

# FREEDOM IN ONE LIFE

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First, as one might expect, the subject of freedom lends itself to many volumes of material. In an attempt to deal with that reality, I have elected to choose certain ties of Unitarian Universalism to freedom. Second, I will address some definitions, concepts, and applications of the idea of freedom along with the inevitable use of quotes from others. Finally, I will share with you some of my personal experiences and ideas regarding freedom. To the extent that I may repeat myself from earlier presentations to this group, I do not remember everything I said before and I hope that any repetitions are seen as relevant to the subject of freedom.

From my perspective, the Unitarian Universalist Principles of “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning”, “the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in our society at large”, and “the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all” speak to freedom. In our Statement of Purpose authored by the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Sheridan, two ideas stand out for me. They are “We come together to develop our individual religious values, respecting and celebrating our differences.” and “We seek congruence between our beliefs and our actions.”

So what is this thing called freedom? I used my iPhone and added some of my own ideas to generate a lengthy list of which I will share only part.

- The power or right to act, speak, or think as one wants without hindrances or restraint
- absence of subjugation to foreign domination or despotic government
- the power of self – determination attributed to the will, the quality of being independent of fate or necessity
- freedom of conscience
- freedom of choice – “life is made up of the choices you make and the actions you take”

- freedom related to patriotism – “My country right or wrong my country. When it is right to keep it right. When it is wrong make it right.” (My Paraphrase) Another quote related to this idea is from Dag Hammarskjold, “Never, for the sake of peace and quiet, deny your own experience or convictions.”
- Individual freedom
- freedom to protect my family
- freedom to protect people who are vulnerable

I fully realize that I left out some common freedoms like “freedom of the press” and others. If I didn’t leave something out, we would be here for a very long time. I hope my selection of a cross-section of my life and freedoms upon which I focus are relevant for you and help you to think in regard to it. Think of it as a “selected bibliography” which lets you know that there are many other references available.

Next I want to quote from the blog of a man named Bill Murphy, Junior. He quotes others and, even though I had to do so, I found it very difficult to select out any of the quotes.

Murphy starts by saying, “Independence Day is one of the best American holidays, both for what we celebrate and how we celebrate it.”

“It is easy, however, to take liberty for granted, and to misconstrue just how difficult it was to gain our freedoms 239 years ago. The Revolutionary War was long and costly-- arguably the second – longest conflict in American history. While the 50,000 or so casualties on the American side are roughly equal in number to the total dead and wounded in Afghanistan [and to the dead military personnel in Vietnam I might add], this was at a time when there were fewer than 3 million people living in the former British colonies.”

“So by all means, march in a parade, host a barbecue, have a few beers, head to the beach, light off some fireworks. My family and I will be right there with you. But take a minute or two to reflect on why we celebrate as well. Here are some of the best things ever said about freedom – some poignant, some rebellious, some even funny – to get you thinking.”

- “The truth will set you free, but first it will piss you off.” – Gloria Steinem
- “The only way to deal with an un-free world is to become so absolutely free that your very existence is an act of rebellion.” – Albert Camus
- “If freedom of speech is taken away, then dumb we may be led, like sheep to the slaughter.” – George Washington
- “For to be free is not merely to cast off one’s chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.” – Nelson Mandela
- “I do not agree with what you have to say, but I’ll defend to the death your right to say it.” – Voltaire
- “They who can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety.” – Benjamin Franklin
- “The advancement and diffusion of knowledge is the only guardian of true liberty.” – James Madison
- “Nothing is more difficult, and therefore more precious, than to be able to decide.” – Napoleon Bonaparte
- “Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.” – Martin Luther King Jr.
- “I’d like to be remembered as a person who wanted to be free and wanted other people to also be free.” – Rosa Parks
- “It does not take a majority to prevail, but rather an irate, tireless minority, keen on setting brushfires of freedom in the minds of men.” – Samuel Adams
- “Freedom lies in being bold.” – Robert Frost

The last quote by Robert Frost leads me to what my life experience has taught me thus far. At first I was going to paraphrase the last quote by Frost in this way, “Freedom lies in being [assertive].” I felt “bold” sounded too self aggrandizing and being assertive is necessary. Then I decided that “bold”, indeed, fit based on choices and actions I took during my formative years. In about 1964, when I was falling into and out of love on an almost weekly basis and reading everything I could about that elusive state, I came across another quote by a man named Paul Tournier. This is it.

