

Freedom – Are We There Yet?  
Rev. Kathleen Owens  
February 24, 2008

The United States of American – home of the brave, land of the free...or are we? The picture of on the front cover of the order of service is I think provocative – our flag with prison bars across it. Just how free are we in this nation? Our prison population is growing exponentially and there are some states in which prisons are built faster than schools. We have a problem in this land of the free...but that's another sermon for another day.

Expressions of freedom are everywhere. Freedom in our songs – this morning's hymns as well as many national anthems...Belise, Canada and our own, to name a few. Of course, in the first verse of The Star Spangled Banner – O'er the land of the free – it's a pretty high note in a song most cannot sing – or sing well. Maybe it was written that way intentionally – you have to work, have a broad range for freedom; to live in the land of the free.

Some in our culture think that with enough money – they could be free, free from the burden of debt and continuous bills. Maybe you've even played the game – you know, you're driving down the highway and you see the billboard announcing \$7 million in Loto and you think if you one that you would – quit work, travel or...and dreams abound. Of course, you have to play to win. But a recent film tells the story of a man who finds two million dollars and wow, what kind of freedom that might buy...and yet the movie No Country for Old Men shows how the money didn't bring freedom at all (it is the Oscars today, had to mention them somehow. For some of us, it's a holiday and Tom is available for pastoral calls tonight).

And this month of February is celebrated as Black History month and the work and lives of African Americans are honored as a people who once were slaves who are now free. But are they? Rather I ask: Are we? – for we know oppression harms both the oppressee and the oppressor. Racism and oppression are still rampant today. Even in the business section of last Sunday's Union Tribune there was an article about worker's compensation insurance and how

race, age and gender will bias a worker's claim. Next month the National Business Institute will host a talk in Sacramento on "How to Discriminate (Apportion) on the Basis of Age, Sex, etc."<sup>1</sup> And slavery still exists. The November 2007 edition of *The Christian Century*, a liberal magazine that promotes living faithfully while thinking critically, the cover story was Sold into Slavery – the scourge of human trafficking involving mostly women and children. There is a talk later today sponsored by the Women's Federation on this an issue linked to this subject.

Freedom is a universal desire. In this Unitarian Universalist faith – we have long promoted reason, freedom and tolerance as our trinity. And our faith tradition, like these United States, has its own work to do regarding racism and oppression. This congregation has been involved in this work for a long time and it continues to be. We are field testing a curriculum titled Building the World We Dream About that brings us into intentional reflection and practices that support a multicultural, multiracial community. We hold Soul Work conversations about diversity in its many forms, not just the skin deep kind; the conversation on March 9<sup>th</sup> will be one about living with disabilities. In this place we are all on the journey towards wholeness through a variety of conversations, workshops, and learnings. I know this congregation is committed to creating, maintaining and celebrating a multiracial, multicultural, anti-oppression, anti-racist community. A community which offers another way of being in the world, that holds up another model of how to live together authentically; that knows that diversity means abundant life for all. And with all of this work, one wonders, like children on a long road trip ask, are we there yet? One wonders when will we be there and how will we know when we've arrived? These are some of the questions we must keep in our minds as we engage in this work.

The strength and joy of diversity is exemplified in our faith tradition, at least theologically. We are one of the very few faith traditions that affirms diverse theologies within one community. We have atheists, agnostics, theists, humanists, pagans, mystics, Buddhists, Jews, Christians, Religious naturalists and non-labelists among us. This rich diversity exists but is

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<sup>1</sup> The San Diego Union-Tribune, Sunday, Feb. 17, 2008, Business section F, page 1 and 6.

it celebrated? Do Christians, Republicans and atheists really feel the joy of being in this community?

And sometimes it can feel like this faith tradition of ours is too open – too free. There are some folks who can only experience freedom within a set of boundaries – like a frame around a picture. Jackson Pollock's work reminds me of this need...as do some of the conversations I've had with our youth – who can have the erroneous idea that because we do not have a creed, one is free to believe anything and be here.

For me there are some distinctions within freedom. In this faith we are free from doctrines that do not make sense; free from tyranny and absolutes, free from a cultural way of being that seems bent on wasting the precious gift of life. And in this faith of ours is the freedom to something – to a new liberty because we see others humanity as never before, freedom to living in a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness we share with each other and this planet; freedom to learn how to live with less so we all can live in the safety of having enough, freedom to a counter-culture message that sustains life rather than waste it.

And all of these various concepts of freedom are important and could make for many sermons or one very long one. But I've been thinking about freedom in a different way. It's one thing to have enough money to feel free from burdens; it's one thing to experience freedom from institutions that were once controlling and oppressive and there is another form of freedom that everyone can experience, can cultivate regardless of circumstances.

A story – the country was at war. The people were terrified, and had fled to the hills in the face of the advancing enemy troops. By the time the army arrived, the place was deserted. The fierce-looking barbarian of a general called his troops together. "Where has everyone gone?" he demanded, raging.

"They have all fled in fear of us,' the men replied.

'Is there no one left to pay tribute?' No citizens that we can force into slavery? No one to terrorize, and no treasure to plunder?' the general's rage knew no bounds.

'As far as we can discover, the only living person here for miles around is an old holy man living in a hermitage just outside the village.'

Without any more ado, the general marched to the hermitage and demanded to see the holy man. After a search, he found him quietly meditating.

The general was furious that the holy man refused to acknowledge him as conqueror. He shouted at the holy man: 'Don't you know who I am? You are looking at the man who could strike you dead without batting an eyelid!'

