



## Freedom From. Freedom To

BY PETER A. FRIEDRICHS, LEAD MINISTER, UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH OF DELAWARE COUNTY, MEDIA, PA

Every spring at Stonewall Farm in Keene, New Hampshire—and at other dairy farms throughout northern New England—there’s a festival to celebrate the season. It’s not an Easter celebration, or a Solstice celebration. It’s not Mother’s Day or May Day. It has different names at different farms, but at Stonewall Farm it’s called “The Dancing of the Ladies.”

Sounds like some kind of pagan rite, doesn’t it? When I first heard it, I pictured middle-aged women prancing around with flowers in their hair. But that’s not what the Dancing of the Ladies is. Instead, it is the ceremonial release of the milking herd from the barn to the field for the first time in spring.

What makes this event so popular that crowds will stand eight or ten deep to witness it is the reaction of the cows to being set loose in the fields. When the cows are freed from the confines of their barns, they act like excited little children. These animals that can weigh close to a ton dance and prance and cavort all around the fields. Not only are they let loose, but they let loose themselves, literally kicking up their heels with pure, simple, unadulterated (I’m tempted to say “unpasteurized”) joy. You can almost see it on their faces.

The closest experience that I can relate this to was back in grade school, at the end of the school year, the last minute of the last hour of the last day, when the bell rings and suddenly you’d be set FREE, and you’d run out of the classroom screaming and singing. Do you remember that feeling? I don’t know whether the cows feel that way, but that’s the way they act when they get out into the fresh air and sunshine for the first time in spring.

I felt something like that same feeling when I discovered Unitarian Universalism. That same sense of freedom, of being released from bondage, of being able to breathe again. Perhaps you also experienced that feeling when you first discovered a religious community that doesn’t tell you what you have to believe to belong. Having been raised in the Catholic Church myself, I remember it distinctly.

I had left the Catholics as a teenager and entered the ranks of the “un-churched”—or maybe now I’d be called one of the “Nones.” That was until my wife and I moved to Maine and had our two children, and she sent me out to find a church where I’d be happy. The main street of our town was lined with churches of every stripe and color, with the Catholics located at one end of the street.

I decided to start my search geographically as far from that church as I could, and it just so happened that at the other end of the street were the Unitarian Universalists. I had never heard of them and had no idea what to expect. But I tried it out. And I was amazed by what I found that Sunday.

So I went back the following Sunday and then the next. And I felt like those cows set loose into the field and the sunshine. Free. Free to doubt. Free to find my own path. Free to explore. Free to question long-held beliefs from my childhood. Free to be myself with others like me. That was more than 25 years ago, and I still remember those feelings of freedom as strongly as I remember the feeling of the last day of school and the start of summer.

It is one of the great graces of our faith tradition—this freedom we’re given and that we claim. It lies at the very core of who we are as Unitarian Universalists. Because our liberal religious forebears fought and sometimes died for it, we are free from the

# Quest

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I am not free while  
any woman is unfree,  
even when her  
shackles are  
very different  
from my own.  
—Audre Lorde

A monthly for religious liberals

### THINKING ABOUT FREEDOM

- FREEDOM FROM. FREEDOM TO.  
*Peter Friedrichs*
- FREE AND RESPONSIBLE  
*Victoria Weinstein*
- FAMILY TREE  
*Ketlove Gray*
- FREE ON THE INSIDE  
*George*
- FROM YOUR MINISTER  
*Meg Riley*
- RESOURCES FOR LIVING  
*Lynn Ungar*
- FREEDOM TO DO AS WE WILL  
*Dana McLean Greely*

constraints of orthodoxy and the commandments of the Catholic Church. We are free from the stain of Original Sin. We are free from the power of the priesthood to mediate our relationship with the Holy. We are free from the control of a central authority in Rome or even Boston.

Our scripture isn't limited to one holy book. Religiously-speaking, the entire world is our oyster. Or, perhaps more accurately, it's a rich and enticing smorgasbord. We have been granted the freedom to learn from Sufism, to investigate Taoism, to immerse ourselves in Emerson and the tasty Transcendentalists. And it feels GREAT! Am I right?

