

**Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Peninsula**  
**Sunday April 26th 2020**

**Reading:** “To the People Who Have Mistaken Freedom for Liberation”

by the Rev. Theresa I. Soto

My reading this morning comes from *Spilling the Light*, a collection of “Meditations on Hope and Resilience” written and published last year by my colleague, the Rev. Theresa Soto. This meditation is entitled “To the People Who Have Mistaken Freedom for Liberation”.

To be free, you must embrace  
the breadth of your own existence  
without apology, even if they try to take  
it from you. You must know, not that you  
can do whatever you want; you are not  
a kudzu vine, eating entire hillsides for  
the purpose of feeding your own lush life. You  
must know instead, that inside you are entire  
Universes — milky blue, magenta and gold —  
expanding. But to actually be free, you must  
know and you must fight for the entire  
Universes inside of everyone else.  
Being free is not a license, but  
a promise.

**Sermon:** “Freedom: From, For or With?”

Before I begin my sermon, I need to make a brief Public Service Announcement, as follows.

The makers of Clorox, Lysol and other household cleaners do not recommend injecting their products into your body. They do not recommend gargling with bleach, nor should any disinfectant be administered internally, whether by ingestion or by any other means. Of course, these manufacturers do not wish to infringe upon your constitutional right to do or say stupid things, so you are free to inject yourself with disinfectant or eat Tide Pods if that’s what you really want to do.

(Seriously, though, please don’t do those things!)

We have a complicated relationship with freedom in this country. A few years ago, there was one night when it sounded like one helicopter after another came flying overhead, or maybe it was the same helicopter doing dozens of sky-donuts above our neighborhood. It started mid-evening and continued well after midnight, and at times it was so loud that it was setting off car alarms. Inevitably, people posted about it on Facebook, some wondering what was going on, others complaining about this extended disturbance. Some people responded to the complaints in particular by saying that the helicopter activity was part of US military preparedness, so nobody had the right to complain about it. The irony, of course, is that the freedoms that such preparedness is intended to protect includes the freedom to complain about it, as well as the freedom to criticize those who complain.

As we generally use the word, freedom means a lack of external constraint. It is freedom *from* something that otherwise would hold us back. For example, two of the Four Freedoms of which President Franklin D. Roosevelt spoke about in 1941, and

which Norman Rockwell subsequently illustrated, are Freedom from Want and Freedom from Fear. These, Roosevelt explained, required an international community and economic system that would afford every citizen a healthy and peaceful life by ending both poverty and privilege and removing the threat of war.

Of course, in the absence of such a utopia, not everyone experiences such freedom *from* external constraints in the same way.

There's a three-stage exercise I've run with different groups in which I ask each of the participants to consider their various physical characteristics, like eye color or height. These are the features that define them, at least as far as other people experience them, and once the participants have made a list of their own characteristics, I ask them to sort them into one of three categories: Which of the characteristics give them an advantage in our society? Which of the characteristics put them at a disadvantage? And which don't make a difference? Finally, I have the participants compare their lists of characteristics, and if someone else mentions one they don't already have listed, then they put that in the appropriate category for themselves.

What I've found, in all the times I've run it, is that when it comes to the final stage of the exercise, most participants are more likely to be adding characteristics that turn out to benefit them, rather than any that put them at a disadvantage. Or, to put it another way, they're more likely to have already listed the characteristics that disadvantage them, because they're aware of them.

In many groups, particularly if they're UUs, most participants will have listed the more obvious characteristics, like gender and race, but there are other characteristics that are often only listed by those who are disadvantaged by them, such as an accent, visible tattoos or piercings, or hair length. So if you're a Southerner in the North, or a Northerner in the South, or if you're a man with long hair or a woman with short hair,

you might be aware that people treat you differently, but if your accent matches where you live or your hair length conforms to gender norms, then you might not even think of those as characteristics that define you.

In other words, freedom *from* depends on how we, as individuals, fit into the ways that society has decided, in advance, to judge us. Freedom *from* is not equal. And if freedom is defined as freedom *from*, and if we're more likely to be aware of that freedom when we don't have it than when we do, do any of us actually know how it would feel to be free?