The holy man raised his eyes and fixed his gaze steadily on the raging commander.

'Don't you know,' he asked calmly, 'that you are looking at a man who can be stuck dead without batting an eyelid?'

For a moment the general was speechless, fixed by the cool gaze of the holy man. Then he bowed low, called his troops together, and left the village without doing any further damage.<sup>2</sup>

Now there's freedom – I mean real freedom. (To not bat an eye in the face of possible annihilation.) For me this story exemplifies a freedom from fear. In my belief system there are three sins that exist in humankind and one of them is fear (the other two come up in other sermons yet preached – but don't worry, I'll get to them one day). I think fear is a sin in our being that we need to be delivered from...and we do this through the spiritual discipline and practice of courage.

Before I go too far, let me say here that there are some fears that are good to have. Our instincts of flight or fight to try to protect us from physical danger. In Sidney Poitier's spiritual autobiography, The Measure of a Man, he writes about growing up on Cat Island and as a child he was free to roam and play. Listening to his own instincts, he learned the boundaries of island – where it was safe to play and where it was not. And he learned to test some of these boundaries – being stung by wasps as he tried to eat the fruit from the sapodilla tree, among many

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<sup>2</sup> From one hundred Wisdom Stories from around the world, edited by Margaret Silf, page 161.

experiences.<sup>3</sup> That instinctual fear can be a good thing in our lives. But that may be the only place fear is a positive influence.

The fear that I think is a sin is the kind that keeps us isolated, that keeps us fixed and paralysed from action; that keeps us from loving our whole selves and thus others, that keeps us stayed and closed and disconnected. Maybe you know the kind I mean?

Folk singer Holly Near tells a story about one day walking in a city – getting her mind clear for the concert later that evening when she saw ahead of her a man and a child. The man was clearly angry – his stride purposeful, his jaw set and he kept turning back to yell at the little child who was trying to keep up with him. In a flash, the man raised his hand to hit the lagging child; she froze...her brain burst into an argument with herself – do something! Say something!! You are against the use of violence, you protest wars, you're trained in non-violent communication skills, come on!!! But she remained frozen in place – by shock, by fear...she stood silent and watched – as the man's arm arched back.

One definition of courage is to feel the fear and take action anyway. Being courageous doesn't mean you're not afraid...Minister and author Forrest Church writes, "The courage to act is the courage to direct, within our own power," the script of our lives. "Finding the courage to act means refusing to succumb to fear's life-denying logic." Freedom comes when we act courageously. It is courage that allows a young person to tell the truth about their lives, even when they know they may be disowned by their family. It is discipline and courage that allows us to do what is right when our heads says don't get involved – this doesn't concern you, mind your own business. It's courage that allows lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people and their allies to get involved in a decline to sign campaign that threatens to change our state's constitution to ban marriage equality. // As Holly Near stood frozen on the sidewalk and watched that man prepare to hit the child, a voice rang out above the street noise – you see, a man on the other side

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<sup>3</sup> Sidney Poitier, *The Measure of a Man*, a spiritual autobiography, page 4.

of the street saw this scene and he sang out, Don't hit the baby, don't hit the baby. And it was enough to stop that arm from coming down.

How do we cultivate the kind of courage needed? Surrounding ourselves with exemplars through reading and in community; we take the risk that we know is ours to take because we feel it's right in our gut, it is that knowing that is deeper than the trembling of fear; we make the conscious choice to act, to love, to be. It's telling the truth of your life, of you who are, of how you want to be in the world. It involves finding small ways to begin living your life, rather than reacting to it. To me it means choosing to act upon the truth that we are all connected, that what happens to one affects us all. Living courageously brings personal freedom which radiates out to others. And I always find it helpful to have someone who can gently hold me accountable to what I long to be, how I long to love, how I long to act – when fear threatens to hold me back.

A friend of mine told me about a research project long ago. It seems there was a young, therapist whose dissertation was to see if there was a common thread among people of all classes, races and other socially-constructed boundaries – of people who were of an advanced age. So she went to multiple retirement communities, assisted living communities and other places and interviewed almost a thousand elders. And throughout her research there did indeed turn out to be one common thread linking them altogether – upon reflection of their life, almost every single person said if they could live their lives over again, they would take more risks. What is it that you would like to do? How do you long to be in this world? Isn't it time to acknowledge the fear and then courageously act anyway, love anyway? Are you tired enough of fear keeping you from the life for which you yearn?

Sometimes fear is stronger than prison bars, more oppressive than institutional barriers and the burden of debt. Fear slowly strangles the life out of us. Our faith is not based on rules, or creeds or fear; it is based on the power of life and love that brings transformation and healing the world and it begins with you, with us in this room and on this campus. When we are courageous, in spite of our fears, we can experience joy, love and freedom in a way that may take us / even

beyond our dreams. The opportunity is here, among us to reach out, fearful perhaps but determined to live and love and be who we are – and in doing so, become more of who we long to be in this world and thus create a better world for ourselves, for those around us and those coming after us. May it be so. <sup>4</sup>

Benediction – May the spirit of truth light your way at every turning and deciding place and give your courage when the choice is hard; may love uphold you when you most need and the joy of life surprise you when you least expect it. Go forth living boldly and let your future begin today.

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<sup>4</sup> This sermon was influenced by the work of the Rev. Forrest Church's book, Freedom from Fear, Finding the Courage to Act, Love and Be, St. Martin's Press, 2004.