

Freedom and the Free Church ©

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Sometimes, one has to put the weight of the world that has been riding on one's shoulders down for a bit and let go of all the problems we have and our country has and just find a way to relax, connect and celebrate. For me, it doesn't mean that I don't care deeply and sometimes desperately about the problems our country is facing, it just means that I also want to celebrate the promises of this great country of ours. I feel very lucky that I got to celebrate the Independence Day holiday by going to a ball game (America's pastime) and watching the fireworks afterward. I even had a hot dog and peanuts, the traditional yet not necessarily nutritious dining fair commonly served at ball games.

And just like going to a ball game, having a hot dog and watching fireworks is the archetypal fourth of July experience, so too are other ideals we cling to and stories we hold dear. Today as we talk about freedom and the free church, many of the ideas we have about freedom come from the stories and mythology we tell each other and our children about what it means to be an American. One of the stories is that we are endowed by our creator with certain inalienable rights. These rights were not bestowed upon us by a ruler, a king, or a president. They exist merely because we are human beings; and cannot be taken away by any law.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." (U.S. Declaration of Independence, Paragraph 2 (1776).

We know that many desires contributed to the Declaration of Independence including the desire not to be taxed without representation, the desire for more financial gains and profits, the desire to own that land that was taken from the indigenous peoples for themselves rather than for their king, and last but not least, the desire for religious freedom. The concept of freedom has always been a part of our patriotism and our identity. When a President and Congress want to go to war,

they always couch it in terms of protecting our freedom: the land of the free and the home of the brave.

Many of the ideas in the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution are similar to the ideas that make up the 7 principles of Unitarian Universalism. Both are products of the Age of Enlightenment with its emphasis on human worth and dignity and the use of reason.

With the exception of our Unitarian forbearers in Transylvania and King John Sigismund's Act of Religious Tolerance and Freedom of Conscience (1563), the people of a country were expected to practice the religion of their king or queen. And even though free thought and free religious expressions were important in our formation as a country we have a long history of failure regarding both human and religious freedom.

And while the myth of freedom and the desire for freedom remains strong, I find myself wondering what most people are really reflecting on when they think about freedom and the free church.

Sometimes when people say I wish I were free, what they really mean is that they wish they didn't have to do something that they don't like. Commitment is seen as constraint. Sometimes what constrains us is not an external law, but an internal process. Sometimes people can be so afraid of making a decision and going through a door because they find themselves focusing on what they will be giving up rather than what they will be gaining. They seize up and feel imprisoned from too much choice and then get stuck or float aimlessly.

Sometimes folks are afraid to believe in something and then commit their lives to it, so they tell themselves that they believe in nothing. This may feel like freedom, but it is "lostness" with no direction home. It is an unmoored drifting. I see this happening a lot in Unitarian Universalism.

One of the shadow sides of a free faith is that one can fool oneself into shallowness, unmoored drifting and flabbiness when one thinks and proclaims, "I can believe anything I want for a day and then change belief when a response of substance or a degree of discomfort is required." A freedom to seek requires - if it is

to truly lead us somewhere - an ability to commit. Our free faith is not a free ride. Our freedom is a freedom for life not from it.

Our faith is free, but it is not a free ride. It requires conviction of us if we want to truly respond to the world with freedom rather than the rote responses of a consumerist society.

We come from the free church tradition. What this means, in part, is that we do not expect our members to recite and affirm a creed that constrains belief and is incompatible with our direct experience of life. The creed many Christians recite was developed in the 300's, right after the Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity.

Rome and her rulers prided themselves on--and took great comfort in-- order, hierarchy and rules. Christianity, only three hundred years old, was gloriously disorderly. Well, that is one way to look at it. Another way was to say that it contained a plurality of interpretations about the nature of God and the teachings of Jesus. We Unitarian Universalists trace several of our theological roots to the conversations that were going on at that time.

One of our theological ancestors was a man named Origen (b.185-d.254). He was a great theologian and teacher. His theology, teaching, preaching and writing were so supple that I think of him as the Michael Jordan of theology. He believed that love was an integral part of God's identity. This conviction led him to another profound theological position. He believed that all people's souls were saved, and that none would be condemned to an eternal hell. He believed that the wholeness and goodness of God could never ultimately be separated or withdrawn from another soul.

This idea of universal salvation did not sit well with the Roman rulers who were trying to systematize and structure Christianity. They believed in punishment and used the fear of eternal damnation as a means to control the population.

Fundamentalists in our day and age use this same fear of being separated from God and being imprisoned in hell to frighten their adherents and their children. Many of us know that this is still going on because their children tell our children that they are going to hell for not believing in a literal interpretation of the Bible and certain

doctrines about Jesus. Perhaps we ourselves have heard this from neighbors or family members. They want to put fear into religion; we want to take it out. We hold with Origen that God, in part, is expressed as an abiding love, wholeness and interconnection of all.

Another one of our theological ancestors was a bishop name Arius (b.296-d.373) He did not believe in the trinity as expressed, defined and understood in the Nicene Creed (325 CE). He did not believe that Jesus had always existed. This view led people to regard Jesus as a prophet and a teacher. Many of us relate to Jesus in this way today, which is why he is considered another one of our ancestors.

At the time of Constantine, there were probably as many expressions of Christianity as there are now. When people met in the streets - at the baker's or the market - they passionately expressed their views of Jesus and his teachings in the same way many of us discuss current and former members of our favorite sports team. At one time, there were more than forty gospels, many of which we only know about because they were refuted in orthodox texts. Some were found in caves and buried in the ground, like the Gospel of Thomas and the materials of the Nag Hammadi Library. The church which became more and more Romanized in their love of hierarchy and order did, in fact, order all but the four gospels known as Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John to be burned and never to be used again. Arius was exiled and most of his and Origen's teachings were also destroyed during this period of Christianity's organizational development.

