

Freedom Is a Funny Word

BY MICHAEL A. SCHULER, SENIOR MINISTER,
FIRST UNITARIAN SOCIETY OF MADISON, WISCONSIN

I doubt that any concept has greater currency among Americans than “freedom” and its synonym, “liberty.” It is prominent in the Pledge of Allegiance, which ensures justice and liberty for all; in the Star Spangled Banner, which characterizes the United States as a “land of the free and home of the brave”; and in the words of practically every politician, as they pay lip service to the concept while vying for public office or promoting legislation.

Given the premium that U.S. culture has placed on freedom, it is hardly surprising that a faith tradition such as Unitarian Universalism should have arisen within it. Thomas Jefferson once described Unitarianism as the religion most in harmony with the democratic, freedom-loving American spirit. Drawn by its anti-creedal, non-dogmatic and democratic principles, generations of free thinkers have entered our movement’s ranks, including such notables as Susan B. Anthony, champion of women’s rights; Roger Baldwin, founder of the American Civil Liberties Union; and John Haynes Holmes, co-founder of the NAACP.

As the late Stephen Fritchman, a Unitarian minister whose Los Angeles church provided a spiritual refuge for actors and writers caught up in the anti-Communist crusade of the early 1950s, put it:

Unitarians are men and women of the free spirit. No party has us in its pocket, no dictator writes our creed, no monolithic power robs us of our native strength to say, “The King is wrong.” We are a people braced by centuries of freedom who love maturity and despise...all meek surrender to those in search of witches.

Nevertheless, freedom has often been a vexed word, a source of both confusion and conflict. If I have heard it said once I have heard it a thousand times: “As a Unitarian Universalist I can believe anything I want.” But while it is true that our faith tradition encourages freedom of inquiry and allows for much greater latitude in belief than is typical for religion, it most certainly does not say that “anything goes.” Nor does it imply that any one belief is as acceptable or as valid as another.

To hold such a position is to misconstrue freedom. The fact is, Unitarian Universalism would be completely stripped of all moral and theological substance if freedom was conceived and practiced in this way. As former Unitarian Universalist Association President Dana Greeley wrote, “Just to advocate freedom in religion does not of itself constitute a religion.”

To be sure, for Unitarian Universalists the “right of conscience” is accorded high value; it is embedded in the fifth of our seven Principles. But the fourth Principle, which calls for “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning,” puts the fifth in proper context and helps us distinguish between freedom and mere license.

The latter—license—tolerates no restrictions, rejects intelligent discernment, and demands absolute autonomy. No matter that my belief is ill-founded, irrational, and pernicious, it is my categorical right to claim it, license says.

Freedom, on the other hand, is ever and always subject to certain limits—the dictates of reason perhaps, or the necessity of living in community, or of ensuring our own and other people’s safety. As Barack Obama put it in his acceptance speech at the 2008 Democratic convention:

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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

A monthly for religious liberals

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What is the American promise? It's a promise that says each of us has the freedom to make of our own lives what we will, and that we also have obligations to treat each other with dignity and respect.

But just as Unitarian Universalists have not always been clear about or in agreement over what freedom means and what it implies, neither has the rest of the country. Although Americans have been blessed with a commendable record of freedom, we are also burdened with a long history of hesitancy and inconsistency when it comes to putting that principle into practice.

The struggle to determine freedom's meaning and establish its parameters commenced with the arrival of the first religious refugees in the early 17th century. The Puritans had hardly established a beachhead in Massachusetts before their leaders began placing severe restraints on religious faith and practice. Thus, John Winthrop, the first governor of the colony, distinguished sharply between "natural liberty," which suggested the liberty to do evil, and "moral liberty," or the liberty to do only what is good. In keeping with that distinction, 17th century Puritan minister Jonathan Boucher defined "true liberty" as a liberty to "do every thing that is right and being restrained from doing any thing that is wrong."

These pious settlers arrived here with an understanding of freedom that has its origins in the writings of ancient authorities such as Aristotle and St. Augustine. For them, as for the Puritans, freedom and morality were indissolubly connected. As Augustine put it, "He that is good is free, though he be but a slave; he that is evil is a slave, though he be a king." Those among the early settlers who desired a less restrictive and more open spiritual atmosphere—Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson, for example—were ultimately forced to leave the colony. The point is, both of these factions valued freedom, but they simply could not

reach a consensus on what it meant and how it ought to be properly exercised.

