

## Freedom and Responsibility

We are exploring Divine Paradox, two truths that seem opposite yet are equally true. Today I want to look at Freedom and Responsibility. The paradox is that I am free and endowed with free will AND I am responsible for the consequences of every choice: my thoughts, my words and my actions.

Early in our experiences we believe freedom means having no responsibilities. Sometimes, we continue to cling to that belief. Also early in our experiences, we may find rules and restrictions that seem to limit our freedom. Bedtime for a five year old is a fence to be climbed and a rule to attempt to circumvent. They postpone with water and bathroom and story. Clearly they long for the freedom to stay up as late as they want. Finally, they are allowed to stay up late but they must stay at home or at least BE HOME by a certain time. Curfew becomes a new limit to complete freedom. Then comes the day when they move away from home. They are free at last. Within a few months or the end of the first semester of college, there is a dawning awareness of responsibility. Ah, you can stay up as late as you want, even drink alcohol and party til the wee hours. **And** you are responsible for getting to class and work and whatever else life involves at this point. You are also responsible for the consequences of NOT attending class, completing assignments and reporting for work. Freedom and Responsibility are two sides of the same coin, not two different coins that can be obtained one without the other.

We also tend to believe that freedom is dependent on our outer circumstances. We can only be free when there are no restrictions, no fences or bondage. This only looks at freedom from a material plane, spatial aspect. In the Revealing Word, Charles Fillmore describes freedom as, “having a sense of complete well being. It is a result of regulating one’s life according to Principle, not according to what anyone else may think or say. Liberation from bondage comes as we seek first the perfect Mind of Christ.” Freedom, then, is inherent within us. It is a concept beyond our outer circumstances. It is a part of another inheritance, that of “free-will”. Fillmore says this is “Man’s inherent freedom to act as he determines.”

It is this inherent freedom that sustained many of the concentration camp survivors. Victor Frankl was one of those survivors who wrote of his experiences in *Man’s Search For Meaning*. In that book he says, “Everything

can be taken from a man or woman but one thing; the last of human freedoms, to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way." Whatever our outer circumstances, we always have this freedom. Even the five year old can choose to rebel and fight against the bedtime or utilize it to gain rest for the next day's adventures. New parenting techniques begin to emphasize how to present the choices available as we build decision-making skills from an early age.

So if freedom is inherent, is Responsibility also inherent? Webster says Responsibility is "moral, legal or mental accountability". Often we view this as also a function of the material plane and there are those who smugly believe that they have beaten the system and avoided responsibility if there are no legal consequences for harmful and destructive actions. In Unity, we believe that everything functions according to spiritual law and principle. On the spiritual level, there is no breaking the law or interrupting the operation of principle. "The measure you give will be the measure you get." (Matt 7:2)

This is a caution both for those who would wish evil upon those who appear to have avoided legal accountability and for those who believe they have avoided accountability by the lack of legal consequence. Fillmore also talks about "Divine Justice" as the "infinite law of justice that may be called into activity. When we call our inner forces into action, the universal law begins its great work in us, and all the laws, both great and small fall into line and work for us. The true way to establish justice is by appealing directly to the divine law."

Victor Frankl also believed in Responsibility as the other side of Freedom's coin. He suggested that since we have the Statue of Liberty on the East coast, we should place the Statue of Responsibility on the West coast. Maybe in San Diego's harbor.

As we begin to accept Responsibility, are we only responsible for the consequences as they affect us directly? Clearly that is what we think of first. A child thinks first of whether he or she will be caught and punished for wrongdoing without regard for anyone else or any affected by the wrongdoing. Some of us remain stuck in that childish mentality. If we consider "ego", that puffy-chested little bird inside our heads, how it affects ME is its only concern.

Yet in Unity we talk about our oneness. We talk about our oneness with all that is. We are a part of that great web of life and love in which every cell is connected to all the others. Technology makes this more real; we get real-time tweets and video about revolutions and disasters on the other side of the world. The Greek economy affects our interest rates and we are beginning to see the refuse from the Japanese tsunami wash up on our shores. Quantum physics says it is more than spiritual, it is scientific.

Martin Luther King Jr saw this and spoke of it. He said, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.”

