

# Freedom

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Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church  
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## Meditation

Gathered here between each our birth and death, we pause on earth in frozen winter mode to remember the things we dearly love and why we love them. Receivers of such bounty, we orient ourselves again within the majesty, pathos, courage, and despair around us and within our hearts, and seek the clarity and will to live this day and those following with an integrity we can call our own in peace. Toward peace, toward justice, toward thanksgiving and compassion, we give ourselves each in our own way in silence.

## Prayer

Infinite, subtle, astounding reality in which we live, like wanderers come home we hail the myriad human testaments to love, to courage, to questing, to honesty, to self-sacrifice that surround us now and that have brought us through the ages here to this moment. Rooted in such heart-rending, heart-ennobling inheritance, and faced with the gorgeous wings of freedom to move into the future, may our being be for beauty and for love. Amen

## Reading

by Robert Hayden "Frederick Douglass" (Black Voices, ed. Abraham Chapman, 449)

When it is finally ours, this freedom, this liberty, this beautiful  
and terrible thing, needful to man as air,  
usable as earth; when it belongs at last to all,  
when it is truly instinct, brain matter, diastole, systole,  
reflex action; when it is finally won; when it is more  
than the gaudy mumbo jumbo of politicians:  
this man, this Douglass, this former slave, this Negro beaten to his knees, exiled, visioning  
a world  
where none is lonely, none hunted, alien,  
this man, superb in love and logic, this man  
shall be remembered. O, not with statues' rhetoric,  
not with legends and poems and wreaths of bronze alone,  
but with the lives grown out of his life, the lives  
fleshing his dream of the beautiful, needful thing.

## Sermon

Freedom is the lifeblood of our religious tradition. It was for freedom of religion, freedom of conscience, that so many of our forebearers sacrificed everything else. They were not, of course, alone, since the whole history of religion in the West has been the continuing effort of the powers that be to define and control religion while a long line of martyrs and heroes have insisted with their lives that the conscience must be free if religion is to be real. So we Unitarian Universalists find steadfast friends across the board who have refused to let that which addresses the most central issues of life be controlled by anything other than the most heartfelt desire for truth. And the prerequisite for such a true center is the freedom to pursue it, question it, prove it, live it. Freedom of thought, of inquiry, of belief is the essential context for a religious life that we hold to be authentic.

Here are some quick examples of our free kin in this history, one of them surprising. Although this first will strike many of us as odd, we are actually fairly closely linked to the Amish and the Mennonites, for they are the descendants of the Anabaptists who demanded the right simply to be left alone in their practice of religion. They went different places with the freedom they demanded than we have - they arrived at something they wanted to keep steady rather than going on into new ground as we have done - and their closing of ranks early on precluded further valuing of independence of thought, but their demand for that basic right of the freedom to follow their path is the same as the cry that Unitarians and Universalists raised.

So, too, we share much with the great humanist of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century, Desiderius Erasmus, who insisted on intellectual freedom as the only possible valid path to truth. His followers called themselves the "disciples of the free spirit," recognizing that freedom was the essential path to truth (Angus MacLean, Wind in Both Ears, 109). I love that name, and hope that it would apply also to us - "disciples of the free spirit." Another name I have come to treasure is Thales of Miletus, the first Greek philosopher we know of who actually encouraged his students to disagree with him, to better his arguments, to correct his blindneses. This humility and welcoming of dissent is foundational to the way of free inquiry, and hence to our free faith tradition as well as the scientific enterprise.

If you're new here you probably don't know the name of Francis David, who back in the sixteenth century arrived at a Unitarian theological position and persuaded the young Transylvanian king to grant the first decree of religious tolerance in European history. It was the only time Unitarians held power, but David paid for it by dying in a prison cell after retrenchment happened. He paid a hard price for his breathtaking stance.

