

**FREE TO BE ME?**  
UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP OF PETERBOROUGH  
THE REV. JULIE STONEBERG  
MARCH 13, 2016

**OPENING WORDS**

~ Suzelle Lynch

We are a People of Liberation  
striving for equal rights for one and all,  
upholding the unfettered voice and vote of citizenship,  
affirming freedom of religious belief and expression,  
and remembering that none of us are truly free until all of us are free.  
As a People of Liberation  
we stand with those who are marginalized and oppressed;  
sharing our power so that they might be free.  
As a People of Liberation,  
we work to release ourselves from outgrown habits of mind and heart,  
so that we, too, might be free.  
[May the chalice of light that burns here]  
Inspire us all.

**STORY FOR ALL**     *The Day the Crayons Quit*     ~ Drew Drywall

*(Duncan just wants to colour. But when he opens his box of crayons, he finds only letters. All saying the same thing. We quit!)*

**READING**             *from Down the Mountain* (excerpted)             ~ Jen Crow<sup>1</sup>

This reading is excerpted from an essay by Rev. Jen Crow entitled "Down from the Mountain."

When I was a teenager, I dreamed of living along in a small, sparse hermitage somewhere far out of the way. My hut would be tucked into the side of a hill, kind of like a hobbit house, and I would live there alone, eating mushrooms I'd found in the nearby forest. I'd read and meditate and pray, I'd write poetry and deep spiritual works there in the solitude. It would be great.

There were, however, a few big problems with this scenario. For starters, I was sixteen. It wasn't legal to live alone in the woods and as much as I would have disagreed with this at the time, I really hadn't had enough life experience yet to claim wisdom. It also dawned on me, after a while, that not many people have a use for spiritual truths developed in solitude. After all, how would they work when the rubber met the road and we had to emerge from our hermitage in the woods?

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<sup>1</sup> *Not for Ourselves Alone: Theological Essays on Relationship*, Burton D. Carley and Laurel Hallman, eds. (Skinner House Books: Boston, 2014) pp. 101-109.

It turned out that the woods and that little hobbit house tucked in the side of the hill are great for renewal and reflection for me. They are wonderful as a retreat and a respite, a place to nourish my soul and repair my spirit. But hope as I might they aren't the place where I could – or would – live.

While solitary spiritual practices can quiet the mind and help us to hear the still small voice within, they will also bring us right back into community...calling us back to this world, to compassion and kindness in all that we do.

In her book, *Comfortable with Uncertainty*, Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron puts it this way:

“Spiritual awakening is frequently described as a journey to the top of a mountain. We leave our attachments and our worldliness behind and slowly make our way to the top. At the peak, we have transcended all pain. The only problem with this metaphor is that we leave all others behind...”

“On the journey of the warrior-bodhisattva, the path goes down, not up, as if the mountain pointed toward the earth instead of the sky. Instead of transcending the suffering of all creatures, we move toward turbulence and doubt however we can. We explore the reality and unpredictability of insecurity and pain, and we try not to push it away. If it takes place, if it takes lifetimes, we let it be as it is. At our own pace, without speed or aggression, we move down and down and down.”

The spiritual life calls us down the mountain, into relationship with each other and the earth.... And when we get down the mountain, when we land squarely in the midst...we need one another more than ever.

In this world of increasing isolation for so many, we need one another when it comes to the challenging task of living out our values in our lives. To find and live into our wholeness, we must walk both alone and with company, welcoming in not only the spiritual practice of solitude but also the spiritual practices that call for community. We need one another if we are going to have the strong foundation of love that is required to live with compassion in this world. We need one another if we are to bring our ideas and our serenity down the mountain and into the world, bringing our kindness and compassion to bear in all our relationships, allowing ourselves to change and be changed by all that we encounter. We need one another to listen and to speak and to question. Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed is right: “Alone, our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen. Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed.”

## **MESSAGE**

*Free to Be Me? ~ Rev. Stoneberg*

The bride was the daughter of my best friend. She had met her husband-to-be at university, and he, by coincidence, had grown up UU. Both bride and groom were in masters programs...brainy and beautiful...creative and self-actualized. As a new minister, it was the

first wedding I would perform, and they'd asked me to do a homily as part of the service...that is, to share my 'wise words' on marriage.

As if I had any.

Thankfully, the couple had already chosen the readings they would like included in the service, and one of them was from Madeleine L'Engle's *An Irrational Season*.

It is that reading that first came to mind as I began preparing for this morning, and I'll share it in a few minutes. But really, what better example of the tension between freedom and responsibility, between the individual and the collective, can there be than marriage? It is something that lovers enter into joyfully and (in most cases in our society) without duress. It is also something that is spoken of with derision as the quintessential loss of freedom, likened to tying oneself to a ball and chain, for life.

Which is it? Is commitment to others a joy or a prison? Surely, in marriage or in any of our relationships, freedom is put to a very high test. To enter into relationship is to freely choose a precarious thing, but it is a choice which also holds the most promise. Relationships make more work for us and make life more complicated, but they also have the potential to gift us with intimate human connection. Relationships are, community is, risky business.