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**“Freedom from” keeps us looking back on our past. “Freedom to” is forward-looking, pulling us toward the future. “Freedom from” is about rejection, while “Freedom to” is about creation.**

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This freedom is one of the reasons—maybe the primary reason—we love our faith as we do. It's why the boldest among us even tell our friends and neighbors about it and maybe, just maybe, invite them to come to church with us. We are unique among religious enterprises and experiments because of this freedom, and the independence it invites.

For those of us who have come from other faiths, the freedom from all that has bound us in our religious past draws us toward Unitarian Universalism. For those of us who have been marginalized or oppressed by religion in our personal pasts, the freedom from fear and judgment draws us toward Unitarian Universalism.

Ours is a faith in which we are allowed to be our true and authentic selves. And if we don't know exactly who or what that is, this faith gives us the freedom to explore and discover and claim it. Our faith is nothing if not the sum total of all the “freedom froms,” such as freedom from authority, freedom from fear, freedom from orthodoxy.

But there is a shadow side to all these “freedom froms,” which can show up in unhealthy ways in our congregations and in ourselves. Just because we are free from authority doesn't mean that we can do whatever we want. We have shared values and understandings about the world and our place in it, and there are limits that, if exceeded, would place you outside the admittedly wide bounds of our faith.

The fierce independence that our faith promotes can easily become corrupted into a narcissistic individualism that is both personally destructive and damaging to our communities. The Rev. Dr. Fred Muir, minister emeritus of our church in Annapolis, Maryland, called this the rise of the “iChurch,” where each individual believes and acts as though the institution is there to meet their own personal needs.

The danger, I think, stems from our getting stuck at “freedom from,” and not living into the “freedom to” of our faith, as when we come to treat our freedom as a birthright rather than as a precious gift. The “freedom from” mentality keeps us stuck in antagonism. It pits us against “them,” whether “they” are the faith of our family of origin, those who refuse to accept us as we are, or any other part of our past that we have rejected or want to hold at bay. “Freedom from” keeps us in a state of moving away, instead of moving toward; of disengaging, rather than engaging; of standing against instead of standing with.

It is the “freedom from” approach to church that enables toxic people to hold entire congregations hostage, and that keeps us from achieving the excel-

lence we're capable of, for fear of offending someone. “Freedom from” is a kind of lowest common denominator thinking, where we value keeping things calm and conflict-free more than risking depth and living into the power of our true potential.

Our faith is about gaining freedom from certain things, yes. But we can't stop there. We must move beyond it to a “freedom to” attitude. “Freedom to” is about exploring rich possibilities in our lives and in our congregations. It calls us to ask and explore tough missional questions like “Why do we exist?” and “What are we called to be and to do in the world?” When we look at freedom not as the be-all and end-all, but rather as the jumping-off point—the place where we begin instead of the place where we end—we realize that our freedom is a rich resource from which we can draw strength and gather commitment.

“Freedom to” leads us to ask questions: “Freedom to be who?” “Freedom to do what?” It calls us not to spin around in our own little orbits as individual actors. Rather, it calls us to seek to grow into relationship with each other, both within our congregations and with the community around us. “Freedom from” keeps us looking back on our past. “Freedom to” is forward-looking, pulling us toward the future. “Freedom from” is about rejection, while “Freedom to” is about creation.

I want us—each and every one of us—to celebrate the simple joy of our freedom, just like cows that dance in the spring fields. But we can't stop there. We can't be satisfied with the freedoms that we've won, and that have been won on our behalf. We have been handed a precious and powerful gift. We must ask ourselves toward what ends we can use it, and then take steps to put it in motion, so that future generations may one day celebrate their own liberation, dancing in the joy of that freedom. ■

## Free and Responsible

BY VICTORIA WEINSTEIN,  
PARISH MINISTER,  
UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST  
CHURCH OF GREATER LYNN,  
MASSACHUSETTS



### *Free and responsible.*

I would venture to say that freedom is the most cherished religious value for Unitarian Universalists. We cannot abide the suffocation we feel in our souls when someone else dictates to us what to believe, what to think about the important questions, or even where to look to find the answers.