As last example, when we passed the offering plate around before we enacted the price that the Universalist congregation in Gloucester, Massachusetts, fought for when they brought the court case that separated church and state in the commonwealth. They insisted that any religious institution be freely and voluntarily supported by its members rather than being financed by common taxes. They won, and we all pay that free price.

But the continuing effort to squelch free religion - the Inquisition, the widespread burning of the woman, the repressions then by the Protestants who themselves had once been persecuted (we know here how John Calvin burned the Unitarian Michael Servetus to death in Geneva, where both had fled from the Inquisition) - show that the path to freedom of whatever kind is long and hard. Just as repression in the civic realm has been brutal and always justified as being for the good of the people, as being necessary for order and security, so too has religious repression been

brutal and justified by the same rationales. Thus Frederick Douglass's incomprehension of the people who kept objecting to the vehemence of his speeches because he wasn't being nice enough, because he was agitating. He had looked at the long sorry story of history from the perspective of both a slave and a free man. And he knew that, as we read him this morning, "Power concedes nothing without a demand; it never did and it never will." He knew that something as fiercely prized as freedom would not come to anyone who nicely waited for it to be granted them. It must be demanded and fought for, either violently or nonviolently, but always fought for. And that was never easy or nice.

We forget, in the afterglow of the civil rights movement, the widespread, vicious condemnations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Council, of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, of the Congress On Racial Equality and their tactics for the equal rights of freedom. Their insistent, determined demand caused great upset and outrage and only gradually made white power give way some. Frederick Douglass saw that resistance of power quite clearly: "Find out what people will submit to, and you have found out the exact amount of injustice which will be imposed upon them. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those they oppress." (Grey hymnal, 579). He knew freedom asks a price.

And part of that price is moving beyond the initial understanding of freedom as being a freedom **from**, a negative definition of freedom, to a positive sense of freedom being **for** something, freedom asking something in return from us, like making conscious commitments with the opportunity freedom provides.

Angus MacLean, an outstanding Universalist religious educator, comments on the need for this further journey into freedom among us Unitarian Universalists who luxuriate in the euphoria felt when we left a religious tradition that felt too limiting and yet never take the further step of using our new freedom responsibly and well. He says, "...it is pretty futile to hang on to the moment of departure, for no one lives responsibly and uninvolved, too. The least the comer can do is to choose the confinements and dictates of freedom itself, and these are many and commanding, too. Freedom has to be served, not plucked and consumed like an apple. We are often so conscious of departure that we are liable to be far more aware of our negations than our affirmations, and to avoid giving ourselves to anything." (Ibid, 96)

In India, an important step in spiritual exploration is called "Neti! Neti!" meaning "Not that! Not that!" where you wave aside all the things that you know you don't believe in, like getting through underbrush. It's an important process, but it is not supposed to be the end of the quest, these denials.

So the first question about freedom is how to attain it and guard it. But the second question, equally important but often overlooked, is, "Now that I have attained it, what am I to do with it?" Many of you probably know the scene in the movie "Braveheart" where Mel Gibson, acting the part of William Wallace addressing his troops just before a battle with the forces of English Edward I, cries to them in his Australian Scottish accent, "What will you do without freedom?" Powerful scene, powerful question. But this talk is more concerned with the equally powerful question, "What will you do with freedom?"

And many of us never give more than a moment's thought to this second question. Indeed, Erich Fromm, the great existentialist philosopher, titled his book Flight From Freedom precisely because so many people, given the freedom to choose, run screaming to the safety of some authoritarian person to tell them what to do rather than to have to make a free choice about

something as important as their lives. But it is precisely here that our religious tradition - at least if we are to be true to it - demands us to be responsible, to use this religious freedom of thought given us wisely and well, to go beyond negative declarations of what we don't believe to positive affirmations of what we do, to act as we would hope free people would choose to act. We indeed find that freedom must be served, not just consumed like an apple. This is the vital heart of our religious practice and discipline. We need to clothe ourselves in it.

