

Freedom from Evil: Collective Liberation

Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver

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Reflection on the Theme by Brett Raunig

Our theme for this month is freedom and at first glance, I thought to myself that should be an easy topic to write about. However, when I sat down to write about the topic, I found it difficult to focus my writing on any one thing and realized that I often took for granted the ability to choose. I also started to wonder about the complexity of freedom and how at times personal freedoms appear to be at odds with the freedom of others.

This got me thinking about a race Wendy and I have done for several years. Wendy and I have captained both Hood to Coast and Portland to Coast running/walking teams. In both events, we organize a relay team of 8-12 people to run or walk from Mt Hood or Portland to Seaside Oregon.

There are a million little details to work out, from who's going to walk/run each leg of the race, to first aid kits, to getting Vans, Coolers, and water jugs. It always seems like there are hundreds of logistical items and someone usually drops out at the last minute, and we must shuffle everyone's sections of the race.

By the time race day comes, all the things we have spent hours worrying about melt away and they somehow don't matter any longer.... It's time to go! It's time to take on the challenge of moving this team from Portland (or Timberline) to Seaside.

The excitement and energy take over and everyone settles into the race. The months of training on hills, in the heat, and gradually running/walking longer distances are over. It's race day and you feel a sense of freedom. A freedom that says I can do this! We can do this. The race starts and our first runner/walker is off - one leg in front of the other we all move cohesively from point A, ending at point B. We cheer each other on along the way and the miles fly by each person passing the little wrist bracelet to the next person in line. After about 36 hours of running or walking, we arrive at Seaside. It's an extraordinary undertaking, to say the least!

There is something that happens after hours of being cramped in a van with 6 other stinky people with very little sleep. You become the ultimate cheerleader for your fellow teammates. We all become free together and before we know it we've made it to the beach.

This got me thinking about freedom and what it means on a larger scale beyond my own personal freedoms. How do we blend our personal choices with the freedom of others? I'm looking forward to Monica's talk on freedom and community. Each one of us in our own way

can add value to this world, we call all be part of a team. A team committed to justice, love, peace, and equity.

Freedom and Connection by Rev. Monica Jacobson Tennesen

If you were hanging out in certain parts of the internet about twenty years ago, you might have encountered the expressions, “free as in free speech” and “free as in free beer.” Folks online in open source software communities were trying to distinguish between software that could be freely modified – like speech or other expressions, it could be remixed – and software that could be used free of charge – freeware that was available without any purchase price or licensing fee.

Sometimes I think about those definitions and wonder what version of them we might find useful as Unitarian Universalists. For a long time, folks in UU circles have talked about freedom of faith, or “the faith of the free,” and as with that software example, I think we have multiple definitions of the word “free” running around in our conversation. A very English language problem. In some corners of the internet, the free speech vs free beer distinction gives up on English altogether and becomes a distinction between gratis, meaning “available without need of payment,” and libre, meaning “available at liberty.”

Of course, this problem is hardly limited to UU circles. It’s also an American problem. When I was in seminary, Dr. Sylvester Johnson visited my history class as a guest lecturer. He’s a Black man whose scholarship at the time was focused on African-American religious expressions, as shaped by Black American experiences, from 1600 to the present. Dr. Johnson opened his time with us by saying that America’s dominant culture – white Europeans who came and colonized the east coast in 13 colonies – was established by folks who felt unfree in their European societies, and came to North America to be free. However, they understood freedom discursively – meaning freedom as created and defined in conversation or relationship. If you understand freedom this way, the way you know you are free is because there’s someone else who is less free who you can point to. This became part of the creation of whiteness as a concept in North America – poor white folks were more free than poor Black folks and poor Indigenous folks. Still less free than rich white folks, who were themselves still less free than European royalty.

