

OH FREEDOM

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The first time I visited the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center I didn't really make it past the slave pen. Yes, I toured other exhibits, but emotionally I remained parked at the threshold of the slave pen. It took me several minutes to contemplate what it would mean to cross this threshold. I trembled. This structure housed the enforced suffering of human beings; some traces of their physical and emotional presence remains. The last thing I thought before I crossed over was "This is holy ground."

Inside the pen, I did not feel worthy of this suffering. I did not feel safe, even though I was not alive when the pen was used, and am not immediately responsible for its usage. I thought and felt, "Something should have been done." "Why didn't people stop this sooner or never start it? Intellectually I know that the history of slavery is as old as the history of the human race (Americans neither invented slavery nor imported nor used the most slaves). But still, it was never less than gruesome, never less than inhumane, and I still don't know what this means.

The Freedom Center promotional brochure reads, "Based on the heroic stories of the Underground Railroad, a visit brings to life the powerful message that every individual can make a difference in the struggle for freedom." The powerful individual heroic, courageous, inspirational stories exist, but my takeaway continues to be the power of individual and societal evil. Perhaps it takes a minister to go to the Freedom Center and be consumed by evil.

Yes, I said "evil," wrong relationship, voluntary, unnecessary, destructive sins against humanity. What would you have me call slavery? Sins. Evil. Oh freedom, you are not easy. "Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet deprecate agitation, are people who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning; they want the ocean without the awful roar of its waters."¹

Depending on how we let ourselves enter the Freedom Center, the water is roaring. The next time I attended the Freedom Center I never emotionally got past room two of the history exhibit. Room two showed a small drawing of a neck iron, something most of us have seen in other museums, or maybe a movie. But this drawing had something new, a neck iron with three, long, hooked prongs. If you were wearing this neck iron and rested your head down, or to the side, or to the back, you would be stabbed. You could not lie down and rest. You could not move your head. How long were slaves kept in neck irons like this? How could one human look at another and not see a member of their human family, a human being who should never, ever be put in a neck iron?

Individuals can make the difference in the struggle for freedom both ways, releasing or imprisoning one another. And, individuals create a society that either releases or imprisons. It's not just about individuals. Perhaps it is not fully about individuals. It is about society - communities and their power to prevent or encourage evil. I think of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, where an enslaved mother facing impossible choices in a slave holding society kills a child. The child haunts her mother until the mother is released from this living horror by the loving presence of the community. Extraordinary is the power of community when committed to loving kindness that does no evil.

¹ Frederick Douglass.

Also extraordinary is the power of community when not committed to loving kindness. Oh, freedom, what are you? Slave owners were free to put slaves in hooked neck irons. A few years ago at General Assembly in Nashville, Tennessee I walked over to the Tennessee Historical Museum and saw slave manacles for the first time, and tucked around a corner, early robes from the Ku Klux Klan. Wasn't that freedom too? Freedom to bind the wrist of others, freedom to dress in a robe and terrorize others? Where is the line on freedom? When is freedom salvation here on earth and when is it hell? What happens when choices are made that do not serve all individuals or humanity?

My dictionary defines freedom as "the quality or state of being free, as a) the absence of necessity, coercion, or constraint in choice or action, b) liberation from slavery or restraint or from the power of another. A positive definition of freedom is the presence of choice in thought and action and the absence of coercion, fear, violence, murder, or slavery.

I was interested to read about two synonyms of freedom, liberty and license. According to my dictionary definition, freedom, involves some variable positive restraint. Most of us would agree there are some positive restraints in our society like stop signs, rules that make sure we share our space and rights. My dictionary defined liberty as the power to choose with less restraint and, license as the liberty to break the rules. So police officers can drive through stop signs if necessary, but there can be consequences to this if someone is hurt in the process.

