



# *What does it mean to be a people of Freedom?*

Small Groups: October 2015

Throughout October, we will explore the question, “What does it mean to be a people of freedom?” Freedom is a core value in Unitarian Universalism. In our principles and covenant, we speak of the free and responsible search for truth and meaning and our commitment to the right of conscience for every person – the right to articulate the truth of one’s heart. This is so important to us because our theological roots are born in men and women and movements of people who didn’t just accept tradition and doctrine as handed down, but found truth emerging through a combination of history, tradition and the discoveries and needs of the present day.

In our congregations, we welcome a great diversity of belief and non-belief. And yet, this commitment to seek truth in freedom is not just about making room for a variety of beliefs; it is also about being open to the idea that revelation is never-ending. New understandings, new ways of seeing things, new articulations of truth and meaning are possible when we keep our minds, our hearts and our spirits open. Allowing this openness and flexibility in thinking, even welcoming change to our beliefs, requires freedom. This commitment to religious freedom has long been a part of our tradition. This makes freedom an especially interesting theme to explore, as there is also a larger conversation happening around our country today about religious freedom. A few weeks ago, I attended a Scottsdale City Council meeting where opponents to a non-discrimination ordinance to protect the rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people couched their opposition primarily in the language of religious freedom. This is not isolated to Scottsdale. It does raise the question, what does religious freedom really mean and where does a person’s rights to believe and teach a particular doctrine begin to impose on another person’s inalienable rights and equal protection under the law? What happens when one person’s demand for freedom comes at the cost of another person’s freedom? We will definitely touch on this conversation this month.

Of course, freedom is not just important in religious belief, it is also a core value to our country. The words “liberty” and “freedom” carry tremendous national weight with them; and yet, there are many realities in the United States which are a serious affront to our professed commitment to freedom. In particular practices of the criminal justice system and the reality of mass incarceration fly in the face of the image of American freedom. Has the language of freedom become so politicized, so well-worn in political rhetoric that we no longer know what it means? In his book, 1984, George Orwell offers this quintessential example of political double speak – one of the slogans of The Party - “War is peace. Freedom is slavery. Ignorance is strength.”

Language does matter – but how we use language matters just as much. If we use the language of freedom while allowing the incarceration of people to fund our police force and municipal governments, we corrode the power of the language and spirit of freedom. Freedom is something that we can strive for in our personal lives, our religious lives and our political lives – and it is something worth the struggle. This month, let us deepen our understanding of freedom and our commitment to it. As Bernice Johnson Reagon from Sweet Honey in the Rock writes in *Ella’s Song*, “we who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes.”

*Rev. Susan*



# *Living the Theme: Freedom*

Choose one of the exercises below to engage the theme. Come to the meeting prepared to share how you tried to experience freedom and what you learned from the practice.

## **1. Find an escape, for yourself and others**

There are some things we can never escape even if we want to: A diagnosis, a loss, the responsibility of caregiving, regret, worry, the draining busyness of daily life, the joy-filled but nonstop responsibility of parenting. Some of these burdens are extraordinary; some are routine. But regardless of their intensity, we may find ourselves longing for a reprieve. A spiritual timeout. A temporary moment that lets us feel carefree just long enough to be refilled or to gain a new perspective. **Find a way to feel carefree!**

To be specific, here is your task:

1. Find a moment of quiet and watch this video for inspiration:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?t=67&v=pMWU8dEKwXw> Spend some time identifying the burden, weight or responsibility from which you need (or would just like) a brief time of escape.
2. Then do something to give yourself that escape. *Do something that leaves you feeling carefree!* What silliness can you incorporate into your day? What moment of laughter would free you from your troubles?
3. Come back to your group prepared to share the gift that this moment of freedom gave you.

Sometimes it's not we who need a moment of escape, but someone we care about. Stepping away, renewing one's self and taking a break are gifts that some people are not good at giving themselves. Sometimes they need a friend to give it to them or support them in doing it. So maybe life is calling you to help a friend find a carefree moment or an afternoon.

If so, here is your task:

1. Watch the video listed above.
2. Spend some time identifying someone in your circle of concern that is carrying a burden, weight or responsibility from which they need a brief time of escape.
3. Then do something to give them that gift, to leave them feeling carefree. You can be direct about it or sneaky. Sometimes gifts like these require a surprise or even anonymity. It might be important for you to drag them into it. Then again, it might be important for them to never know you are behind it. Your assignment is simply to orchestrate it, to make it happen.
4. Come back to your group prepared to share the gift that this moment of freedom gave them... and you.