But let's begin with the concept of liberation, which is the process of being freed from something which limits, or confines, or imprisons. All of us have been liberated, and are in the process of being liberated...by those who came before us who worked so that we might live in a free society, and also by our own processes of slowly untying ourselves from those things that constrict our spirits.

But once liberated, what then? What have we been freed to do?

Do you remember the 1970's record and book and TV Special, featuring Marlo Thomas, *Free to Be...You and Me*? She and a host of collaborators had a mission, which Thomas said was, "to convince children that their dreams were not only boundless, but achievable." An inspiring message of liberation, one that became immensely popular, a product of the strong current of individualism that was sweeping across our society.

That was a time when a large cohort of baby boomers were coming of age, having been raised by a generation of institutionalists and conformists. This generation, my generation, felt pushed down, held in place by societal expectations and norms. And so, the resulting tide of rising individualism was an understandable, maybe even appropriate, reaction. Generally speaking, responsibility has been viewed by my generation as something that would constrict personal freedom.

In seminary, I took several classes from a lovable Buddhist monk, Bhante Seelawimala. I remember him talking about human nature, our desires and predilections, as being similar to sprung steel. When pushed in one direction, we often over-react in the opposite direction, and back and forth we spring until we find balance, at least temporarily (because, of course,

according to Buddhist thought, everything passes away.)

Well, that's how I view the predominant culture's current emphasis on individualism... which has come to be manifest as a commercialized search for all things pleasurable and self-serving. "I want it, I want the biggest and best, I want it now. Oh, and I don't want to do anything to get it." And without going into a lot of detail, I think you can see that the spring has now been pushed in the completely opposite direction...to a point where the common good, including the health of our planet, is in danger.

But what I really want to talk about today is how all of this...the tension between the individual and the collective...plays out in community...this community.

In "Power of Community, the Peril of Individualism,"<sup>2</sup> a recent article in the UUWorld, Rev. Cheryl Walker tells us that she was raised Muslim. She tells of finding her identity in the conformity of that community, but eventually finding that the price...giving up her individuality in order to exist...was too high. She goes on to say that she fell in love with Unitarian Universalism because of that ability to be an individual within a faith community. But then she discovered a shadow side, in that "everyone had come thinking that this religion was made just for them...and thought everything should be just for them." Individualism, she writes, is attractive in the beginning, when you're starving for it. It's what we feel we have been liberated for...to freely pursue our own desires and follow our own path. But can we really create community, beloved community, if our individualism is all that we share? The Universal Peace Federation has a 'comprehensive moral education' curriculum on Wikispaces called *Discovering the Real Me*.<sup>3</sup> In the section on "What Do We Live For?" there's a lesson on Freedom and Responsibility, and I found it particularly helpful in making connections between being free as individuals and being caring participants in community and society. Here are a few salient points from that curriculum:

- There's no such thing as complete freedom. Freedom is always limited by such things as physical law, natural ability, and legal or social constraint.
- Freedom of will is an important dimension of freedom that is often forgotten. In every moment that we make a choice, we experience freedom.
- True freedom is the freedom to follow one's conscience and maintain one's personal integrity. The joy of freedom is the ability to choose well...to make life decisions that best align with our values.

Perhaps this reminds you of what Victor Frankl, a concentration camp survivor, once said, "Everything can be taken from a man but...the last of the human freedoms - to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

So, why would one choose community? Here are Madeleine L'Engle's words about marriage,

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.uuworld.org/articles/power-community>

<sup>3</sup> <http://discoveringtherealme.wikispaces.com/9+-+Freedom+and+Responsibility>

which I offer in abridged form.

“Ultimately two people who love each other must ask themselves how much they hope for...and how much risk they are willing to take...It is indeed a fearful gamble...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...into that love which is not possession, but participation...

When love is not possession, but participation, then it is part of that co-creation which is our human calling, and which implies such risk, that it is often rejected.”

To commit ourselves to one another is the biggest risk we can take...in marriage...but also in community. It calls us into the act of co-creation, where we’re not the only one we’re accountable to, and where we have to balance holding onto our personal integrity with remaining in relationship.

Friday night, we gathered here for a potluck meal and a conversation about welcome and inclusion. The materials we looked at proposed building a multi-cultural religion, where each person can bring all of who they are. It was just a beginning conversation about the complexity of being multi-faceted individuals nested within a community that matters, and how to make space for each other. For me, one of the primary learnings from that conversation was about how hard it is to notice when we’re assuming and promoting a dominant culture, and then, to choose to give some of it up in order to include others. We have to make space, by somehow pulling back, or shrinking up the space we are taking. Rev. Walker expressed this in another way: “True community doesn’t happen unless everyone is willing to give up some of their identity as an individual to take on the identity of the group.” (*repeat*)

As individuals, this feels risky. We, or at least I, resist giving away anything that feels like giving away a piece of myself. It’s threatening. But think about it this way. Remember how I said that the joy of freedom is the ability to choose and to choose well? To choose well is to act or respond or participate in life in ways that are in harmony with our values. To do this, is to create a life of integrity, a life that we love.