Your license then can impinge on my freedom. Your license can take up too much space or too many rights that belongs to someone else. (I do like Sallie McFague's definition of sin as "taking up too much space"). Slave ownership was license, evil, taking up too much space and too many rights, wrong relationship. One person's freedom does not include physical possession of another person (such as domestic violence, child abuse, torture, and premeditated murder). It is evil to relate to another human being as an object of possession for personal need or gratification.

But this area is still very gray. One person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter. Consider the Sandinistas and the Contras, or controversial photographs of the Palestinian uprising against Israel (originally placed in the Freedom Center, then discreetly masked). Have you heard the roaring waters yet? As much as we would like it, there is no shared understanding of freedom either in America or abroad (remember, in America some people think freedom begins and ends with small government).

Freedom is discomfoting. I take no comfort in my visits to the Freedom Center. I do not leave uplifted. Enlightened, yes. Provoked, yes. Challenged, yes. Educated, yes. Upset, yes. Inspired, sometimes. Uplifted, no.

In our readings for this morning I mentioned Reverend Mark Morrison-Reed's "trinity" of freedoms; spiritual, political (I assume this includes physical, economic, etc.), and intellectual. According to Morrison-Reed, overall (but of course there are exceptions), the "black church" places spiritual freedom first (When humans abandoned enslaved humans, God became the ultimate source of freedom during slavery as in the spiritual "O Freedom" which sings "before I'd be a slave I'd be buried in my grave and go home to my God and be free"), political freedom second, and intellectual freedom last. According to Morrison-Reed, who is a black Unitarian Universalist minister, the order is reversed in Unitarian Universalism; intellectual, political, and spiritual.

You'll note that in both the black church and Unitarian Universalism, "political freedom" is second. However, depending on the comforts of your societal class, political freedoms become more or less pressing. A theory exists that there are "higher" and "lower" order freedoms. Fundamental or lower order freedoms are safety, food, clothing, shelter, jobs, really subsistence issues of economic survival, that do become political (de-segregation, unionizing workers) for the lower classes.

Political issues can also be survival issues, which is why Morrison-Reed notes in our readings for this morning that historically the black church has been more likely to be deeply

involved in child care, food, shelter, funerary rights, civil rights, and voter registration. I am proud though that First Church has actively participated in childcare, funerary rights, voter registration (particularly this fall which was a wonderful community experience of helping and being helped), and to some extent civil rights.

"Higher" order (some would say "optional") freedoms are intellectual, and are exercised by people in higher classes (like Unitarian Universalists) who have the privilege of guaranteed survival. A positive society relies on strenuous intellectual thought, but it is a luxury. Unitarian Universalism comes out of the liberal religious tradition. This is a tradition of middle-class comfort (luxury) and intellectual freedom. It is a religious tradition for people who have some power. I am not the first person, nor the most famous person to suggest this. The great theologian H. Richard Niebuhr considered middle-class Protestant religion as philosophical, abstract, and formal, a child of the Enlightenment with an emphasis on individual, intellectual freedom (not spiritual or political freedom). He notes

The religious ethic of the middle class is marked throughout by this characteristic of individualism . . . Such an ethic is capable of producing a real heroism of self-discipline and, in its insistence on personal responsibility, the courage of resistance to the authority of state and church when these conflict with the imperatives of individual conscience. But this morality is incapable of developing a hopeful passion for social justice. Its martyrs die for liberty not for fraternity and equality; its saints are patrons of individual enterprise in religion, politics, and economics, not the great benefactors of mankind or the heralds of brotherhood.²

Ouch. The contemporary theologian Dorothee Solle writes

I suppose that most of us owe our best experiences of faith to liberal theology. Its humanity, its comprehension and its intellectual honesty, which forbade it to leave its own understanding at the church door . . . But it is now impossible to overlook the shadow side of this theology . . . its consistent individualism. Liberalism regards human beings as individuals who find comfort and peace of mind in faith . . . The bourgeois theology is the work of the white middle class, relatively well-to do, dominated by males and with an andocentric thought. It takes no account of the impoverished masses of this earth; the starving appear at most as objects of charity.³

I can name you Unitarian Universalists who were great benefactors and heralds of brotherhood, individuals who cared about social, political and ecological questions, Clara Barton (a Universalist who founded the American Red Cross), James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo (Unitarians murdered in the south during the civil rights movement), Whitney Young (founder of the modern Urban League). But overall, Niebuhr and Sollee are correct. There is no way around this.