I mention all of this because it lays the foundation for the development of the Nicene creed that I referred to earlier, and the insistence that all who wished to be legitimate Christians adhere to this creed. Orthodoxy of belief was and remains very important to the majority of people practicing the various forms of Christianity. The people were told what to believe. Belief seemed to be more important than how you acted in the world.

For centuries the bond in a mainline church became one of faith. Faith took priority over love. To make matters even worse, the whole notion of faith is rigorously and repeatedly diminished each time it is quantified or classified as "right" or

“correct” hierarchically approved doctrine and belief. Questions were not sought and most certainly not eagerly embraced.

We Unitarian Universalists do not recite a creed nor do we require a belief in one to become a member. Rather than a doctrine, we say that love is the spirit of our church. We even proclaim this every Sunday during our church aspiration. We say that how you are in the world- your actions and what you do- is at least as, if not more important, than what you say you believe. Often when I am meeting with people who have come to our free faith from another tradition, they tell me that they were told that they asked too many questions. Can you imagine that? Here we know that to question in itself is an answer.

But it is important not to get sloppy with the questions and allow ourselves to wallow in indecision and unresponsiveness or fear that we may upset someone with our differing opinion. I have a friend who is a chaplain in the U.S. Navy and she serves in a department known as the “spiritual fitness department.” I like the image of spiritual fitness.

Yes, we are a free church, but that does not mean that anything goes, that we can believe anything that we want. Nor does it mean that we are noncommittal and spiritually flabby. We must stand for something or we stand for nothing.

Some beliefs and actions violate the inherent worth and dignity of others, which is the very first principle that we affirm and promote. Some beliefs and actions deny the interconnected web of existence, which is our seventh principle. Some beliefs ask us to ignore our own direct experience. As UU’s we are free to explore and respond to what we find to be the good, the true and the beautiful. We are free to examine and make sense of our direct experience of mystery and awe, rather than required to memorize answers in a catechism book. We are invited to make a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We are free to grow, as our third principle clearly states: accepting one another and encouraging spiritual growth in our congregations.

And when we free church folks say that our search is responsible, to whom are we responsible? We are responsible to each other. We are responsible to grow our souls within our congregations. And we are responsible to the future, to the planet,

and all beings that come into existence after we are long gone. We are responsible to stand with those who are marginalized or mistreated. Truth in all its complexity is not come at in isolation. It is come at, maintained and tested in community, in relationship to each other.

Our free church tradition also holds sacred two more tenants: the free pulpit and the free pew. The free pulpit means that no congregant and no board can dictate to a preacher what he or she will preach upon. This has provided a challenge for our clergy as far back as Boston in the 1800's when William Ellery Channing preached against slavery and the Boston Brahmin slave ship owners (a.k.a the captains of industry), who attended the church he served, did not like anything or anybody that threatened them as they accumulated their wealth with disregard for the personhood of their cargo. And yet, as dangerous financially as it can be for ministers who challenge congregants in their complacency and then lose their jobs, it remains a cherished core of our faith tradition.

The corollary to that is the free pew. Just because the preacher preaches something, the listener is not required to believe it. Each of us is to weigh the message and sift through it for how it might help us live a life more in alignment with our own beliefs.

This whole issue of the free pulpit came up for me recently with someone thought that when I said something critical about a decision that our current president made, it made him nervous because it might make other people in the congregation unhappy.

I was glad for the opportunity to discuss this with him and pleased that he had the courage to ask his question. Here are my thoughts about this now. We say every Sunday morning that all are welcome including all political beliefs. And they are, but they might not hear anything that they will agree with. I am not here preaching for you to be agreeable. Unitarian Universalism is not for everyone. If you do not believe that people and their health are more important than profit, this may be a challenging pew for you to occupy. This is also true if you do not believe that the environment, public education and the rights of women and people of color are at

risk. I cannot, and will not, soften the message for fear of upsetting someone, nor will most of my colleagues.

I hope you will stay with your discomfort and allow it to change you. But that is up to you. I will not soften the messages of our faith, because they are too important.

We come to church freely, not because of some fear of punishment, but to grow our souls and to become spiritually fit. Being spiritually fit means that we are intentional about our spiritual practices. It means we show up for Sunday service, not just because we may need some nourishment, but because we know that our act of coming creates the community that affirms our strength and nourishes us in our time of need as well.

Because we don't have a creed and a set of pat answers, because we don't expect someone else to save us, we come to church to grow our ability to make meaning in the world. We come to church to grow our ability to articulate our values and to live more deeply into them, even when it makes us uncomfortable and puts our privilege at risk. And finally, we are a free church because we know ultimately that the Spirit blows where it will. It can't be defined by doctrine or orthodoxy. Our awareness of it can be grown and our ability to live into its truth can be strengthened, and its love can be shared.

The free church is not a free ride. It requires effort and spiritual strength. We know that one person with a conviction is a social power equal to ninety-nine who have only beliefs or feelings. Imagine a whole church, our church, filled with conviction, growing our souls, savoring and delighting in justice as well as truth and beauty and goodness, healing our planet, and serving the common good. May it be so. Blessed Be. Amen.

Benediction (#700)

For all who see God may God go with you  
For all who embrace life,  
may life return your affection  
For all who seek a right path  
may a way be found ...  
and the courage to take it,  
step by step.