Now there's another way to talk about freedom, and that's as freedom *for*. This answers the question of what it is that our freedom lets us do, of what it is that we can do with our liberty.

The other two of Roosevelt's Four Freedoms represent such liberties, namely Freedom of Speech and Freedom of Worship. Roosevelt didn't say much about these, perhaps because they're arguably covered by the First Amendment, but Rockwell did a lot to illustrate them. In his "Freedom of Speech", Rockwell shows someone speaking at a town meeting, apparently expressing an unpopular opinion, and yet everyone else at the meeting is respecting his right to speak his mind. And in "Freedom of Worship", Rockwell shows people of different faiths engaged in prayer or other devotional practices, along with the words "each according to the dictates of his own conscience".

Certainly freedom *for* is a more positive way of talking than freedom *from*, emphasizing what we *can* do rather than what we *can't*, but there's still a problem.

For instance, there's a story I heard from my colleague, the Rev. Phyllis Hubbell, who was one of the interim ministers at what was then the Unitarian Church of Norfolk ten years ago. (This story can be traced back to an actual event, so it's not just the clergy

version of an urban legend!) It concerns a man in a congregation, some decades ago now, who had found a way to exercise his freedom *for* in church, specifically a way to express his dislike of a sermon. He would stand up — once he'd heard enough of the sermon to know he didn't like it — and slowly begin taking his clothes off. He would remove all of his clothing, one piece at a time, until he was completely naked. And then he would stand that way, waiting for the sermon to be finished, which I'm guessing may well have been sooner than the preacher had otherwise planned.

Such behavior may charitably be called bizarre, but what's most striking about the story isn't the man's behavior but the fact that nobody else in that congregation made him stop. Apparently they didn't want to infringe on his freedom to express himself.

In our own time, we can look to current events to see how freedom *for* and freedom *from* are complements. I'm thinking of the people who are protesting their state's "stay at home" orders, people who seem to be predominantly white, male and armed. As one friend commented, it's white fragility on full display. Aside from the fact that these protests are all apparently engineered for partisan purposes, the protesters are relying on their freedom *for* — their right to speech and assembly — to demand freedom *from* the "stay at home" orders. This shows, of course, that freedom *for* — in this case, protesting — is as unequal as freedom *from*. Just consider how protests by people of color have been handled. Consider the response to a single person of color who knelt to protest racism.

Now consider the nurses and other medical professionals who have gone up those protesting "stay at home" orders. They aren't demanding freedom *from* or freedom *for*, as such. I would say that they're taking a stand for freedom *with*, in that they represent their patients, their co-workers, their families and their communities who are impacted by the pandemic.

This freedom *with*, I would argue, is closer to the true meaning of freedom, rather than how we often think of it as freedom *from* or even freedom *for*. When linguists trace the word “free” back through Old English, Anglo-Saxon and Germanic, for instance, they end up with the Proto-Indo-European root “\*pri”, which actually means love. The word “friend” comes from this same root. In other words, our concepts of freedom and friendship are consequences of ideas going back thousands of years about what it means to love and to be loved. Freedom isn’t really about us as individuals so much as it’s about what we do and the choices we make in relationship to one another.

Think about Bree Newsome, who, almost five years ago, climbed the thirty-foot flagpole outside the South Carolina statehouse to remove the confederate flag. Not only did she do that for the cause of freedom *with* — for everyone who has been hurt by racism — but Newsome literally took that action with other people, a team who helped her train and who kept her safe while she was climbing.

This form of freedom — as freedom *with* — is what we mean by liberation. It recognizes that you’re not free unless I’m free, too. It understands that your destiny is bound up with your neighbor’s — and your doctor’s and that of the person who delivers your mail and that of the person who stocks the supermarket shelves.

Now, although both “liberty” and “liberation” come from the Latin word for “free”, here’s how my late colleague, the Rev. Marjory Bowens-Wheatley, explains the difference between liberal and liberationist:

“The classical liberal vision seeks to make free, to provide opportunities for individuals to realize freedom, but stops short of confronting systems that stand in the way of freedom. By contrast, the liberationist vision sees structures of oppression as inhibitors of freedom and seeks new relationships that lead to freedom from oppression.