As moving and important as it is, most of our saints lived and our martyrs died (Michael Servetus, Francis David) for intellectual freedoms of conscience. Their suffering (and that of others) was great. They were tortured and murdered, and it was for intellectual freedoms. Most of them were not fighting for political or physical freedom. As economically comfortable middle and upper class individuals, they were not trying to upset the middle class status quo or capitalist economy.

The Freedom Center places the problem of political freedom at the beginning of its history section. The slave trade continued, although many people knew it was terrible, because the world economy relied upon it. Why didn't people stop this sooner? Money. Our economy.

² Morrison-Reed, 24-26.

³ Dorothee Solle, *Thinking About God: An Introduction to Theology* (1990), 15-18.

Throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries there was an intense trade in slaves, rum, cotton, gold, and silver that generated tremendous cash profits. Why did American society legally uphold slavery and stand silent (even though thousands of individuals protested and defied slave laws) while people were placed in hooked neck irons? Cash. Money. Profits.

I am moved, inspired, awe-struck that John Parker and John Rankin and their families, as well as all the enslaved persons who tried to escape bondage, risked their lives (seen in the Freedom Center "Borderlands" movie), but they remain grains of sand until the community rises to say, "Stop it." Just one individual is a grain of sand in a world economy or societal order. That is why it takes a community to heal us from our ghost children.

Moment of honesty, I like being a bourgeois person, drinking a \$3.50 latte, and considering the purchase of a pair of round-toed pumps. No one could contest that these are luxuries, and I admit to liking them. But, we are also one human family. One human family. I have been thinking about this all month. It tears my heart and fills me with fear to say this, but my son is not more precious than you, or your sons and daughters, or the sons and daughters of people I don't know. If it's one human family no one wears a neck iron, no one stays in a neck iron because it is good for business, or my lattes, or my shoes. As a society we can have luxuries. I am not naive enough to believe that anyone can create an entirely equal society. But I am not negligent enough to think I shouldn't be working towards that end.

This Freedom Center has left a deep troubling in my soul, beginning with the potential for human evil and greed, the strength of some individuals (for good and bad), the weak, selfish negligence of society and its ultimate power to do good. At the Freedom Center I have had the same experience I had at the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam. I assume it is the same experience I would have at a Museum of 20th Century Tibetan People's History, or Armenian People's History. It is the same experience I had when I read "Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee."

Each experience of suffering is unique. American slavery was different than Latin American slavery, different than the Holocaust, different than the Chinese occupation of Tibet. Different people suffer differently in these systems for different reasons. Yet the capacity for human evil, greed, negligence, hatred, misunderstanding, possession, oppression, torture and murder is the same. I am not Anne Frank, but I could have been. I was not a Nazi, but could I have been? I expect to live a life mostly free of intense oppression, but if there is some change and people in America who are Unitarian Universalist, or have green eyes, or who married someone of Portuguese descent become oppressed some day, I would not be surprised. History teaches me that this is normal and the oppression can be a nuisance or it can be horrific.

Some people don't like the Freedom Center because of unresolved racial justice issues in Cincinnati. This is a fair concern. A friend recently said to me "The geographic location is historically appropriate. But it really co-opts issues of racial justice in Cincinnati. The corporations gave lots of money and people keep quiet now." Others note that the West End and Over the Rhine continue to flounder; neglected "step-children" of the city while money was poured into the riverfront to build this museum. Economy and money again.