And what does “free” mean in this case? Being a person who gets to do whatever they want, apparently! Which is bizarre, Dr. Johnson told us. One person getting to do whatever they want, no constraints or consequences, means they aren’t in real relationship with others. Relationships ALWAYS come with some constraints – things the other person needs from us, things we refrain from expressing in hurtful ways, times we inconvenience ourselves to help the other person. To be completely free, in this sense of being completely unconstrained, suggests

also being completely isolated from human connection. Which is considered cruel and unusual punishment!

Author Mia Birdsong agrees. She writes, “The American Dream tells us that freedom is the state of being unburdened and unconstrained by others or systems. ... But we tend to understand it as an individualistic concept. This is where we have to expand our understanding to fold in what is actually an older understanding of freedom.

In *Liberty and Freedom*, David Hackett Fischer explains that the word free is derived from the Indo-European *friya*, which means “beloved.” Friend also shares this common root with freedom. A free person was someone who was “joined to a tribe of free people by ties of kinship and rights of belonging.” Freedom was the idea that together we can ensure that we all have the things we need—love, food, shelter, safety. The way I’ve come to understand it, freedom is both an individual and collective endeavor—a multilayered process, not a static state of being. Being free is, in part, achieved through being connected.”

This I find much more useful. It points us to a definition of “free” that I think applies to UU communities the most: “free” meaning “uncoerced.” One element of our theological heritage that was positively shocking back in the day is our Universalism. Universalism originally referred to universal salvation – no hell, no eternal damnation, everyone goes to be part of the greater love, aka heaven, after they die. Folks in the 18th and 19th centuries thought this was completely unworkable when compared with the widely held Christian understandings of the time – if there’s no hell, what do you use to scare people into obeying the rules?

I love this story: Hosea Ballou was an early American Universalist preacher and circuit rider, who traveled from church to church preaching. One day he was riding the circuit along with a Baptist minister, arguing theology as they traveled. At one point, the Baptist looked over and said, “Brother Ballou, if I were a Universalist and feared not the fires of hell, I could hit you over the head, steal your horse and saddle, and ride away, and I’d still go to heaven.” Hosea Ballou replied, “If you were a Universalist, the idea would never occur to you.”

In other words, if you didn’t require the fear of punishment after death to stop you from acting on your worst impulses, you’d already have aimed yourself instead toward living up to your best aspirations. When you’re not coerced by threats of hell, it’s your CHOICE to be in right relationship with others.

Unitarian Universalism is not an easy religion. We have articulations of how we intend to be, and how we want the world to be, and many of them are countercultural. It can be unpopular, or uncomfortable, to champion some of what we lift up. And it can be awkward when we have those moments in which we realized that even within our communities of practice, we don’t always get things right.

For example, we aim ourselves, collectively, toward being places that celebrate the gender identity and expression that feels truest to each person. It’s our goal to use the right pronouns

for everyone! And. I don't know about you, but I do sometimes trip up and need to correct myself. It can feel a little awkward, or embarrassing, and I have to remember not to make it MORE awkward by making a big deal out of correcting my mistake. It's usually enough to say, "She – sorry, I mean they – they said they were going to bring a folding table."

I don't do this because someone is making me. I'm not coerced by the fires of hell, or by having to pay a fine. I choose, freely, to keep focusing my efforts on giving everyone the respect of referring to them by the name, title, and pronouns THEY USE. I do this because it's in alignment with my goal of treating everyone with respect.

Mia Birdsong writes about this too. In her book *How We Show Up: Reclaiming Family, Friendship, and Community*, she describes what she's learned about accountability from transformative justice practices. She calls on us to expand our understanding of accountability – many folks think of it as getting called on the carpet, punished and made to do what someone else dictates. This understanding is about others. But Mia Birdsong says,

"Accountability, as I mean it, is more about ourselves in the context of the collective. It's seeing the ways we cause hurt or harm as actions that indicate we are not living in alignment with values that recognize our own humanity or the humanity of others. It's about recognizing when our behavior is out of alignment with our best selves. And as [transformative justice leader] Mia Mingus explained to me, you can't hold another person accountable. You can support someone's accountability, but we hold ourselves accountable.