Americans have also struggled for centuries over who is entitled to freedom and who is not. Democratic freedom—the right to have a say in matters of politics and governance—was initially restricted to white men who owned property. At the time of the Revolution only property owners were believed to be cultured enough and to have a sufficient stake in public policy to act responsibly. Wage labor was associated with servility and immaturity.

“The world has never had a good definition of the word liberty, and the American people, just now, are much in want of one.”

Thomas Jefferson, for one, felt differently, which is why the right to "property" disappeared from the Declaration of Independence and the "pursuit of happiness" was inserted instead. By the time of Jefferson's death on July 4, 1826 (the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration), property was no longer a requirement for voting or holding office in most states.

Both slavery and industrialization afford vivid examples of just how complex debates over freedom have been. For defenders of slavery, property rights and local control were at stake. "The right to property," Virginia's Arthur Lee argued, "is the guardian of every other right, and to deprive a people of this is to deprive them of their liberty." One might well ask, as some did, "What gives one man the right to claim another as property?" To which slavery's defenders replied, "White men were 'made for liberty.'" Blacks, on the other hand, were regarded as "utterly unqualified for rational freedom.... They are perpetual children for whom freedom would be a curse."

For abolitionists, the operative conditions of freedom were quite different. To have "property in oneself" and the right to possess the fruits of one's own labor is what mattered to them. When Frederick Douglass escaped from slavery and acquired his first paying job in Massachusetts, he declared, "I am now my own master." Douglass's wage was an emblem of his freedom.

Here is how Abraham Lincoln contrasted these two views of freedom in 1864:

The world has never had a good definition of the word liberty, and the American people, just now, are much in want of one. We all declare for liberty, but in using the same word we do not all mean the same thing. With some the word liberty may mean for each man to do as he pleases with himself and the product of his labor; while with others the same word may mean for some men to do as they please with other men, and the product of other men's labor. Here are two, not only different, but incompatible things, called by the same name, liberty.

A similar dispute over the word "freedom" roiled the nation during the Gilded Age, when a new generation of industrialists and wage earners found themselves contending over its economic implications. The business community placed primary emphasis on "freedom of contract." As long as labor relations and economic transactions were governed by contracts independently arrived at by autonomous individuals, all was well. To the degree that labor unions and governments interfered with such contractual arrangements, freedom was at grave risk.

For their part, workers and their advocates argued that the right to organize and to bargain collectively for decent wages ensured workers' freedom and protected them from becoming "wage slaves." In an age of industrial and commercial giants, labor maintained that the negotiating positions of

management and labor were hardly equal.

As a culture, we have yet to resolve this issue. For many today, the locus of freedom par excellence is the marketplace with its myriad products, available to anyone for the right price. As David Lilianthal, former chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, once declared: "By freedom I mean essentially the freedom to choose to the maximum degree possible.... It means a maximum range of choice for the consumer when he spends his dollar."

I imagine more than a few Americans would agree wholeheartedly with Lilianthal, and it is why they are often willing to accept oppressive work environments as the price for exercising freedom of choice in the marketplace. If asked to identify which dimension of freedom matters most, what percentage of the U.S population would choose consumer sovereignty over civil liberties or democratic freedom? I suspect many would opt for the former, but not Dorothy Canfield Fisher, who wrote:

Freedom is not worth fighting for if it means no more than license for everyone to get as much as [they] can for [themselves]. And freedom is worth fighting for. Because it does mean more than unrestricted grabbing.

In recent decades the struggle over variant understandings of freedom has hardly let up. In 1952 Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, a man of Unitarian sensibilities, opined that "The right to be left alone is the beginning of all freedom." This set the stage for a series of "right to privacy" decisions handed down by the high court in the years that followed. The right to use contraceptives, to seek an abortion, to cohabit outside of marriage, and to enter into same-sex relationships all follow from the privacy principle.

Yet for many social conservatives, this has been an unwelcome development. For those who still think of freedom in

moral terms, its expansion into such traditionally sensitive areas is patently offensive. Like those old Puritan divines, our modern moralists equate liberty with an inner disposition to do only what is righteous and Godly.

As a morally freighted concept, freedom, writes historian Eric Foner, "has been used to convey and claim legitimacy for all kinds of grievances and hopes, fears about the present and visions of the future." What that suggests is that we need to exercise great care in using the word and insist on a certain precision when we hear it mentioned.

