

FREEDOM
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
May 4, 2014

OPENING WORDS ~ Heather K. Janules

We gather today with our minds 'stayed on freedom.'

Our prophets died for the freedom of faith;

We are here in their spirit.

We are here to practice and sustain our living tradition;

In our free faith,

We are here,

Seeking freedom from despair,

The freedom to be loved as ourselves,

And the freedom to grow beyond imagination.

We are here,

Gathered in the name of all that we find holy.

Let us give thanks for the gift of gathering here.

Indeed, we are privileged to have the freedom to gather. Let us celebrate that privilege.

STORY FOR ALL AGES *Little Red Bird* ~ Nick Bruel

(A red bird, who has experienced both life in a cage, and life outside, wonders which is better.)

READING *It Matters What We Believe* ~ Sophia Lyons Fahs (#657 SLT)

MESSAGE

I spent the last couple of days at Trent University 'drinking in' the Sacred Water Circle Gathering which drew together Indigenous elders from around the Americas. I was humbled and overwhelmed...and through the days, I found myself straddling two worlds. In that world, I was partaking of something almost foreign...messages and languages and styles and social norms...things that challenged me to take stock of my own life and practices...to examine my duty to the earth and to the water. And, the other world, my everyday world of other duties, kept intervening, reminding me that I am also called upon, in a similar though much less esteemed, 'wise and elder-y' fashion, to give a message to the people. As I sat listening over the past two days, my mind kept jumping back and forth, from there to here and back again. What is it that needs to be shared with you, today? What are you prepared to hear, maybe even longing, to hear? What I am able to say?

Water, and the inter-related state of our planet, are critical issues. Our topic here today is freedom...which maybe doesn't seem so critical. We've got freedom already, so...? Sure, we still manage to imprison ourselves...emotionally and spiritually and mentally...with our calendars...but in the socio-political realm, we're pretty darn free. Yet, what makes this a critical issue, for me, is the question of what we do with that freedom.

An elder from the Northwest Territories, Charlie Nevelle, spoke yesterday about returning home from residential school, angry and filled with hatred. He had been freed physically, but

until he chose how to use that freedom, he was still imprisoned. His father, over time and through repetitive teachings, showed him that he was choosing to exist in a world of 'outside-in', where he was allowing what happened around him, and to him, create and control what was inside of him. The teaching, the learning, he received from his father, and which he was passing on to us, was to live instead from the 'inside-out'...to use his creative energy and all that he was given to affect the world around him.

Freedom is a core value for Unitarian Universalists; historically that value is rooted in the Reformation and our insistence on the right to believe as our consciences dictate. We have long fought for, and insisted on, freedom of religion. Unitarian leaders were the instigators of the first-ever edict of religious toleration...the Edict of Torda in Hungary in 1568. Freedom is a huge part of our history and our understanding of who we are. Our ancestors worked long and hard to win freedom...freedom FROM religious oppression, freedom TO worship as they chose.

There's a difference between freedom 'from' something and the freedom 'to' do, or to be. Rightfully, the same word should not serve both purposes, because they are two really different things...there's freedom that liberates and there's freedom that enables. What matters in that distinction, of course, is the reality of your situation. If you are constricted, confined, or oppressed, you may be itching for, even desperately needing, 'freedom from.' But when you're free, when you have ready access to inalienable rights, then....what? What does one do with that freedom?

A colleague wrote, "Freedom conjures images of open space and the movement it allows - an open sky and birds that cross it; an open field and dogs and children bounding into it; or open water and the blade of a boat's bow slicing through it."¹ It's like the Little Red Bird² in today's story seeing the open cage door, and then the open window...or the fish leaping out of the bowl in the picture on the order of service. We imagine freedom as flying free without a care...to be able to do whatever we want, in whatever way we want, without restriction and without condition. Based on how often images of 'freedom' appear in marketing, it has almost become something we can buy. And once we have it, it's ours to keep and to use, and to soak up...even hoard? Ahhhh....I'm free!