The best case in point that I can think of, of such a responsible use of freedom, is taught to me by some Quakers in North Carolina who served freedom truly. A number of Quakers in the Chapel Hill area are descended from Friends in Pennsylvania who left for North Carolina because a law had been passed in Pennsylvania saying that to hold public office there you had to be a member of the Society of Friends. The Quakers had been persecuted so many places that they were determined no other religious tradition would take over the commonwealth and subject them one more time to what they had known in the past. But some Quakers saw in this move exactly the kind of religious intolerance that they had suffered from elsewhere - only "we" can be the ones to hold power - and so they demanded that no one be barred from civic life because of their religion. Failing the vote, they moved to North Carolina, away from the safety of Pennsylvania, but also away from the old, old pattern of the persecuted in turn becoming the persecutor in the name of security.

These people grasped the magnificent point that freedom for ourselves contradicts its very nature when it rests upon the denial of freedom to others. In other words, freedom cannot be selfish. It must, simply, do unto others as we would have them do unto us. Or, as the Unitarian abolitionist James Russell Lowell put it in his famous poem:

All whose boast it is that we come of forebears brave and free,  
if there breathe on earth a slave, are we truly free and brave?  
If we do not feel the chain when it works another's pain,  
are we not base slaves indeed, slaves unworthy to be freed?  
(“True Freedom,” in grey hymnal, 150)

If Lowell is right, as I think that he is, then we can not really be the land of the free if our foreign policy is exploitative of other people. We cannot hold our liberty by holding other people down. Frederick Douglass saw that so clearly. If we really want freedom, then order and security cannot be our primary values - needed, but not over all. The service of freedom is to give it out to others, as well as to claim it for ourselves.

The word freedom comes from a Sanskrit root meaning "dear" because originally the ones loved in a household by the master were free, while the others were kept as slaves. If you really loved a slave, you gave her or him their freedom. And so, surprisingly to me at least, freedom and love are tied together from the very beginning. Only now the circle of loving concern can at last expand out beyond the former household bounds of the familiar to where Robert Hayden and Frederick Douglass can envision a world where none is lonely, hunted, alien, none beaten to their knees. This is the world Douglass fought his whole life for, and it is the one given us to work for if we will, a world where all the slaves - economic, political, emotional, intellectual - are to be set free.

The more I think on this central value of ours, the more I am humbled by its demands of us and exultant because of what it celebrates and envisions within us. Each of us is given a daily

world of opportunity to loosen chains within us and around us. And each of us, given the huge openness available to us for our religious unfolding, the creative domain placed simply and magnificently in each our hands to grow in moral stature and in wider and wiser outlook and deed - each of us is thus given the opportunity of a lifetime. This is truly not to be missed. It is not to be sat upon like a done deed, an apple consumed, a negative holding action. Countless people in history have literally been dying for a chance such as this. We would be worse than fools to do anything less with such a chance than bring all of the fullness of our being to blossom.

William Ellery Channing, our great nineteenth century Unitarian minister, in his seminal statement on the free mind (grey hymnal # 592) put it thus, "I call that mind free which protects itself against the usurpations of society, and which does not cower to human opinion: which refuses to be the slave or tool of the many or of the few, and guards its empire over itself as nobler than the empire of the world." That nobility stands at the heart of our free religious tradition. For it is possible to spend life not in asking what we shall eat or drink, but in hungering, thirsting after righteousness by the very paths that strike most deeply and resonantly in our being. In such an environment, even our hindrances are helpful because they show us where our own limitations are set and so show themselves as the next step to be taken, the next work to be done.

This chance given you and me has been most carefully considered by a myriad of our human colleagues and passed on as central gifted core to us. Take it, my friends, and bloom, for yourselves, for this earth, for all its peoples. We have had placed before us the beautiful, needful thing. Disciples of the free spirit, please, receive it and use it well and be blessed - freely, fully.