Americans are suckers for freedom. The popularity of politicians rests upon it, the wars we fight are justified by it, advertisers shamelessly exploit it, and it is an ever-present factor in how members of families and communities relate to each other. As an American and a person of privilege, I cherish it as much as the next person. And, as a Unitarian Universalist, it probably means more to me than to most.

But in the end I have learned that the choice we have before us isn't whether or not to defend and promote freedom per se. It is the much more difficult one of determining which of our freedoms really matter and are most worthy of our loyalty. ■

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Laughing into New Life (Excerpt)

BY KAAREN ANDERSON, PARISH CO-MINISTER, FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF ROCHESTER, NEW YORK

Being in the tomb doesn't mean there is an absence of life, but, rather, the dominance of death.

I see the tomb present in so many of our lives all the time. The longing to be partnered and have children as a still single 35 year old can consume us, suck all the air out of the room. And we are obsessed, all other lights are shut out, we are, in other words, "entombed."

The phone call from our ex-spouse, or cranky co-worker or obsessive relative and their ability to hook us, hold us, keep us in the dark place, long after we've hung up the phone and we are entombed. The new college graduate ready to take on the world, yet applications for the same job mount into the hundreds, their future feels narrow and constrained, and they are entombed.

This entombing of ourselves happens so often, it's like we forget we even do it. We let whatever the worry, concern or burden is eclipse the rest of life. We often let it define our days, who we are, and we get stuck, most often because we want the answers, we want control.

And when we feel so stuck, so eclipsed, when we are not letting in any light, I think the gift of laughter is honestly one of the few ways there are to roll away the stone.

Jean Houston, the great American author and spiritual leader said, "at the height of laughter, the universe is flung into a kaleidoscope of new possibilities." ■

The Flying Trapeze and the Fine Art of Freedom (Excerpt)

BY DIANE DOWGIERT, MINISTER, UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH OF TUCSON, ARIZONA



I've attended the circus exactly three times in my life—twice as a child and once as an adult. The first two were the Ringling Brothers, Barnum and

Bailey circus (under the big-top, the “Greatest Show on Earth”) and the third was Cirque de Soleil, held in an auditorium theater.

I was enchanted by that first circus, from the festively adorned horses and elephants leading the procession with circus performers riding their backs—not seated, but standing!—to the brave lion tamers who got into cages with big cats, to the jugglers and clowns and acrobats walking the tight-rope.

What most captivated me, though, was the flying trapeze. Perhaps my fascination was rooted in vivid childhood memories of the backyard swing-set—those times when I would pump the swing as high as it would go, and then, at just the right moment, propel my body off the seat, let go of the chains, and for a moment or two, fly free.

At the circus, I was captivated by the trapeze artists high above the crowd, gracefully letting go of their swinging bar, flying through the air, being caught, and then letting go again. The sense of freedom was exhilarating.

Author Henri Nouwen once had the opportunity to travel with the Flying Rodleighs, a troupe of trapeze artists. Their conversation inevitably turned to flying and how they could possibly do what they did. In the end, says Nouwen, it comes down to this: “A flyer must fly, and a catcher must catch, and the flyer must trust, with outstretched arms, that his catcher will be there for him.”

Nouwen, a Catholic priest, uses this as a metaphor for what happens to us when we die. We are the flyers and the catcher is God. For most Unitarian Universalists, however, the focus of the spiritual journey is on this life, realizing that heaven and hell can be conditions we create right here on earth. For me, the lessons from the flying trapeze pertain not to death, but to life—lessons in letting go, catching, and being caught.

If we are to fly free, we must learn to let go, and trust that when we do, we will be caught.

I think something in us all craves the feeling of freedom. It is inherent in us. Yet, we allow ourselves to be deluded into thinking that security is synonymous with freedom. Truth is, the work of freedom comes with risk—the risk of letting go.

Letting go is religious work. Think for a minute of all the things that keep us imprisoned, all those things that get in the way of realizing the beloved community we dream of—racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia. The religious work is in finding these tendencies within ourselves and then letting them go. But letting go of deeply ingrained beliefs and fears is no small thing. Holding on to something feels better than having nothing to hold on to.

Much as we crave freedom, we also crave security. Letting go of beliefs, even those that don't serve us, can feel like a free fall, a plunge into the unknown, unless we know that we will be caught, that there is a safety net.

We need trust if we are to let go of all that keeps us divided from one another. Building trust is religious work, learning that when we let go, someone will be there to catch us. The role of the religious community is catching people as they fall. People come to us all the time, having let go of beliefs that no longer serve them. They come to Unitarian Universalism for the first time with outstretched arms, trusting that we are going to be here to catch them.