But see, I think we've taken this freedom thing as from the outside-in. That is to say, we've taken it, and used it for ourselves without a thought to what it requires of us...without reflecting it back...from the inside-out.

About eight years ago, I officiated at the wedding of a young woman I've known since the day she was born...she being the daughter of my BFF from childhood. In the pre-wedding socializing, I was struck by the multiple times that the bride and groom were teased about taking advantage of their last moments of freedom. What is it those parties are called here...stag?...doe?...shag?...the parties that are said to be one's last night before the 'ball and chain' of marriage is locked on forever?

Why do we talk about marriage this way? When we talk about rights, we *freely* use the word freedom in conjunction with marriage...the Freedom to Marry...the freedom to choose who we

¹ http://www.unityunitarian.org/uploads/6/1/0/3/6103699/april_2011.pdf

² Bruel, Nick, *Little Red Bird*

love. If commitment is so constraining, who would EVER choose such a thing? As if in getting married, one is being placed in a cage, or in a lidded box, and kept there forever, with no possibility of flying or feeling free.

Anyway, the bride and groom, these dear young friends, chose a reading for the service from Madeleine L'Engle's *The Irrational Season*³ which says, in part...

"Ultimately two people who love each other must ask themselves ... how much risk they are willing to take...It is indeed a fearful gamble...Because ... to marry is the biggest risk in human relations that a person can take...

If we commit ourselves to one person for life this is not, as many people think, a rejection of freedom; rather it demands the courage to move into all the risks of freedom..."

As I reflected on that reading, in my preparation for the wedding homily, especially in light of all the 'ball and chain' commentary, I was captured by this phrase...'the risks of freedom.' I'd never conceived of such a thing...that freedom could be risky. Isn't it supposed to be carefree!? Foot loose?

You see, people don't get married because they want to limit their choices. People get married because they believe that with and through commitment (responsibility to another person) there comes the promise of something deeper, something richer. The freedom to choose frees them to choose...actually gives them the opportunity to commit to something, to give their hearts to something, and in that process to experience challenge, and intimacy, and...well, love. But as L'Engle suggests, this commitment takes one into a vulnerable and risky place. And yet, every day, people make this choice because they believe that marriage, however hard it might be, will give them a better, happier life.

I suppose you arrived today expecting to hear a message about freedom, and not expecting to hear about risk, let alone responsibility. I swear, this is not a bait and switch... teasing you with freedom, and then giving you a dose of responsibility. I really believe that they are, or ought to be, inseparable. They go together like...a horse and carriage...as the old 'love and marriage' song goes. Freedom and responsibility.

Marriage may not be the best analogy for some of you, maybe for many of you. I'm not married, but I do understand making a commitment to something freely chosen, and then having to live into the risks that come with that commitment. Choosing to be a Unitarian Universalist...choosing to be a person of faith...choosing to be part of a religious community...these are risky commitments.

Some of us, I wager to say, are Unitarians because we want to be in a place where we're able to believe without restriction and without condition. This is what fuels that pervasive myth, the one that says that Unitarians can believe whatever they want! But let me assure you...this is a myth. I believe that Unitarian Universalism does not offer freedom FROM religion; rather, it give us freedom TO BE religious in ways that are true to our hearts and souls.

³ <http://www.ibizaceremony.com/node/479>

We have religious freedom. We are free to search for truth and to articulate what we find. We are free to live lives grounded in that search and in the meaning we make of our experiences. It is freedom TO, not freedom FROM.

Philosopher Santayana is quoted as saying: "Freedom, like the air we breathe, is necessary for existence but is insufficient for nourishment."⁴ This quote inspired me to choose the picture on the cover of the order of service. Unitarians throughout history have been heretical, often seeing the world in a different way, often the 'odd fish out.' But jumping out of the water...existing on in freedom...is insufficient for our spiritual nourishment. (And that's where this analogy has to stop, because it will get pretty muddy if we take the 'fish out of water' thing too far.)