What interests me, though, is how UUs sometimes mistake freedom of religion for freedom *from* religion. They come in the door all sweaty and frantic having fled an oppressive religious past and they collapse into our pews and say “Phew, that’s over. I reject this and this and this and that and that other thing, and the whole scene I just came from. It all makes my skin crawl and thank Buddha or Krishna I’m here with the Unitarians where I don’t have to believe anything!”

But that’s not true. It’s not accurate, and it’s no way to build a religious community or to construct a healthy individual spirituality. Rejecting religious doctrines that offend our spirit is just the beginning, just Part One of the faith journey. Part Two is seeking to understand more of those doctrines and our relationship to them *so that we can heal*, let it go, and move on with a peaceful heart. Only when we explore religious language and ideas that previously upset or wounded us can we eventually develop the freedom either to reclaim them or let them go.

We grow. We mature. And in the next part of our faith journey, we find what we *can* affirm, what we *do* believe.

UUs engage in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, which means that we take responsibility for our relationship with religious ideas,

not expecting to be spared any mention of them. Sometimes folks need to be reminded that Unitarian Universalism, for all its freedom, is a religious tradition. It amazes me how many otherwise rational people expect UU congregations to be religion-free zones. They are having none of that. They want intellectual stimulation and a good “talk”—some congregations won’t even call it a sermon—and they break out in hives over anything that reminds them of that “traditional churchy stuff.”

I understand. I was once very angry at religion. I grew up the daughter of a very angry Jewish father who bore the profound wound of anti-Semitism. We never spoke of all the Weinstein aunts and uncles and cousins who had been murdered by Hitler. But I knew they had been, and I was victimized myself by anti-Semites in my own peer group. On the school bus I was called a Christ-killer and other names too hateful to repeat here, and I was beaten up on the playground in elementary school. I had a swastika drawn on my locker twice in high school. Even some teachers sneered at my name and asked me “What are you doing here today?” on the Jewish high holy days.

My father’s family disapproved of my mother because she wasn’t Jewish, and my mother’s family returned the favor by disapproving of my father because he was a Jew. That’s why they were married in the Unitarian church. We went to a Unitarian Universalist church on Sundays sporadically throughout my childhood and at pre-school age I was dedicated at the UU congregation in Westport, Connecticut. But, I kid you not, I had no idea that Unitarian Universalism was a valid religion of its own until I went to seminary.

Why would we belong to a religion? In my household, religion was either divisive or derisive. Neither of my parents believed in God and my grandparents’ Orthodox Russian faith was regarded by all of us as a sentimental, supersti-

tious hangover from the old country, not something intellectual people could respect.

Therefore, my free and responsible search for truth and meaning didn’t concern itself with religion at all at first, but with philosophy, literature and the arts. I am convinced it could have gone on that way for the rest of my life with no deficit to my moral or ethical development—except that I had this wound, you see.

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...UUs sometimes  
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I scorned religion and religious people without knowing much at all about either, and for the longest time I tightened up whenever anyone said God. If they said Jesus or Christ, my visceral reaction was even worse. I came to a point where I didn’t want to live the rest of my life like that. I wanted to be healed of this burning hostility I had about religion, and especially Christianity. My father had died when I was in high school and I had too much pain. I think I was just desperate to unload some of it.

When I look back on the serious religious search that I began in college, it seems to me now that I started out the way someone newly diagnosed with cancer sets out researching everything they can about that cancer so they can live with it, and survive it. I started with the word “God” itself, determined to understand this damned thing, and felt just so angry, so much anger. I was enraged for a good three or four years about the damaging God of Western culture, the God Rev. Carlton Pearson calls “the monster God.”