So, what are our values around community? Personally, I highly value the vision of a ‘beloved community’...where all are welcomed as blessings, where no one cultural identity dominates, where no one has to leave their identity at the door.<sup>4</sup> What else? What do you value about community?

If we are true to what we express about this religious community, we value being inclusive. We value being affirmed as inherent and worthy. We value the wisdom and learning we glean from simply being with others. We value being supported in our life journey, and being

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<sup>4</sup> Culled from *The Welcome Table*, a class offered by SERC, Welcome and Inclusion Part 1.

known deeply. We value the power of a group of people to change the world.<sup>5</sup> In community, we gain a lot. And we value that.

Still, to choose community is to freely choose to do a difficult thing. It is to choose to take the risk of giving something up in order to experience all the gifts of friendship, of love, of intimacy, of relationship. To choose community requires work, and intention, and time, and patience, and faith...faith in each other, and faith in humanity.

But to be aware of our free choice is also to relieve the felt burden of responsibility. I believe that when we recognize that we are choosing to participate in and support this community because it matters to us, then what it requires of us will no longer feel like a task. I also believe that joyfully 'doing what it takes' is a much needed tonic to our society's current over-emphasis on the individual.

(By the way, did you know that Victor Frankl once proposed that to 'balance' the presence of the Statue of Liberty on the east coast of the US, that a Statue of Responsibility be erected on the west coast? And did you know that plans are in the works? Google it. The prototype is pair of clasped hands, oriented vertically, equal in height to the Statue of Liberty, symbolizing the responsibility that comes with that liberty.)

A couple of years ago, on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *Free to Be...You and Me* project, the collaborators were asked what they would tell children today that would make them even more free to be.<sup>6</sup>

Harry Belafonte, who sang on the album, said that he'd want them to know that his generation, motivated by lust and greed, had morally failed in the care of the planet, and would want to encourage them not to let that failure destroy their spirit.

A co-producer said that we need to encourage kids to connect to each other, moving from *Free to Be...You and Me* to *Free to Be We*.

Gloria Steinem wrote about bullying, suggesting a song that talks about the big freedom that comes when we learn that people are linked, not ranked.

The composer said she'd write a new song called "We're All in This Together."

Marlo Thomas said she'd write a new love song that ended with "You=Me."

But what I liked best among the reflections was a reference to something Kurt Vonnegut wrote in the original book: "I've often thought," he said, "there ought to be a manual to hand to little kids, telling them what kind of planet they're on, why they don't fall off it, how to avoid poison ivy, and so on," concluding that he would want to teach kids about diversity and how we can learn from each other.

If there were a manual that I could write, words of wisdom that I had to share about freedom

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<sup>5</sup> This list of 'community gains' is found in Rev. Cheryl Walkers article. <http://www.uuworld.org/articles/power-community>

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/marlo-thomas/free-to-be-40-years-later\\_b\\_2206066.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/marlo-thomas/free-to-be-40-years-later_b_2206066.html)

and responsibility, I might turn to the metaphor presented in our story this morning. Although we are individual crayons, we live in and among an infinite variety of colours, with each necessary to create the rich tapestry of life. We are called to make a contribution, but regardless of how we present, no one but us can determine how we should use our colour to best contribute to the picture of all that is. And life that includes all the colours, in the way that they choose to show up, is a picture of the beloved community. Oh, and I would tell them to choose to love...because to love is to colour your heart out, and to experience the beautiful, life-giving intensity of co-creating a life with others.

What is the manual that you would write?

Blessed be all of our dreams for a more just and sustainable, and connected, world...a world where we are both free and accountable to each other. Amen.

**READING**

*Breathing Through*

~ Joanna Macy

Basic to most spiritual traditions, as well as to the systems view of the world, is the recognition that we are not separate, isolated entities, but integral and organic parts of the vast web of life. As such, we are like neurons in a neural net, through which flow currents of awareness of what is happening to us, as a species and as a planet. In that context, the pain we feel for our world is a living testimony to our interconnectedness with it. If we deny this pain, we become like blocked and atrophied neurons, deprived of life's flow and weakening the larger body in which we take being. But if we let it move through us, we affirm our belonging; our collective awareness increases. We can open to the pain of the world in confidence that it can neither shatter nor isolate us, for we are not objects that can break. We are resilient patterns within a vaster web of knowing.

Because we have been conditioned to view ourselves as separate, competitive and thus fragile entities, it takes practice to relearn this kind of resilience. A good way to begin is by practicing simple openness...for the development of compassion.

**\*CLOSING WORDS** ~ Wilfred Cantwell Smith.

There is more to humankind than meets the eye. More to oneself; more to one's neighbour; more to the world that surrounds us. There is more to the past out of which we come, and especially, it would seem, more to the present moment, maybe even infinitely more. There is more to the interrelationships that bind us together as persons. And the further we probe, people have always found, the deeper the mystery, or the reward, or the involvement. It is this 'more', perhaps, that provides at least one of the bases of human religion.

May this, our religious community, ever and always be one of that 'more.'

Amen.

## EXTINGUISHING THE FLAME