When our Thomas Jefferson wrote: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”, he was a slave owner. We can only speak about our forefathers because our foremothers were not really allowed to have public opinions and certainly couldn’t vote with them. But our forefathers did not contemplate even all men, much less, all persons. At its inception, there was a list of exceptions to the Declaration of Independence. Not everyone was equal and not everyone was entitled to the pursuit of happiness.

Today the list may have changed some but the list of exceptions remains. It is a part of our social fabric and may not be easily legislated. It remains, however, that in our oneness, so long as there are exceptions, we are responsible for the way we participate in change or for the way we passively sit back in the illusion that the oppression of others does not affect us. We choose by action or inaction, by speaking or remaining silent. Dr. King said, “The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.”

It is interesting that Frankl’s quote about the inherent freedom of one to choose comes in the context of a discussion about prisoners who went about comforting others, sharing their crumbs of bread, even at the risk of death if caught.

I am not advocating for any political party or election outcome but I am observing that this political season is revealing some of the exceptions that remain to equality and the pursuit of happiness. Not happiness that directly

harms someone else but the usual ability to have a career and marry and own a home if you want any or all of those things. There is a story about racial slurs from the email of the Kansas Speaker of the House. There are the local comments arising from the decision of the Lehigh Chamber of Commerce to create a Council for LGBT and the issue of same sex marriage is a topic for many candidates to oppose. There are state and federal funding cuts that affect primarily programs for those with disabilities, those living in poverty and those without English as a primary language.

Dr. King also said, “It is hardly a moral act to encourage others patiently to accept injustice which he himself does not endure.” I have observed the lengths to which those sitting comfortably aloof from any given situation will go to rationalize and justify an injustice done to someone else. The justification allows them to remain sitting on the sideline rather than speaking out or taking a stand to level the playing field. In diversity work, a level playing field is only seen as a threat to those in dominance, those benefiting while others are oppressed and denied the same pursuit of happiness. A level playing field is not a world of sameness or equal wealth or one religion. It is a world without hunger; a world in which all are safe and sheltered and able to pursue dreams and ambitions.

When we claim our own freedom and take responsibility for our thoughts and actions, we want to work for a level playing field. We want balance in the web. We want to co-create an awakened world of peace, harmony and abundance. Our good is not threatened by someone else’s good. We see no need to be better than anyone else because we see the value in each one. Allowing everyone to marry and have health insurance and be able to enter a building and feed their family does not cause me to fear that I might lose any of those things by allowing everyone to enjoy them.

These are times of challenge and controversy. You may have noticed I have a hard time remaining silent. We cannot fight every injustice and yet, it feels wrong to close our eyes to the injustice in front of us. I try to stay aware and awake to my own biases and the times I may be passive because it is an oppression that does not affect me and therefore, I am in the dominant group. I claim my freedom and know that with my free-will comes the responsibility to be accountable for my thoughts and actions. I try to advocate from a place of love. I try not to hate the haters. I try not to oppose injustice but support

equality. It is a fine line and sometime a language issue but I remain aware that what I resist persists. And I admit my humanity. Even Jesus got frustrated and overturned the tables of the money-changers in the temple.

Tomorrow we honor the life and work of Dr. Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. He stood for nonviolence. The Freedom Bus Riders were trained to endure the injustice of violence without returning violence. He stood for equality and the pursuit of happiness without exception. While we cannot know for sure his stand on LGBT issues, his widow, Coretta Scott King said, "I hasten to remind them [those who believe he would oppose LGBT issues on religious grounds] that Martin Luther King Jr. said, 'Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.' I appeal to everyone who believes in Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream, to make room at the table of brotherhood and sisterhood for lesbian and gay people." Also Dr. King said, "Hatred and bitterness can never cure the disease of fear; only love can do that. Hatred paralyzes life; love releases it. Hatred darkens life; love illumines it."

Today is actually Dr. King's birthday. Tomorrow I have been asked to give the invocation at the NAACP and YWCA celebration of Dr. King in Bethlehem. I pray that I will honor his life's work with my words and more than that, I pray that each day my life will honor his commitment to live in freedom, taking responsibility for his words and actions.

I invite you to look around our community, our world. Where do you fail to claim your freedom? Where do you fail to take responsibility for your thoughts and actions? Where do you surrender your power to co-create an awakened world of peace, harmony and abundance?

Let us take some time to reflect on our freedom and our responsibility. We will move into this time by singing When I Pray. The words are simple. The choir will lead us as we learn them if you do not already know them.