Accountability is also about recognizing and accepting that we are necessary and wanted. It's understanding that when we neglect ourselves, don't care for ourselves, or are not working to live as our best selves, we are devaluing the time, energy, and care that our loved ones offer us."

We are necessary and wanted. Not disposable, not someone whom others have to be coerced to accept and include. We're back to understanding our free faith as meaning uncoerced community – each one of us chooses to be here, and each one of us chooses to do what we can to live up to our values, and each one of us chooses to be part of our covenant that binds all of us together in relationship. It's not "free" as in "without consequences or costs." I find that some of my greatest spiritual growth, the biggest expansions of my capacity to live into my values, come in relationships that are difficult for me. I remind myself that I am CHOOSING to figure out how to apologize and learn to do better next time, I am CHOOSING to respond with compassion (maybe after I've gone for a long walk to move my irritation through my body), I am CHOOSING to be brave enough to say to someone, "Hey, that interaction didn't feel good to me, and I wonder if it didn't feel good to you either. Can we talk about it?"

Do you know the old saying about how a person's right to free speech does not cover yelling "Fire!" in a crowded theatre? In other words, it's not free beer. Some choices come with

consequences, like causing a panic and probably getting fined by the fire marshal. People can freely CHOOSE what to say and how to act... and then each of us needs to engage with what results from that. Sometimes our choices bring us closer together immediately, through shared understanding; sometimes our choices require us to go through the uncomfortable experience of learning about our impact on someone else and growing toward being a person who will make different choices next time.

Sure, you can choose NOT to go through that uncomfortable experience. There ARE plenty of occasions in which one person offends or hurts another and then doesn't do the learning and repair that exist in the discomfort. We've probably all done that at least once, right? But as Dr. Johnson pointed out, the more often you choose "no consequences! I do what I want!" the lonelier your life will become.

And remember, these consequences don't have to be the punishment model – it's not about being scolded and sent to our rooms. I mean consequence in the most fundamental definition: "Something that logically or naturally follows from an action or condition." In a certain sense, it's just physics. The consequence of me offering a hug to someone may be that we feel closer – a good consequence that follows from an action!

And we don't have to figure this out alone. Mia Birdsong writes,

"We are responsible for one another. That doesn't mean we can heal someone or make them accountable, though—they have to own a commitment to those things. But it does mean being there. It means not avoiding our people when they experience trauma, illness, violence, or pain we find hard or scary. It means not abandoning people to their relentless pain and hurting. It also means [being there for] our folks when they mess up.

... All the hurt and harm we are experiencing and causing in the world is from experienced and inherited pain and trauma. I want to heal my own trauma and pain because it brings me closer to being a happy, free person. But it is also the thing that will decrease the harm I do cause, and make it easier for me to hold myself accountable when I mess up. I am committed to doing that work and I can't do it without other people committing to help me."

Sounds very like our covenants, in their fullest versions, right? Here's how I want to be as part of this community and to live into these values. Oops, here I am realizing I'm not that person yet. I decide that I want to keep growing toward my best self, knowing that I'll never get all the way there – we live in a universe with entropy, meaning that things inevitably get chaotic sometimes. Physics is helpful again! – but I want to keep growing because I have a vision of the Monica I want to be, and I owe that Monica my best efforts toward finding my sore spots and healing them so they don't hold me back from choosing to learn and grow. I owe that Monica my best efforts toward living a life that embodies my values. I even owe her the opportunity to change the set of values I'm living into, when I get compelling reasons to do so! And I owe her

the gift of letting others help me – not make me – grow and heal and repair mistakes I have made.

We are a people of a free faith – not free like free beer, to be clear. Free like freely chosen, uncoerced, joined together by ties of kinship and belonging and the knowledge that each of us is necessary and wanted. Free as in able to choose in the best ways we can, not because someone is making us do it but because we understand that it's the path to our best selves. May we keep on freely choosing this, together.