

Let Freedom Ring

Let's get the obvious out of the way first. In the last two months I put 3,000 miles on my car, had all my preventative maintenance testing done with good results, attended a Unity headquarters board meeting, got new glasses, a fresh haircut, went to a wedding, visited friends and family, slept, read novels, watched movies, wrote, cooked, gardened, went out to hear live music and went to Graceland. For the most part I did what I wanted without much of a schedule.

The title of today's sermon is "Let Freedom Ring". Thanks to Anthony's persistence, I was able to arrive at this title several months ago. At that time I was mainly looking forward. The Fourth of July, the celebration of the United States independence from England, is coming up on Wednesday. It didn't really occur to me until I sat down to write the sermon that looking backwards, it might appear that *my* freedom is ending. Two months of freedom ends today as I step back into roles of responsibility and schedules. I am no longer free—or am I?

This brings me to the writing that spurred my original thought: the first chapter of Emilie Cady's book, Lessons In Truth. The title of the first chapter is: "Bondage or Liberty, Which?" It seems to be an ongoing question around freedom as a choice. Cady says, "**Everyone** believes her/himself to be in bondage to the flesh and to the things of the flesh. All suffering is the result of this belief." Well there are lots of facets to this very broad statement and assumption. Is any part of this quote true? If not, what is false? If it's true, is there a way out of suffering?

So we'll start with the first part of the first sentence: "Everyone believes her/himself to be in bondage to the flesh". I'm going to start at the end of the phrase and work my way back to "Everyone".

What does it mean to be "in bondage to the flesh"? Maybe lots of things. Maybe it means thinking we are nothing more than bodies. We cannot be more than the blood and muscles and bones and brains that make up our bodies. We are bound up in this human vehicle and there is no escaping the limits and flaws of our bodies.

Where do we get this "belief"? The tricky part of belief is that although we usually think of beliefs as conscious thoughts, we are driven just as much by the beliefs we never consciously examine.

A fair amount of time in therapy and self-exploration is the focus on uncovering those hidden beliefs that are driving our behavior in ways we do not desire. We internalize ideas about what harms us, our worth and what is needed for our safety and security through our experiences and the messages we hear from any number of sources in our formative years. We might deny a number of “beliefs” only to discover in self-examination that darn it, we **do** believe that. While discovering a hidden belief may initially be an unhappy discovery, it can also be the beginning of transformation. The potential for transformation is why we might want to invest some time in self-exploration.

The second part of the first sentence, “and to the things of the flesh” just expands the focus of the limiting belief from our physical body to all the emotions and desires of the body, as well as our dependence on the physical world around us. We come to accept, sometimes with anger, sometimes with frustration, sometimes with despair, that we are bound by the physical world of our senses.

So is **everyone** doomed to this belief in bondage? Well everyone who is alive, on this planet, has a body. Does everyone believe, consciously or unconsciously, in the bondage? Initially I thought of a couple exceptions. Young children have not yet been exposed to the indoctrination of limitations. Have you ever watched an infant discover and explore toes which are actually a part of the infant? It is like watching a miracle being revealed. “Hey, what’s this down there? Hey, when I touch them, I can feel the touch!” Without a clear concept of ME, the infant is discovering what is me. Without a concept of limits, the youngest child does not perceive what the body cannot do or what death means or what bondage might feel like. In a way, this lack of knowledge, indoctrination and belief is freeing. Which perhaps is a part of Jesus admonition that unless you “change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” However anyone who has ever experienced the tantrum of an infant or toddler denied what they *want* will understand that this tantrum is an expression of being in bondage to the expectation that the physical world will provide what we want. And to be denied what we want in the physical world produces suffering. Toddlers suffer and express in the ways they are capable of expressing suffering. At times we may observe similar tantrum behavior in those we might expect had moved beyond the toddler stage. I would venture to say most of us have experienced the suffering of being denied what we desire in our bodies and in the physical world, with or without a tantrum. So whether or not EVERYONE is burdened or ALL suffering arises from this, the belief in bondage is clearly a problem.

Cady does offer a solution in this first chapter. “Each [one] must sooner or later learn to stand alone with God; nothing else avails. Nothing else will ever make you master of your own destiny. No one can give to you as can this indwelling [Spirit].” “Hitherto we have believed that we were helped and comforted by others, that we received joy from outside circumstances and surroundings, **but it is not so**. All joy and strength and good spring up from a fountain within one’s own being and if we only knew this Truth, we should know that, because *God in us* is the fountain out of which springs all our good, nothing that any one does or says, or fails to do or say, can take away our joy and good.”

True freedom arises from knowing the dimensions of our own being that transcend and are more than our bodies and our physical circumstances. True freedom lies in our relationship to the Divine through our own divinity, not whether or not external forces appear to act upon us. A favorite Unity scripture is in Colossians 1:27, “Christ in you, the hope of glory”. To know the eternal essence of our being, *Christ in you*, is beyond the snares of this earth is a source of hope and a source of personal power which external conditions cannot deny. Cady’s writing was first published in 1896 but the wisdom contained in the message Jesus taught has been available in the ethers for all time.

