can both belong and be who it is we are at our core. That I think, is the promise of this faith tradition, to provide such a place and ideal. Though, we so often fall short of that dream.

Liberation movements develop because the larger society to which we belong oppresses our authentic identity –it is that assertion of our true self – women's liberation and gay liberation as it was called at first, the American Indian Movement, Black Power and Black Lives Matter, these movements for liberation were and are collective movements – people find belonging with people who are suffering the same indignities and insults from society that they are.

Liberation theology is the study of the nature and condition of poverty by poor people in order to change their conditions and improve their lives. Liberation is from a society that accepts poverty as a given – using the scriptural verse “the poor you will always have with you” as a way to maintain the status quo rather than change the conditions and status of the poor. Liberation theology leads to a rejection of the judgement that if you are poor it is clearly because there is something wrong with you, and an understanding that it is the society itself which is wrong, having created conditions under which some are unable to survive.

Liberation theology was created among people who live in extreme poverty and interlaid with their understanding of Catholicism and interpreted by some pretty amazing priests – like Gustavo Gutiérrez from Perú. In this country, the Poor People's Campaign, organized by Martin Luther King and the march carried out by Ralph Abernathy after his assassination, and the continued campaign under the leadership of William Barber II are current examples.

Liberation theology contains truths and lessons for our own collective liberation, in this country, context, time, and faith tradition. We all need to affect the world we inhabit and improve the conditions for people, including ourselves. “Make the world a better place” we say each Sunday. Our theology should not just be written or spoken, but lived and practiced as Santa Concha lived and practiced her faith in Travesía. We need to be involved in our own liberation.

Freedom, as Emily pointed out, isn't just about removing the measurable and external constraints that exist in the world. We are implicated in our own liberation, we choose some constraints over others. Because we are interdependent and do not exist apart from others, the choices we make can turn out to limit the choices others have. This is where I think the shift from Wilbur's language from 1920 of “freedom, reason and tolerance” to a 2020 understanding of “collective liberation” is important.

I think church is the perfect workshop for this work. We don't even have the constraint of needing to agree on a single theological framework to belong here, although, as Emily points out, we do tend to

create our own constraints. Assuming that others are like us, for example, and not reaching out with genuine curiosity. Just because we say we are tolerant, doesn't mean we always act that way.

We can in church engage with others who see the world differently from ourselves. Emily has started a conversation this morning that will likely lead to new understanding for her as well as others. But many of us are doing this in small groups like chalice circles, where we share our different perspectives on important theological themes and topics. Or the group of people who have gathered around the common experience of having left high-demand religions that meets this afternoon, or the Black, Indigenous, People of Color group meeting next Sunday, the good grief group, or coping with change group, even the quilting groups. This self-examination and world-examination leads directly to community projects like the Green Team recycling and the Maplewood Mosely Community Garden that goes beyond this community to reach our neighbors and beyond. Our participation in Family Promise of Clark County has a direct impact on families in poverty who find themselves without shelter or home.

I often think of this church community as a village, such as the one I served in Honduras, where we come together to study, reflect and practice – where we work to free ourselves from the constraints of an unhealthy culture and society that privileges some over others damaging all of us. We need a place to gather, heal, and re-engage the world. We need the Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver.

“We are not dealing here solely with an intellectual pursuit,” wrote Gustavo Gutierrez. “Behind liberation theology are Christian communities, religious groups, and peoples, who are becoming increasingly conscious that the oppression and neglect from which they suffer are incompatible with their faith ... religious faith. These concrete, real-life movements are what give this theology its distinctive character; in liberation theology, faith and life are inseparable.” In Unitarian Universalism, faith and life are inseparable.