## **2. Share Your Freedom Song**

Is there a better image of freedom than watching someone dance and sing to their favorite song? What song leaves you feeling free? What song has turned up in your life and set you free? What song do you regularly turn to in order to feel free again? What song reminds you how important freedom is—even *what* freedom is? Come prepared to your meeting with a sample of your chosen song, and explain why it represents freedom for you. And play it all month long! Here are some to get you thinking, singing or dancing:

[Ella's Song by Sweet Honey in the Rock](#)

[Redemption Song by Bob Marley](#)

[Freedom Song by Jason Mraz](#)



## *Some Questions to Live With*

As always, don't treat these questions as "homework." You do not need to engage every single one. Instead, simply look them over and find one that "hooks" you most. Live with it for a while. Allow it to regularly break into – and break open – your ordinary thoughts. Then come to your small group prepared to share that journey with the group.

1. Eckhart Tolle writes, "As long as you make an identity for yourself out of pain, you cannot be free of it." **Have you trapped yourself in your wounded-ness and victimhood? What would free you from your identity of pain?**
2. **Has freedom for you been in one big leap or a slow and steady process?** Are you trying to make it one big leap when it needs to be slow and steady? Or are you trying to be slow and steady, when you really need to take the leap?
3. **When have you been freed by love?**
4. **When was quitting an act of freedom for you?**
5. **Would living more simply bring you freedom?**
6. All of us have pain. All of us want to escape it. Sometimes that effort to escape becomes a prison of its own. **What do you do to escape from emotional pain?** Drink or eat too much? Keep yourself ridiculously busy?
7. Where in your life do you feel the most free? **Are there places, spaces, environments where you are not or don't feel free?** How does that feel, physically, emotionally, mentally? **Are there ways you have found to resist, externally and/or internally, to preserve a sense of freedom or dignity even in those contexts?**
8. Harriet Rubin writes, "Freedom is actually a bigger game than power. Power is about what you can control. Freedom is about what you can unleash." **Have you had an experience of shifting your thinking from power/control to freedom/unleashing?**
9. Some say money allows for more freedom, others see how it can entrap us, and lead in some cases to less happiness, less carefreeness. **How have you experienced the relationship of money and freedom in your life?**
10. **Has age left you feeling more free or less?**
11. **Are you trapped by your inability to forgive?**
12. Thomas Merton said, "I have an instinct that tells me that I am less free when I am living for myself alone." **Is living for yourself alone making you less free?**
13. **Have you ever been afraid of freedom?**
14. **Have you ever had your freedom taken away? What was your experience of not having freedom?**
15. **What responsibilities come from living in a free society?**



## Recommended Resources

These are **not** required reading. We will not dissect these pieces in our group. They are simply meant to get your thinking started and offer different ways to see and explore the theme.

### *First Thoughts and Wise Words*

**Freedom: the state of being free or at liberty rather than in confinement or under physical restraint; the absence of necessity, coercion, or constraint in choice or action**

*We covenant to affirm and promote: A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.*

The fourth of seven Principles adopted by the Unitarian Universalist Association

*A genuine feminist politics always brings us from bondage to freedom, from lovelessness to loving.*

bell hooks

*True individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence.*

Franklin D. Roosevelt

*I wish that every human life might be pure transparent freedom.*

Simone de Beauvoir

*None who have always been free can understand the terrible fascinating power of the hope of freedom to those who are not free.*

Pearl S. Buck

*You can only protect your liberties in this world by protecting the other man's freedom. You can only be free if I am free.*

Clarence Darrow

*Hence I have no mercy or compassion in me for a society that will crush people, and then penalize them for not being able to stand up under the weight."*

Malcolm X, The Autobiography of Malcolm X

*In a free society, all are involved in what some are doing. Some are guilty, all are responsible.*

Abraham Joshua Heschel

### Democracy

*Democracy will not come  
Today, this year  
Nor ever  
Through compromise and fear.*

*I have as much right  
As the other fellow has  
To stand  
On my two feet  
And own the land.*