But I kept fighting, and seeking to understand, to claim something of the God-idea for my own self, for my own heart, for my own life. I was wrestling

a blessing out of this thing. There was no curriculum that I knew of for what I wanted to learn and to unlearn, so I made it up as I went along. I took religion classes in school and struggled through them. Nothing clicked. From what I could see, organized religions were all a long, violent nightmare pitting nations against nations, culture against culture, brothers against sisters.

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### For me, a free and responsible search for truth and meaning has to have a touch of almost desperate longing to it...

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Then I was befriended and mentored by a Hasidic rabbi and his family on campus. This representative of an orthodox sect of Judaism introduced me to the joy of studying Torah. He gave me permission to explore my Jewish identity and to come to terms with the fact that I did not feel religiously Jewish. I will be forever grateful to him.

Then maybe five or six years later, a terribly embarrassing thing happened. Jesus got ahold of me. Like when someone's enraged and ranting and you just wrap your arms around them from behind and hold them—that's how Jesus got hold of me.

It happened like a secret romance through years of private study. It really happened when I fearfully accepted an invitation to the open communion table at a meeting of the Unitarian Universalist Christian Fellowship. Everything went Technicolor for me that day, like when Dorothy gets over the rainbow, and I had found my religion. And after I became a Christian, many other religions looked beautiful to me, too. I worked for understanding and I received healing.

I kept my religious beliefs a secret for a long time, because in my experience Unitarian Universalists had such bitter

disdain for Christians I didn't want to be considered a heretic by the heretics! How marginalized can you get? My experience with Unitarian Universalists was that everyone was happy to have you search, but you weren't actually supposed to get anywhere specific.

Not a year goes by that I am not asked by half a dozen UUs why I am still here as a Christian—and not nicely, either. I joke, "This is where my free and responsible search for truth and meaning has led me. If it upsets *you*, imagine how *I* felt!" It is because I so well remember my own anger and disgust for Christianity that I am very careful not to speak of it too often—to treat my own religious faith with a light touch. This is, as you can imagine, intensely challenging at times. Sometimes it has been painful, knowing that I am not welcome to speak with passion about my spiritual path. I am now committed to working toward a Unitarian Universalism where all of us are welcome—even encouraged—to speak with passion about our religious and spiritual lives.

I recognize that many of us are still hurting from the abuses of a conservative Christian past, or are offended by the vile behaviors of so-called Christians in public life in America. I share that offense, of course. But I continue to be embarrassed by the number of Unitarian Universalists who seem willfully ignorant of the significant progressive Christian population in America. Our terminal uniqueness and Christianophobia keeps us isolated, and limits opportunities for coalition-building. I am glad to see that attitude changing, but it is not happening fast enough.

For one thing, I wish that UUs would stop conflating Theism with Christianity and remember that God is a universal concept used by almost all religious traditions. I also wish UUs would remember that the Bible is a Jewish document as well as a Christian one.

For me, a free and responsible search for truth and meaning has to have a touch of almost desperate longing to it, or else we risk being dabblers, dilettantes and tourists, stopping by one philosophy after another and taking what we like and avoiding the inevitably troubling or demanding aspects of each one. We flirt with—or step over the bounds of—cultural appropriation and intellectual dishonesty when we do.

In our search for truth and meaning, the aim is to reach a place of confident, peaceful understanding, and appreciation of our own and others' sources of most profound theological and philosophical meaning. We know we have gotten somewhere when our guts don't churn when a trigger word comes up in worship, when we have spiritual practices that sustain us, whether grounded in theism or non-theism, transcendence or immanence or both. We know we have come to a good resting spot (if never a finish line) on our search for truth and meaning when we can engage in the spiritual practice of being in community with generous spirits and be of genuine support for those who are in that community with us. ■

One of the gifts of a free society is that of freedom of association—we choose how we will come together, and to what ends. But the other side of that freedom of association is responsibility. Organizations such as the CLF are only possible when their members take responsibility for their support. If the CLF is a community you value, please join in shared responsibility for its future.