The fine art of freedom is knowing when to hold on and when to let go, knowing what to hold on to and what to let go of. Now, more than ever, we are being called to practice values that we cherish, values of peace-seeking, justice-making, love—the value of extending compassion. We need to continue to let go of everything that gets in the way of freedom.

Now more than ever we need to be that community of catchers, to be a safe place to land for people ready to let go of culturally imposed values of unbridled greed and consumerism and the inevitable exploitation of people and the planet that come with an unquenched thirst for wealth and power.

Now, more than ever, we need to be that community. To do anything else is to put freedom at risk. The work ahead of us is religious work, trusting what our forebears taught—that there is a source of life from which we can never be ultimately severed. We belong to life and life belongs to us and the nature of this life is love.

In a world becoming increasingly intolerant, we can choose to be different. Within our community we can do the religious work of building trust. Within our community we can begin to create the world as we wish it to be. It is ours. We can create it to be what we want—a place of peace, a place of freedom.

If we are to fly free, we must learn to let go, and trust that when we do, we will be caught. And we must become the catchers. ■

Carrying the Language of Freedom

BY JANE RZEPKA, MINISTER EMERITA, CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP



This year what has taken hold of me about Passover is not so much the story itself, but the very fact that the story is reliably told and retold, generation after generation, at the family Seder. The story is a fundamental part of the language of a people. It provides the basis for religious identity, and helps to preserve the community, sustaining an enduring culture and tradition.

The whole story is about freedom, but what I'm thinking about just now is how over the centuries the Jews maintain their journey toward freedom as a group with definite boundaries, a religious group, and they continue doing that in spite of enormous odds against them. We read of Jewish soldiers in the U.S. Civil War, who on Passover managed to hold a Seder, substituting bricks for the mixture of apples and nuts that are customary, and a wild weed for the bitter herb. In the Warsaw ghetto during World War II, Jews conducted Seders from memory. Even in the concentration camps Jewish prisoners were reluctant to eat leavened bread during Passover.

The Seder is the language of the Jewish people. This aspect, this identity-preservation aspect of Passover, made me wonder about which enduring theological values are ours to hand down. If we were creating a ritual meal like a Seder, what would it be about?

At first, of course, when you come into Unitarian Universalism, you notice the freedom. No pretending you believe in a doctrine that inside you have doubts about. No guilt about *not* believing or about not coming to church. No hierarchy. There really is a lot of freedom. While we recognize that, for most Americans, theological freedom may

not be a high priority when it comes to religion, and we fully support those who feel comfortable in doctrinal religions, creeds and doctrines are just not our particular way.

Occasionally, in my role as a ministerial intern supervisor, an intern would arrive focused on the freedom that we have in Unitarian Universalism, so I would quickly give that intern an annoying assignment: Write a reflection paper about our theological limits. The intern usually declared there are no limits: "We're free."

So then I'd ask, "Can you as a UU minister lead worship by sacrificing chickens? Is that recognizable as Unitarian Universalism? Can you conduct a service in Boston entirely in Hebrew or Arabic or Tibetan? Is that Unitarian Universalism? Where is the line? What is 'the language of our people'? What pieces of theological identity are we promoting and protecting? If we were forced to leave our homes as a group and head for a promised land, what common practices would we take along?"

I could make a very long list, but I'll name just six examples, all born of one historical and denominational period. When Unitarians set out on their theological journey toward independence in the early 1800s in New England, they broke away from the established religion of the day. What they stood for during their break for independence, and what we still stand for (among other things from other parts of our history), are these:

- If we believe in a god at all, it's a benevolent one, not a frightening or punishing god. That's something Unitarian Universalists carry with us on our journeys.
- We believe in the humanity of Jesus, whom we view as a wise and

wonderful teacher, but not a god. That's something Unitarian Universalists carry with us.

- We reject the doctrine of innate depravity. We do not believe in original sin; that becomes crystal clear when you listen to the words of our child dedications. We carry the theology of potential goodness with us.
- We believe in free will, not predestination. Events are not preordained, nor "meant to be." We have the power to act in the world. We carry that free will with us as Unitarian Universalists.
- We believe in the freedom of conscience, that creeds do not serve us well. We carry that freedom of conscience with us on our journey.
- And we believe in the use of reason as part of determining personal religious truth. We carry that use of reason with us always.