*I tire so of hearing people say,  
Let things take their course.  
Tomorrow is another day.  
I do not need my freedom when I'm dead.  
I cannot live on tomorrow's bread.*

*Freedom  
Is a strong seed  
Planted  
In a great need.*

*I live here, too.  
I want freedom  
Just as you.*

Langston Hughes

*There are only two lasting bequests we can hope to give our children. One is roots; the other wings.*

Hodding Carter

*Freedom is not worth having if it does not connote freedom to err.*

Mohandas K. Gandhi

*If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.*

Aboriginal Activists Group, Queensland 1970s



*What does it mean to be a people of freedom? As UU's, it means having a free mind, learning wisdom from open sources, not being overly dependent on past thinking, but evolving based on new experiences and insights.*

*As Americans living in a relatively free country, it means being grateful, but staying informed of any threat that could reduce our freedoms, and always working on behalf of people who don't live in freedom.*

*As humans living in freedom, it means we are able to make choices:*

*What kind of person to be?*

*Who to love?*

*Where and how to live?*

*But being constantly aware that not everyone enjoys freedom of choice.*

*And with freedom comes responsibility. If we are free of hunger, we must be aware of the hungry. If we have homes, we must be aware of the homeless. If we are free of abuse and violence, we must always do what we can for those who suffer.*

Small Group Facilitator

*Human history begins with man's act of disobedience which is at the very same time the beginning of his freedom and development of his reason.*

Erich Fromm

*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.*

Victor Frankl

*Freedom is not merely the opportunity to do as one pleases; neither is it merely the opportunity to choose between set alternatives. Freedom is, first of all, the chance to formulate the available choices, to argue over them – and then, the opportunity to choose.*

C. Wright Mills

*Freedom is never given; it is won.*

A. Philip Randolph

*Gardening is civil and social, but it wants the vigor and freedom of the forest and the outlaw.*

Henry David Thoreau

*So long as the people do not care to exercise their freedom, those who tyrannize will do so; for tyrants are active and ardent, and will devote themselves in the name of any number of gods, religious and otherwise, to put shackles on sleeping men.*

Voltaire

*The average man does not want to be free. He simply wants to be safe.*

H.L. Mencken

*The moment we choose to love we begin to move against domination, against oppression. The moment we choose to love we begin to move towards freedom, to act in ways that liberate ourselves and others. That action is the testimony of love as the practice of freedom.*

bell hooks

*Liberty cannot be preserved without general knowledge among the people.*

John Adams

*You can't separate peace from freedom because no one can be at peace unless he has his freedom.*

Malcolm X

*Free people have a right to decide for themselves what they want to hear.*

Mumia Abu Jamal

*For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.*

Nelson Mandela

*We ask justice, we ask equality, we ask that all the civil and political rights that belong to citizens of the United States, be guaranteed to us and our daughters forever.*

Susan B. Anthony, Declaration of Rights for Women, July 1876

*If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear.*

George Orwell



*For the first five years of my life, we lived at the Manzanar War Relocation Center in Owens Valley, California. I had no idea that we were living in abnormal*

*circumstances. The imposed daily routines of lining up three times a day at the mess hall, waiting on line to use a communal latrine, and showering as a group were the ordinary way of life for me.*

*A Greyhound bus brought visitors to the "camp" and later, transported residents holding official, exit permits to leave for another life in the outside world.*

*Living free and independent and living under the governance of rules imposed by others were outside of the consciousness of a child. This way of life was the way one lived.*

Small Group Facilitator

*It is our duty to fight for our freedom. It is our duty to win. We must love each other and support each other. We have nothing to lose but our chains.*

Assata Shakur,

A chant used at #BlackLivesMatter events

*We all place a high value on our personal freedom. My mother in particular felt this way. One day, at home, she fell and hit her head and broke her wrist. While in the hospital it was recommended that she be evaluated for mental competence. The results came back that she had mild to moderate dementia. My brother, sister and I began discussions with Mom about the benefits of moving to an assisted living facility. She immediately rejected the idea as it restricted her freedom. We eventually convinced her to go but I am not sure that it was the right decision at the time, as she soon became very unhappy at losing her freedom. I couldn't help but think what I would have wanted had I been in her situation. My response was a "no brainer." I too would have wanted my freedom and would be willing to risk, to some extent, my health, to maintain that freedom. As I age, the question I keep asking myself is: At what point would I be willing to give up my freedom and hand it over the care of others? If I wait too long I may not have the mental capabilities to make a rational decision, but giving up my freedom too soon is unacceptable.*