You can give by sending in a check in the enclosed envelope, or by contributing online at [www.clfuu.org/give](http://www.clfuu.org/give) ■

## Family Tree

BY **KETLOVE GRAY**, SOPHOMORE AT MARQUETTE SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL, MARQUETTE, MICHIGAN

For me it probably all started in  
West Africa.  
Likely Senegal because it has the most  
shoreline, making easy docking for the  
slave traders to  
load their human cargo.  
Do you hear the chains clang against  
the holding cell?  
Do you smell the sweat of fear?  
Do you see the angered rough waters  
through the feared eyes?  
Do you feel the goose-bumped dry  
black skin?  
I hear it.  
I smell it.  
I see it.  
I feel it.  
Do you see my family tree ripped out  
with the African soil still clinging to  
the roots?  
I do.  
Transplanted into the soil of  
Hispaniola  
Where everything was different.  
Lost language.  
Lost homeland.  
Lost culture.  
Lost freedom.  
Toil.  
Long, strenuous, fatiguing labor for  
hundreds of years on sugar plantations  
under owners.  
Do you hear the snap of the cruel  
whip?  
Do you feel the stinging thrashes along  
the backs?  
Do you see the swing of the machete  
as it cuts down the sugar cane?  
I can feel the weight of being treated  
less than human.  
Can you put yourself there with sweat  
glistening on your black skin and your  
back aching?  
I can.  
And I can feel the anger that led to  
revolution.  
So could Toussaint Louverture  
Who was a slave that led an uprising.



He said "I was born a slave but nature  
gave me the soul of a free man."

He  
inspired the  
people  
that  
never knew freedom to fight for it.  
They risked everything because they  
had nothing.  
They fought for freedom.  
Freedom from brutality.  
Freedom from being sold away from  
loved ones.  
Freedom from subservience.  
Freedom from tyranny.  
Freedom to control their own destiny.  
Do you see the flash of the machete  
now used as weapon?  
Do you hear the guns?  
Do you feel the rocks under the bare  
cold feet?  
Can you feel the pent up energy trans-  
forming the slaves into warriors?  
I can.  
The only successful slave insurrection  
in history.  
Victory.  
Two hundred years later I am born on  
the land where the roots had been  
transplanted  
Deep in the soil of Haiti.  
Not a slave.  
Yet not free.  
Poverty is a tyrant too.  
The struggle never ends.  
We fight for freedom.  
For Toussaint Louverture.  
For self determination.  
To maintain our dignity.  
Because we are proud of being  
Haitian.  
Also we celebrate  
Celebrate the process of self

determination.

The richness of a strong culture.  
A culture that thrives despite poverty.  
Filled with powerful music of African  
descent.

There is beauty within the community  
and ourselves.

All this history lives in me.  
Even though I'll never know my  
great, great, great grandmother's name  
She lives in me.

Do you feel her?

I honor her.

I honor the history of my people. ■

## Free on the Inside

BY **GEORGE**, CLF MEMBER  
INCARCERATED IN OHIO

What is freedom? Is it an ideal,  
concept or right? Why are there so  
many people who are locked up  
inside themselves?

I've seen those who had to come to  
prison before they could learn what  
it meant to be free on the inside—  
it's liberating.

True freedom starts when we  
remove self-doubt, stop limiting  
ourselves, and find the things that  
empower us. Freedom is not the  
pursuit of happiness—that pursuit  
is in opposition to freedom. Seek-  
ing happiness is like trying to get to  
tomorrow. It never comes!

Freedom is being free from re-  
strictions, limitations, social norms,  
expectations, false hopes, etc.  
Freedom also is knowing that we  
are made of God. Every cell within  
our body is infused with God's  
energy.



Therefore, we  
are created to  
be divine. We  
are more pow-  
erful than we  
know—we are  
free! ■



## From Your Minister

BY MEG RILEY,  
SENIOR MINISTER,  
CHURCH OF THE  
LARGER FELLOWSHIP

I love poking around and discovering old words which are new to me. One word that surfaced from my reflections on freedom is the Old English *frith*, which is related to the words for both *friend* and *free*. (My ruminations on this connection were launched by a blogpost called “Friendship is a Root of Freedom” at a website called Joyful Militancy: Thriving Resistance in Toxic Times.)