If I were to draw a bubble over that fish, it would say, "I'm free! I'm free! Oh, shoot! Now what?" Actually, we could imagine this bubble over each of our heads! We're free. We have religious freedom. And with that, we are obliged to say "now what?" Will we, as our chalice lighting words say, use the freedom, OUR POWERS, to heal, and to help, and to bless the world? What does our freedom require of us?

In a couple of weeks, on May 18, a few of the participants from the recent "Building Your Own Theology" class will be sharing some of what they believe...their personal, work-in-progress, credos. There were powerful experiences, 'aha' moments, in that class, when we realized that being able to articulate what we believe, or what is of greatest concern, actually makes a difference. It changes our relationship with all that is. It shifts our energy. It calls on us to live those convictions.

It matters what we choose to believe. It matters how we choose to live those beliefs. It matters how we choose to practice our religion. One of our Unitarian Universalist principles...the fourth...is "the free and responsible search for truth and meaning." FREE and RESPONSIBLE.

That's why I think it's a myth that Unitarians can believe 'whatever.' If we truly affirm that principle, and if we maintain that beliefs matter, then we are called, not to believe 'whatever', but to carefully listen to our consciences and our hearts and to reflect on our experiences, and then to use all of that to help others, to help the world, to live from the inside-out. We are obliged to be responsible with our freedom to believe. This is indeed the road less taken, a rewarding and beautiful road, but it's not always easy. Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams called this a 'well-examined life'...a 'well-examined faith.'

Freedom calls us to make commitments, and commitments involve risk. There is potential that the choice will feel constricting. There is the chance that our passion for it will die, that it will hurt too much, that it will be a lot of giving and no getting, or vice versa. There may even come a time when to walk away from commitment seems the easiest and maybe even the safest choice.

But to make a commitment, to freely claim what we believe and where our highest convictions lie, honours our freedom of belief in the highest way possible. To choose the thing that might make more work for ourselves, to potentially make life more complicated, because it may move us closer to what we hold dear, or into more intimate human connection, is to make a

⁴ Quoted in: <http://www.uua.org/worship/words/sermons/183412.shtml>

choice to embrace that which is life-affirming and calls us toward our best selves. In a way, maybe in every way, it requires us to be responsible to our true selves, to our deepest longings, to that inner reality that urges us to shine out.

This is what true freedom calls us to...to freely choose to do what is sometimes difficult ... to freely choose to take a risk...to freely choose to enter into the quagmire that is religious community, trusting that buried within, is a treasure that cannot be found in any other way. Life is like that...in order to experience all the gifts of spiritual growth, of compassion, of community...we have to walk into it and engage in it. This requires work, and intention, and time, and patience, and faith...faith in each other, and faith in the power of humanity in community.

And so here freedom calls us, calls all of us who are so blessed with this freedom, to a greater level of responsibility, to take the risk to share our gifts and to put our beliefs on the line, with the understanding that this is the only way to experience their full ripening. To live freely is to imbed ourselves in relationships with all that is...in service of a more beautiful and free world, not just for ourselves, but for everyone, for every living thing, and for our planet.

May we answer the call of freedom.

Amen.

MEDITATION ON FREEDOM

~ Emmy Lou Belcher

Hear and feel your quiet breathing.
Hear and feel the quiet of this room
and this community of quiet people.
As we sit in the quiet, feel the life that stretches between us,
that fills this room.
Feel the opening of all the windows of our beings,
and the full out-stretching of our spirits,
As we reach outward to the life around us,
beyond this room,
throughout all creation.
For this life –
for the freedom we have to shape and pursue our lives –
we are grateful and rejoice.

CLOSING WORDS

~ Sarah Lammert

Go in peace, embraced by the light and warmth of our gathering.
Go in love, ready again to struggle on.
Go in beauty, shining forth (from the inside-out) like a lamp for freedom.
Amen!