We carry other aspects of identity with us too: the flaming chalice, our hymns, our rejection of the Trinity, our personal approach to memorial services and funerals, our self-governance, our commitment to social justice in the world here and now, our reverence for nature, our love of community. They are not Passover matzos, or palm fronds. When we go on our journeys, they are ours to take along.

May we carry them with us, that they may offer us solace when we need it, inspiration when the world seems dull, challenge when we are lulled into complacency, and the seeds of love and friendship when we feel alone in the world. ■

Excerpted from "The Language of a People" in From Zip Lines to Hosaphones by Jane Rzepka, published in 2011 by Skinner House Books. This book is available from the CLF Lending Library and the UUA bookstore, www.uua.org/bookstore.



From Your Minister

BY MEG RILEY
SENIOR MINISTER,
CHURCH OF THE
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In the early 1990s I interned in the Church of the United Community, a tiny storefront congregation in the Marcus Garvey Center in Roxbury, Massachusetts, triple yoked between the United Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ, and Unitarian Universalists.

Many in the congregation had been through drug treatment. More had been to jail, at a time when crack cocaine was plentiful and arrests of young black men more plentiful still. Many had contracted “the virus,” as AIDS was called there.

Poverty was a blanket that lay over the whole community. Many people lived in the nearby projects. Almost all had experienced homelessness at one time or another.

Violence was always present around the edges. The church ran classes to teach young people what to do when the police stopped them, so they wouldn’t get shot. And, in the year I was there, far too many young men died by gunshot from other young men, some just children sitting in the park at the wrong time. One child, I remember, drew a picture of hopes for his future: Under a picture of jail, he wrote, *I hope I get to go to jail and don’t get killed.*

This daily life of suffering, oppression and violence was, in itself, a kind of crucifixion, forged by racism, classism, poverty, addiction, violence. Crucifixion was an accurate description, implying violence, prolonged physical agony, systemic authorization of the killing. And so, because the crucifixion was so real, the story of Jesus was not just about the friendly teacher/prophet I’d always been introduced to in my UU congregations, or even in a liberal

white Christian seminary. The resurrection, in this context, was absolutely necessary and real unless hope was also to die.

I’ll be honest: If I hadn’t signed on for a yearlong internship, and if I hadn’t needed that internship as one last hoop to jump to get ordained, I would have slipped away within a few weeks. As a young, white, middle class UU, I was completely out of my element, and terrified. I was not afraid of physical violence, though walking from the subway (the T) was a little sketchy at night.

Freedom was in solidarity, in throwing in my lot with the tortured community....

Nope, I was afraid of something much scarier: being totally irrelevant. In this setting, I had nothing to offer. No wisdom, no experience, no cultural competency, no prayer that would be of use to these people writhing with pain. For a wannabe minister, this is a fate worse than death!

I remember one time stomping from the Church to the T, muttering to myself. “They should have called it the WHITE New Testament. They should have called it WHITE Church History.” Nothing in my background had prepared me for this.

The Church of the United Community, led by Rev. Graylan Hagler, a UCC/Disciples minister, was engaged in Black Liberation Theology. Hagler, along with President Obama’s mentor Jeremiah Wright and others in the tradition of Black Liberation Theology, were, and are, raising the dead, week after week, using Scripture, prayer, music, and other elements of worship in a way I had never experienced. They are creating “a way out of no way.” They are laying out breadcrumbs to-

ward freedom, pointing out landmarks on the road for those who still live in chains.

While UU worship might, typically, reflect on what is holy and deepen or explore it, this worship was bringing new life to old bones, resurrecting the living from the dead. Church was where you found freedom, where all of the suffering and oppression of the week was kindling for a raging fire—a fire that, once I got over myself, caught in me and is still burning more than 20 years later.

The resurrection, I learned in Roxbury, was in the gathered community, in the power of oppressed people coming together and claiming their lives as holy. Jesus could not be killed because his community would not allow it. Freedom was in solidarity, in throwing in my lot with the tortured community writhing on the cross, knowing that they were immortal because they were the Living God.

They were free not because of the suffering—much suffering does not lead to freedom!—but because they knew the truth of the Resurrection. Like the women looking for Jesus, they knew that the tomb was empty. And they lived in the freedom of that knowledge.

Each week in our services, we broke bread and had communion. In any given week, Rev. Hagler might point to anyone in the room and nod, and we knew it was our turn to tell that story of freedom. Twenty years later, I still know it in my bones and my heart:

On the night Jesus was betrayed, he took a loaf of bread and broke it, and said, *this is my body, broken like the bodies of so many who have stood for justice. Eat it and remember me.* And then the community would call out the names of others who had died, famous people and local friends, who had died for justice.

