

WISDOM CIRCLES

April 2014

Freedom

What does freedom mean in my life?

“Freedom” is a broad and multi-faceted concept; it means many different things in different contexts and to different people. Freedom can mean personal and physical freedom: the opposite of slavery, the opposite of imprisonment. Freedom can mean the ability to speak, act, or behave as you want, to live according to your own values. It can mean the ability to define your own beliefs, to come to your own conclusions. It can mean liberation from political oppression, or from oppressive patterns, thoughts, or expectations. Franklin D. Roosevelt named four freedoms: freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from want, and freedom from fear.

Freedom is a key concept in Unitarian Universalism. We say every week that we aspire to “seek knowledge in freedom.” One of our principles calls congregations to affirm and promote a “free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” Many people are drawn to Unitarian Universalism by our freedom from dogma: the intellectual and theological freedom offered and expected in our congregations. We celebrate historical Unitarians and Universalists who have asserted their right to believe the truth as they see it, not as defined by a church body or a state. But what exactly do we mean by “freedom?”

Freedom is a central idea in many religious communities and theological traditions, but it’s not always the same kind of “freedom.” Religious teachers have elaborated paths to freedom from spiritual suffering. Religious minorities have struggled for the right to practice their religion. Liberation theologians defined political and social liberation as the goal of theology. Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed begins his book *Black Pioneers in a White Denomination* with an extensive exploration of the idea of “freedom” in US religious communities, distinguishing between three types of freedom: spiritual freedom, an experience of God, “a feeling, an inner knowledge and peace” that could be experienced even in physical bondage; political freedom, from social and legal oppression; and intellectual freedom, the right to seek and believe one’s own truth.

Morrison-Reed argues that in the history of Unitarianism and the liberal (white Protestant) church, “freedom” usually means complete intellectual freedom, rather than political or spiritual freedom. As an illustration, Morrison-Reed notes that both traditional Unitarian hymns and African-American spirituals emphasize “freedom,” but with different emphases. For example, “Faith of the Larger Liberty” (#287 in our hymnal) honors “heroes of faith” who defy monarch and creed, with freedom something to strive for. Many spirituals, on the other hand, evoke spiritual and political freedom: “I’m a child of God with my soul set free.” These are, of course, generalizations. Morrison-Reed notes that “the great heroes in the Unitarian tradition are those who merge freedom’s three dimensions in their lives and have suffered because of their loyalty to these principles.” (25) Theodore Parker, Unitarian minister and abolitionist, is a prime example.

Spiritual Exercise

Find a song or piece of music that is either specifically about freedom or which gives you a feeling of freedom. Sit and listen to it a few times. How does it make you feel? What kind of “freedom” is it about? Write in a journal about your experience.

Questions for Reflection

What makes this a “free church?”

In what ways are you free? In what ways are you unfree? What type of freedom is most important to you?

What activities in your life promote greater freedom in the world?

Words of Wisdom

“Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves.”

— Abraham Lincoln

“I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own. And I am not free as long as one person of Color remains chained. Nor is any one of you.”

— Audre Lorde

There are words like Freedom
Sweet and wonderful to say.
On my heart-strings freedom sings
All day everyday.

There are words like Liberty
That almost make me cry.
If you had known what I knew
You would know why.
— Langston Hughes, Refugee in America

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
— Isaiah 61

I call that mind free, which masters the senses, which protects itself against animal appetites, which contemns pleasure and pain in comparison to its own energy, which penetrates beneath the body and [which] recognizes its own its own reality and greatness, which passes life, not in asking what it shall eat or drink, but in hungering, thirsting, and seeking after righteousness.....

I call that mind free, which jealously guards its intellectual rights and powers, which calls no man master, which does not content itself with a passive or hereditary faith, which opens itself to light whencesoever it may come, which receives new truth as an angel from heaven, which, whilst consulting others, inquires still more of the oracle within itself, and uses instructions from abroad, not to supersede but to quicken and exalt its own energies.

I call that mind free, which sets no bounds to its love, which is not imprisoned in itself or in a sect, which recognizes in all human beings the image of God and the rights of his children, which delights in virtue and sympathizes with suffering wherever they are seen, which conquers pride, anger, and sloth, and offers itself up a willing victim to the cause of mankind....

I call that mind free, which resists the bondage of habit, which does not mechanically repeat itself and copy the past, which does not live on old virtue, which does not enslave itself to precise rules, but forgets what is behind, listens for new and higher monitions of conscience, and rejoices to pour [itself forth] in fresh and higher exertions."

— William Ellery Channing, from "Spiritual Freedom"

I call that church free which enters into covenant with the ground of freedom, that sustaining and transforming power not made with hands. It protests against the idolatry of any human claim to absolute truth or authority. This covenant is the charter and responsibility and joy of worship in the beauty of holiness.

I call that church free which in covenant with that divine community-forming power brings the individual, even the unacceptable, into a caring, trusting fellowship that protects and nourishes his or her integrity and spiritual freedom. Its goal is the prophethood and priesthood of all believers, the one for the liberty of prophesying, the other for the ministry of healing. It therefore protests against the infringement of autonomy or participation, whether it be in the church, the state, the family, the daily work (or the lack of it), or in other social spheres.

— James Luther Adams, from "Faith and Freedom"

Letting go gives us freedom, and freedom is the only condition for happiness. If, in our heart, we still cling to anything - anger, anxiety, or possessions - we cannot be free."

— Thích Nhất Hạnh, from "The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching: Transforming Suffering into Peace, Joy, and Liberation"

Liberation is costly.

Even after the Lord had delivered the Israelites from Egypt, they had to travel through the desert.

They had to bear the responsibilities and difficulties of freedom.

There was starvation and thirst and they kept complaining.

They complained that their diet was monotonous.

Many of them preferred the days of bondage and the fleshpots of Egypt.

We must remember that liberation is costly. It needs unity.

We must hold hands and refuse to be divided. We must be ready.

Some of us will not see the day of our liberation physically.

But those people will have contributed to the struggle.

Let us be united, let us be filled with hope, let us be those who respect one another.

— Desmond Tutu