The liberationist goal is to call society to account for social injustice and to transform oppressive social structures. Liberation theology seeks to restore right relationships. It is not a one-time event but recognizes the need for an on-going process of struggle to preserve and uphold freedom, justice and equality. Liberalism has a tendency to view freedom in the abstract. Liberationists get specific and ask the critical question: Freedom for whom to do what?"

Liberation is the only form of freedom that makes sense in light of the fact of our interdependence. As UU theologian Paul Rasor put it, each of us is not only connected to one another, but we are also completed in one another. Liberation recognizes that there is no such thing as individual freedom, whether *from* or *for*, but only freedom *with* everyone else. Or, as my colleague, the Rev. Theresa Soto, explained it "To the People Who Have Mistaken Freedom for Liberation", "inside you are entire Universes"; "to actually be free, you must [...] fight for the entire Universes inside of everyone else." And for emphasis, Soto writes, "Being free is not a license, but a promise."

During my time at First Unitarian in Albuquerque, the Senior Minister there, the Rev. Christine Robinson, told me about something that had happened there earlier in her ministry. There was a man who came to services and liked to sit in the front row, right where whoever was at the pulpit could see him. On the one hand, that's a good thing, because in most churches people avoid the front row, even when the Sanctuary is otherwise very full. On the other hand, this particular man, after getting settled in, liked to get really comfortable by taking off not only his shoes but also his socks. Thankfully, unlike the man in the other story, his disrobing ended there, only then he'd proceed to brush his teeth or trim his toenails. More than one guest preacher had not only lost their train of thought but had their railroad of comprehension pulled up for scrap metal when confronted with this man performing his ablutions right in front of the pulpit.

Now, Albuquerque was a healthier congregation than the church that suffered the man who took his clothes off when he didn't like a sermon. Nobody in the latter case, remember, would confront the nudist because they didn't want to infringe on his freedom. But at Albuquerque, some members of the Board knew that they couldn't allow their man to continue to brush his teeth or trim his toenails in services, only they didn't know how to do that, at least at first.

Then they realized that the answer was right there in front of them. They could be true to themselves, they could practice their faith, they could live into their covenant, and they could seek freedom *with* one another. So the next Sunday morning, when they saw the man take his usual seat, the Board members went up front and sat next to him. They introduced themselves. They ask him his name. They asked him about himself, too, and they did so sincerely, out of a genuine desire to get to know him. And those Board members sat with him throughout the service, singing hymns with him and listening to the sermon with him. That Sunday, the man didn't take off his shoes and socks, nor did he brush his teeth or trim his toenails. At the end of the service, he thanked the Board members for sitting with him and for taking an interest in him. Then he left, and he never came back to First Unitarian again. And their Beloved Community grew, just a little bit more, into being.

I'm going to close with another story about liberation, though it's not usually presented that way. It's a parable about the difference between heaven and hell, when a seeker-after-wisdom receives the assistance of an angel.

First, the angel takes the seeker to a great banquet hall, with a table piled high with the most delicious foods imaginable. There are people seated around the table, but in spite of all the food, they are thin and pale, clearly hungry and unhappy. The angel says, "This is hell. Look closely." Then the seeker sees that the people are sitting where they can't reach the food except by using spoons with handles as long as yardsticks.



With those long spoons, the hungry and unhappy people can reach the food, but then the spoons are too long to get any of the food into their mouths.

Next, the angel takes the seeker to another banquet hall, and at first the seeker doesn't see any difference. The angel says, "This is heaven. Look closely." Again the seeker sees the table piled high with delicious foods, and the people sitting around the table, again unable to reach the food except by using the same long spoons, and yet the people are hale and rosy-cheeked, clearly well-fed and happy. In this hall, the seeker then realizes, the people are using their long spoons to feed each other.

In hell, the people are trapped by their ideas of freedom *from* and freedom *for*. They want to feed themselves, as individuals, but the system has been set up to frustrate them. In heaven, by contrast, the people have found liberation by embracing freedom *with*. They understand that they can feed themselves by feeding one another.

So may we find liberation by feeding one another.