Standing in that circle, hearing those words, eating that bread, I tasted freedom. ■

March 2013

REsources for Living

BY LYNN UNGAR, MINISTER FOR LIFESPAN LEARNING, CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP

The Passover story is, of course, a story about freedom. It's the story of how the Israelites went from being slaves in Egypt to being free people with a land and a religion of their own. But I wonder when exactly in the story it is that the Hebrew people finally become free.

Does their freedom start when Moses comes to them and says that God has sent him to help them out of bondage? Does it begin when the plagues make them think that Moses might be right, and that God really does want them to be free? Are they free when Pharaoh finally says that they can go? Or is it when they make the choice to actually leave, rushing out of the life they've always known without even taking time to let the bread for the journey rise?

Are they really free when they set out from Egypt, even with Pharaoh's army following after them? Maybe their freedom starts on the edge of the Red Sea, when they look at the water and try to imagine any way that they might get across.

The Bible says that Moses raised his staff and a great wind parted the waters. But there's a famous mid-rash, a commentary on the Bible, which says that the water opened up not when Moses raised his staff, but when the first person, truly believing that the crossing was possible, actually took that first step into the unknown. Did a moment of courage and faith make that person free? Did it bring freedom to the whole Hebrew band?

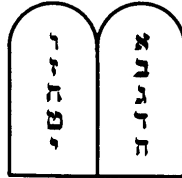
Maybe their freedom came when they actually made it across the sea and Pharaoh's army did not. That could have been the point at which the Hebrews were really able to imagine themselves as free people, rather than slaves who were running away from their master. Maybe they



started to feel free as Miriam sang a song of celebration on the far side of the Red Sea, after they had literally and

figuratively crossed over.

But really, their journey had only started at that point. It would make a nice religious story to say that they got free when Moses brought them God's commandments down from the mountain top, but it turns out that bringing commandments, even on stone tablets straight from the mouth of God, is a long way from people accepting and agreeing to live by those commandments. And the story



makes it clear that there are lots of ways things can go badly wrong during forty years of wandering in the desert.

Actually, the forty years of wandering is a big fat clue to when it is that freedom comes to the Hebrew people. You see, in Jewish tradition the number forty doesn't really mean an exact number, like someone celebrating their fortieth birthday. It's a number that stands for "a really long time." In the story of Noah and the ark it rains for forty days and forty nights—a whole heck of a lot of rain. The Hebrew people wander in the desert for forty years, and we are to understand it as a whole lot of wandering.

And that's when the freedom happens. Not in a single dramatic moment when Moses lifts up his walking stick and the people follow him across wet sand and flopping fish to a magical world called "Freedom." That's not how freedom works. In order to be free you have to escape from the people and the systems holding you captive. But once you've done that you still have to get free in your mind. You have to start thinking of yourself as a person who chooses, who has the ability to make things happen in the world, who understands that each of us has both the respon-

sibility and the means to shape the world.

That's a huge step, and it doesn't happen overnight. It takes...well, as long as it takes. Often a really long time. And you probably don't even notice any special moment that things changed, but you realize that you are finally a real grown-up, supporting yourself and making your own way in the world. Or that you don't try to hide the fact that you're gay from people who you meet at a party. Or that you've stopped drinking for long enough that being sober actually

Freedom doesn't happen right away, in a single happy moment. But it does happen.

feels normal. Or that you can talk with your parents about how your religious beliefs are different from theirs without getting scared or angry. Or that you speak up when a friend calls something they don't like "retarded" or "gay" because it matters more to you that we put an end to prejudice than that everybody is happy with you all the time.

In the world of the Bible, forty years means a really long time, but it doesn't mean forever. Freedom doesn't happen right away, in a single happy moment. But it does happen. It happens when people are willing to walk away from the familiar world that just isn't working, when they can see there is a problem, and they can see that change is possible. Freedom starts when you take the first step toward a new way of living. And it is complete...well... maybe in something like forty years. ■





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Freedom. It isn't once, to walk out
under the Milky Way, feeling the rivers
of light, the fields of dark—
freedom is daily, prose-bound, routine
remembering. Putting together, inch by inch
the starry worlds. From all the lost collections.

Excerpted from "For Memory" by Adrienne Rich, published in 1981 by W. W. Norton & Company in her book of poetry A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far.