Small Group Facilitator

## Caged Bird

*A free bird leaps  
on the back of the wind  
and floats downstream  
till the current ends  
and dips his wing  
in the orange sun rays  
and dares to claim the sky.*

*But a bird that stalks  
down his narrow cage  
can seldom see through  
his bars of rage  
his wings are clipped and  
his feet are tied  
so he opens his throat to sing.*

*The caged bird sings  
with a fearful trill  
of things unknown  
but longed for still  
and his tune is heard  
on the distant hill  
for the caged bird  
sings of freedom.*

*The free bird thinks of another breeze  
and the trade winds soft through the sighing  
trees  
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn bright  
lawn  
and he names the sky his own.*

*But a caged bird stands on the grave of  
dreams  
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream  
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied  
so he opens his throat to sing.*

*The caged bird sings  
with a fearful trill  
of things unknown  
but longed for still  
and his tune is heard  
on the distant hill  
for the caged bird  
sings of freedom.*

Maya Angelou



*The oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom.*

Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed

*Progressive movements in the United States have made some unfortunate errors when they push for unity at the expense of really understanding the concrete differences in context, experience and oppression. In other words, some want unity without struggle. As people who have our minds stayed on freedom, we can learn to fight anti-Black racism by examining the ways in which we participate in it, even unintentionally, instead of the worn out and sloppy practice of drawing lazy parallels of unity between peoples with vastly different experiences and histories.*

Patrice Cullors, Co-founder of #BlackLivesMatter

*In order to be free, one must be financially secure. When burdened by debt or a lack of financial resources, options are greatly limited. This becomes more important as we age and our ability to replace or gain financial resources decreases. Or as in the recent financial downturn, when people were unable to find work and were financially devastated, lives were driven into a corner and the freedom to choose how they lived was greatly reduced.*

Small Group Facilitator

*Freedom's just another word for nothin' left to lose.*

Kris Kristofferson, "Me and Bobby McGee"

*Freedom, however, is not the last word. Freedom is only part of the story and half of the truth. Freedom is but the negative aspect of the whole phenomenon whose positive aspect is responsibility. In fact, freedom is in danger of degenerating into mere arbitrariness unless it is lived in terms of responsibility. That is why I recommend that the Statue of Liberty on the East Coast be supplemented by a Statue of Responsibility on the West Coast.*

Victor Frankl

*Your right to swing your fist ends where my nose begins.*

Robert Heinlein

*If you're not careful, the newspapers will have you hating the people who are being oppressed, and loving the people who are doing the oppressing.*

Malcolm X

#### Sonnets to Orpheus Part One, Sonnet IV

*You who let yourselves feel: enter the breathing that is more than your own.  
Let it brush your cheeks  
as it divides and rejoins behind you.  
Blessed ones, whole ones,  
you where the heart begins:  
You are the bow that shoots the arrows  
and you are the target.  
Fear not the pain. Let its weight fall back  
into the earth;  
for heavy are the mountains, heavy the seas.  
The trees you planted in childhood have grown  
too heavy. You cannot bring them along.  
Give yourselves to the air, to what you cannot  
hold.*

Ranier Maria Rilke

#### Additional Resources

##### Books:

Anne Lamont writes about her two year struggle to forgive her mother after she died. For two years she kept her mother's ashes stuffed away in the back of her closet--unwilling and unable to forgive her. "I know forgiveness is a component of freedom, yet I couldn't even after she died, grant her amnesty," she writes. "Forgiveness means it finally becomes unimportant that you hit back. You're done. It doesn't necessarily mean you want to have lunch with the person. If you keep hitting back, you stay trapped in the nightmare."

Anne Lamont, Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith

##### Videos and Music:

Black Lives Matters Founders Open Up On the Birth of the Movement

<http://www.essence.com/video/black-lives-matters-founders-open-birth-movement>

Lizz Wright, "Freedom"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eid7XC1vDkw>



Richie Havens, "Freedom"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sI9iEYkeR3w>

Sweet Honey in the Rock, "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WPUBGcng6Tw>