Variations of the word *frith* were prevalent in many European cultures, including Iceland, to describe the kind of peace and security that come only from being in right relationship. Freedom is connected to friendship, to kinship. Unitarian Universalists say something about this kinship in our seventh principle, naming “respect for the interdependent web of all existence.”

However, in the way our principles are delineated, “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning” (our fourth principle) might seem to be separate from that interdependent web. Too often, we hear UUs state, “You can believe anything you want to.” However, that kind of individualism will not lead to *frith*.

*Frith* means that freedom includes accountability to and responsibility for one another. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning doesn’t mean that I can conduct thought experiments in a tiny bubble without taking into account how my meaning-making impacts the others around me. That’s why I like this word *frith*, which acknowledges that complexity, that interrelatedness, as foundational.

What would it mean if we lived in a world where *frith* was the norm? I like to think that our spiritual communities are places in which we try to find out;

in which right relationship is the center point grounding our free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

When I hear white Unitarian Universalists say that they are tired of talking about racism, or male Unitarian Universalists say they are tired of talking about misogyny, or other people using all of the ways we are privileged to keep from hearing how our meaning-making is limited and hurtful, I long for a time to talk through who “we” are, and who is included in that center where our faith lives.

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### *Frith* means that freedom includes accountability to and responsibility for one another.

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Paula Cole Jones, director of racial and social justice for several UUA regions, developed the idea that there are two different paradigms in UU circles, our seven principles being one, and Beloved Community (deep multiculturalism) the other. After working with congregations for over 15 years, she realized that a person can believe they are being a “good UU” and following the seven principles without thinking about or dealing with racism and other oppressions at the systemic level. She cites as evidence the fact that most UU congregations are primarily European-American in membership, culture (especially music), and leadership, even when located near diverse communities.

She realized that an eighth principle, which brought these two paradigms together was needed to correct this problem.

Recently, Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism (BLUU) has supported the addition of an eighth principle, which would join the other seven:

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote: *journeying toward spiritual*

*wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.*

This request, which is being discussed and will eventually become an agenda item at our General Assembly, is a movement to create *frith* in our principles—to unite the two strands that Jones identified, to declare that only in connecting right relationship to freedom are we truly living our faith. I’m sure there will be disagreements, but I look forward to the conversation, because it is so needed. And I am hopeful that we will vote to add this key element to what it means to live our faith.

As a white person, I’ve spent many hours trying, often unsuccessfully, to convey the systemic nature of oppression to other white people. It’s been, and will be, my life-long work to fully understand the tenacity of systemic racism and white supremacy. Because I am a visual thinker, I often see the issue in terms of an image I heard from Dr. Bill Jones, one of my first teachers about the systemic nature of racism. Dr. Jones said that privileged people see a metal bar in front of an oppressed person and we think, *What’s the problem? Go around it!*

We don’t understand that there are bars after bars, connected to one another, and that they encircle the oppressed people, with just enough space between the bars that privileged people only see the space around them and don’t get it that the bars are placed strategically to block any movement. I have witnessed, in my own lifetime, some amazing bar-bending by people of color, and yet every statistic about racial divides in wealth, health, education, safety, housing, transportation, incarceration—and every other measure—describe how the bars are still solidly in place.

*Frith* means that I understand how, in the words of Martin Luther King Jr., “No one is free while others are oppressed”—and that my being kind to everyone, while it’s a good thing, does not stop oppression. *Frith* is our path to freedom. ■

## REsources for Living

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

You don't have to spend very long on social media before it becomes clear that while everyone is in favor of freedom and responsibility, people mean very different things by those words. For some people, freedom is the right to be left alone to do as you wish. Rules and regulations are an affront against freedom, as are, it turns out, taxes. This view of freedom asserts that the world is at its finest when everyone is free to do as they wish—and government stays out of the way.