I think co-opting and use of the Freedom Center remains to be seen. The Freedom Center has left a troubling in my soul. Will it have the same affect on other people? Will the Center be radical enough to take on issues of economy, especially local economy? I wish that it would. The roar of the water is certainly there. We mine as well just wade in. Isn't this what the Center calls us to do? I am uneasy, I admit, about the Center's message of individual heroism. Individual heroism is inspiring, but major change it does not make. Does this individual emphasis by the Freedom Center side step the issue of community responsibility, just as liberal religion so often does?

When I was a seminary student I worked at First Church in Roxbury, a large (500 seats?), old, mostly unused Unitarian church in a vibrant neighborhood rich in people. Roxbury is also notably poor, violent, and segregated. Working there was my singularly most inept and

transformative seminary experience (emphasis on inept). I rarely knew what I was doing, always felt out of my depth, and found it all utterly exhausting and ultimately transformative. Whenever I go near Roxbury now, I always look for the church steeple, because the church sits on a hill, and can be seen from far away, even in the city. That steeple was and is a beacon to me, a beacon of joy and pain, a memory of the inner city kids I met and neighborhoods I crossed, a memory of a Unitarian Universalist society going past intellectual freedoms, attempting, one halting moment at a time, to create a better world.

In a poetry journal written by the Roxbury teenagers, one girl wrote

I have a shattered dream of the perfect place,
 there was neither violence nor a war
 and there was rarely a death.
 My dream was shattered by a bullet - maybe it was a stray
 but that doesn't matter
 because I'll never forget the day Joseph passed away.
 My perfect world, my perfect dream,
 has all gone up in flames,
 the stupid violence and the deaths;
 there's far too many names.⁴

In one human family, to the best of our ability, this teenager, and her friend Joseph are not left behind. No child lives in a neighborhood that one Roxbury youth described as full of monsters at twilight with guns and drugs. In one human family we move beyond comfortable individualism to positive communal responsibility. In one human family we name the constant potential for human evil so that we can choose to do good. In one human family we rest, and play, and work and rest and play and work, together, for you, me, all of us.

Freedom can never be nothing left to loose. There is always and only one human family. This is our gift, our burden, our privilege. In just over a year our capital campaign will be done. In just over two years our pledges will be finished. What is next for First Church? In my vision it is a future where we combine intellectual, political, and spiritual freedoms (as we have done in the past, only even more so now) to benefit ourselves, our loved ones, and the billions of people we will never know, and never need to know, but who remain a part of our one sacred, human family here on earth.

READINGS

The fatalism of the disinherited drives them to focus on the otherworldly rather than on justice in this world. In the context of the black church, the spiritual connection to God is emphasized as otherworldly rather than as in and through this world. Power is attributed to God, but it is not recognized that individuals are the primary conduits of His power. God is perceived as all-powerful, and people as powerless. Yet gaining power is one of the central problems in the lives of blacks, workers, and the disinherited. Having power means having the ability to assert control over one's own destiny . . . intellectual freedom is the missing element in the spirituality-dominated black church. The free mind does not shrink from questioning the dogmas that sustain the church's fatalism. It can break through the feelings of low self-esteem and the outmoded beliefs that keep people locked into a feeling of helplessness. For it is in reflecting on one's condition that one discovers ways in which to use one's power to bring about a just society.

-Reverend Mark Morrison-Reed, *Black Pioneers in a White Denomination*, 174-175.

⁴ "Shattered Dreams" by Aja Demby in *Life Thoughts: An Anthology of Poetry Written by Roxbury Youth* (1994), 53.

From the working-class perspective, intellectuals talk about things they can do nothing about, and do nothing about the things they talk about. This criticism rings true. It points to a problem raised in the first chapter: the Unitarian tendency to abuse intellectual freedom by becoming esoteric in one's thinking. This tendency can be corrected by learning from the experience of black religion, which tries to unite thought and action to improve the lives of its members. Liberal religion needs working class realism. Despite the black church's reputation for other-worldliness, it has met the needs of the present. Childcare, food and shelter, funerary matters, the cause of civil rights, and voter registration are all concerns to which the black church has responded.

-Reverend Mark Morrison-Reed, *Black Pioneers in a White Denomination*, 170-171.