It is helpful to remember that the time of freedom we celebrate on July 4th, did not include freedom for everyone in the material world sense of the word freedom. If you consider freedom the ability to vote, to own land, to choose where to live and who to love, many were excluded from the July 4th freedom: slaves, women, and indigenous people. Our history is clouded by the exclusion of worldly freedom from many as our impulse to oppress other humans overcomes our innate sense of oneness and equality. The oppressor wields control and denial to keep the oppressed focused on the outer world. The personal power lies within us. It is our ability to turn within and discover this power that challenges the oppressor. Even the most oppressed humans are able to access this deeper freedom. Certainly not every oppressed person has accessed his/her freedom but it is possible in the direst circumstances. How do I know that?

Viktor Frankl was an Austrian psychologist and holocaust survivor. He wrote, “Everything can be taken from a [hu]man but one thing; the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”

Elie Wiesel was another holocaust survivor who wrote, “It is by his freedom that a man knows himself, by his sovereignty over his own life that a man measures himself.”

Certainly the concentration camps these Jewish men survived in Nazi Germany were places of deprivation beyond anything I can imagine. It humbles me when I struggle with the idea of my own freedom. How simple it suddenly seems to sit comfortably in air conditioning, not hungry or thirsty, able to move about as I wish—and turn within to the power that assures me I am not in bondage to any condition of my body or my circumstance. I have the power to choose the work I do and to choose the attitude I bring to *any* task.

That Truth was really brought up to me recently in a news segment I watched about a podcast called “Ear Hustle”. This is a podcast produced in and about San Quentin Prison in California. It was the creation of a team that included Earlonne Woods, Antwan Williams and Nigel Poor. Both Earlonne and Antwan are prisoners who worked with Nigel Poor when she began a prison radio project in 2012 called San Quentin Prison Report. They wanted a format that was more creative than news reporting and in 2017 Ear Hustle was born. It is basically the stories and personal experiences of the prisoners as told by the prisoners. San Quentin, called the Q, has shifted from a level four maximum security prison to a level two prison with programs aimed at rehabilitating the incarcerated men. Many of the men have life sentences or numbers of years that far exceed life expectancy. Yet Earlonne describes San Quentin as a “community of incarcerated individuals committed to changing their lives”. In the news piece, reporter Ted Koppel challenged Earlonne about the inconsistency of remarks about lengthy, lifetime sentences and other remarks about changing lives and preparing to go home. “That don't stop you from changing your ways and changing your life just because I have 1,000 years-to-life,” Woods replied. “You never know what may happen tomorrow.” To activate the power available to change one’s own life, within the confines of prison, and to claim the possibilities available beyond the current appearance is a freedom no outside person or condition can take away. To claim success through GED’s and job training and to express your creativity despite not having the ability to walk outside the walls of the Q is to **live** a sense of freedom many on the outside of those walls may never discover.

I believe today is a day for each of us to reflect on what freedom really means.

If freedom is available by turning within, casting out thoughts that we are limited to appearances in the material world and claiming the power and possibilities innate in each one of us, how are we using our freedom? How are **you** using **your** freedom?

Have we surrendered our freedom in frustration and allowed ourselves to be in bondage to the failings of our bodies, the numbers that rise and fall in our 401 (k) accounts and the injustices in our world? It is easy to be distracted by all those things. In fact, those who would seek to deny freedom to any person depend on each person submitting to the illusion of imprisonment, enslavement, and de-humanization. As we reflect on freedom, let us also acknowledge the ways our country, our government, our consciousness has historically heaped physical world limits upon people after people who are citizens and live in this land: indigenous people, people of color, Japanese, foreign speaking, and non-Christians. We have separated families, put people to death, incarcerated innocent people in facilities and denied people a place to live or basic resources. Remember that even in the direst circumstance, there are those who are able to claim freedom.

True freedom remains ours to claim or surrender. The attitude we choose and the Source we seek, no matter what the outward appearance, are freedoms no one can take from us. It seems to me that once we have understood this Truth of direct Oneness with the all-sufficiency of Spirit, we desire all people to know the Truth. We do not desire to keep it a secret or deny freedom to any person. We empower each one we come in contact with to know the freedom found within. We speak to each one as free; we treat each one as equal. We speak out against oppression.

Cady says this towards the end of the chapter: “Victory must be won in the silence of your own being first and then you need take no part in the outer demonstration of relief from conditions. The very walls of Jericho that keep you from your desire must fall before you.” Amid the fireworks, swimming pools and picnics, reflect on the hidden beliefs limiting your freedom. Bring them out into the light and then let the false ideas go. Let the freedom accessed through our divinity resound in the depths of your own being and bring a sense of freedom to how you live your life.