But for another set of people, freedom is less about being free from the limitations of rules and regulations, and more about the ability to fully express who you are. These people see "liberty and justice for all" as one thing. If there is not justice, there is no liberty. For these folks, freedom comes when we dismantle racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, confining gender norms, etc. Marlo Thomas's 1970s children's project "Free to Be... You and Me" describes this version of freedom.

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**Freedom and responsibility may start with the individual, but there is just no way for them to end there.**

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It is much the same way with responsibility. The same group of people who believe that freedom means government getting out of the way tend to be the ones to interpret responsibility as people needing to take responsibility for themselves. If we do too much to shelter people from the harsher realities of life, they would say, then people will lose initiative to take care of them-



selves and will become dependent on the system to support them.

I can see the point of this argument. We have

all known people who seem to feel like the world owes them a favor, who don't seem to want to step up to the plate and take responsibility.

But it will probably come as no surprise that I fall in among the people who think of responsibility rather differently. I don't think you really understand what it means to be responsible until you start taking some responsibility for more than your own little life. Certainly, the whole idea of what it meant to be responsible changed drastically the moment I became a parent. Suddenly, working and paying my household bills seemed like a trivial task compared with the need to make sure that nutritious meals turned up on time, that baths and clean clothes and bedtime all happened at the appropriate moments, that enriching opportunities for learning and growth appeared—without my placing any pressure or agenda on my child.

And all those tasks are minor compared with the responsibility of providing just the right blend of openness and limits, of connection and independence, of work and play and rest. And we won't even go into what it takes to maintain a loving composure in the face of two-year-old temper tantrums or a teen's snide eye-rolling.

Being responsible for a child is a massive undertaking. But it's only the beginning. Those of us who are truly responsible know that we have responsibilities to our neighbors. We clean up after our dogs, and shovel our sidewalks when it snows.

And if you're going to participate in a democracy then you have a responsibility to make your vote count, to be informed, to weigh in on those matters that concern you, whether it be a traffic light in front of your local school or a

giant oil pipeline running across your country. When tragedy hits across the world in the form of a hurricane or a tsunami and we reach out to help, we might realize that our responsibilities don't end with the borders of our own particular country.

In fact, our responsibilities reach out across time as well as space. Do we not have some obligation to hand off to our children and our neighbors' children an earth that is still hospitable and green, not to mention an education system that prepares the next generation for a future we can't quite imagine?

I'm all in favor of personal responsibility. But I think we haven't begun to touch our responsibilities until we've committed ourselves as broadly and deeply as possible to the well-being of all those whom our lives touch. And, for that matter, I'm all in favor of freedom, but a freedom that is rooted in relationship, in the understanding that our freedoms are tied together.

When you talk about freedom or responsibility as purely individual—the right to do as you wish and the responsibility to take care of yourself—you are not wrong, but you're leaving out the biggest part of the picture. You are pretending that each of us is, in John Donne's famous words, "an island." And that is simply, factually, not true.

No one keeps the pollution they generate in a tidy little box under the bed. No one eats or works or drives or plays tennis or whatever without depending on an incredibly complex web of relationships that makes the whole thing possible. Freedom and responsibility may start with the individual, but there is just no way for them to end there.

Which makes the whole notion of freedom and responsibility far more complicated and difficult to figure out than the individualists would have us believe. It also makes those concepts far more beautiful and important and real and worthy of all our work and all our wisdom. ■



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**Rev. Dana McLean Greely**, Second from right in civil rights demonstration, in Selma, Alabama, 1965

## Freedom to Do as We Will

We each have a measure of freedom  
To do as we will.  
We can debase our life or dignify it;  
We can fill it with doubt or faith,  
And with hate or love.  
We can disavow our heritage or proclaim it.

In as much as we are free to think and act,  
We may seem to have broken away from nature.  
But I believe that is part of nature's design.  
Wholly within nature, human nature is in the making.  
It has risen above the beast,  
But its destiny is nearer to the stars.

By Rev. **Dana McLean Greely** (1908-1986),  
from his book *Forward Through the Ages*,  
published by First Parish in Concord in 1986.