“Love is a risk taking. It involves daring to be vulnerable and hurt. The search for security is the enemy of loving.” I have paraphrased that saying many times as follows,” [Life] is a risk taking. It involves daring to be vulnerable and hurt. The search for security is the enemy of [living]”. During the next few years and, to this day, in my life, freedom of conscience and freedom of choice have been guiding forces in my life even though, at times, I have felt very vulnerable because they have required the taking of risks. One important thing I have learned is that risk taking involves not just the risk of failure, but also the risk of succeeding.

Here’s a bit of my history in my parent’s generation and the one before that have contributed to my learning. My maternal great grandfather, Alonzo Johnson, a mullato, served with the United States 31<sup>st</sup> Colored Troops during the Civil War. During World War II, my uncle Jack survived service in the U.S. Navy. My uncle Bob was a B-17 bomber pilot who survived the attack on Pearl Harbor only to be killed later off New Zealand. My father was called up but not required to serve active duty due to the “sole surviving son” law and the fact he was participating in research on the development of penicillin.

In my generation, I attended two required years of Army ROTC at the University of Wyoming, initially terminating the spring of 1965. Tremendous troop increases in Vietnam beginning that year and a poor grade average led me to return to ROTC in the spring of 1966. I read everything I could get my hands on regarding Vietnam and the US involvement there. As a result, I became involved in serious draft counseling working out of an office in the United Presbyterian Church in Laramie, Wyoming. I counseled young men regarding both legal and illegal means of dealing with the draft as well as the legal consequences of both. In addition, I joined an organization called “Individuals Against the Crime of Silence”. These people registered their opposition to the Vietnam War by having their names placed on record at the United Nations stating their opposition. They wanted their opposition clearly stated in case there might ever be war trials after the Vietnam War like those held at Nuremberg after World War II.

While in ROTC, I was initially assigned to the Armor Branch of the Army. I requested a branch transfer from Armor to Medical Service Corps stating that my professional life in the field of psychology was to be devoted to the maintenance and rehabilitation of human lives rather than their destruction. I was granted the transfer with the support of my ROTC commanding officer, a full bird Colonel.

Next, during officer basic training at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, I was advised that there might be combat circumstances under which I may be required to lead combat troops. I decided then that only I would make the decision whether or not I would kill another human being. I resolved to use all legal means available to be able to live by that decision. This led to two applications for status as a I-A-O Conscientious Objector, that is an in service non-combatant. The first was rejected because it was seen as “a merely personal code”. I persisted with the help of an ACLU lawyer in Seattle and was granted that status on October 13, 1968. The importance of family and friends in this process cannot be overstated.

Having that status secured, I decided that, since I was against war in general and the Vietnam War specifically, I’d be far more knowledgeable if I experienced war. I was willing to entertain the possibility that my position was wrong. In addition, I was 24 ½ years old at the time and had never really been tried by life. I didn’t need to know how tough I was. Yet, in some way, I needed to know what I could handle. Norman McLean In his book, “Young Men and Fire”, speaks to this need as seen in young smoke jumpers. He writes,... “It is very important to a lot of people to make unmistakably clear to themselves and to the universe that they love the universe, but are not intimidated by it and will not be shaken by it, no matter what has in store. Moreover, they demand something from themselves early in life that can be taken ever after as a demonstration of this abiding feeling.”

...

“For many smoke jumpers, then, smoke jumping is not tied up closely with their way of life, but it is more something necessary for them to pass through and not around and, once it is unmistakably done, does not have to be done again. The ‘it’ is within, and is the need to settle some things with the universe and ourselves before taking on the ‘business of the world’, which isn’t all that special or hard but it takes time. This ‘it’ is the something special within that demands we do something special, and ‘it’ could be within a lot of us.”

Thus, on November 26, 1968 I volunteered for service in Vietnam. The Army obliged me with orders for just that.

I was assigned to Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 2/505 Infantry, 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade, 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division. I was Field Medical Operations Officer/Medical Platoon Leader. Some of my duties included assigning medics to line companies, identification of the killed and wounded, defense counsel in courts-martial cases, processing of civilian and Chu Hoi personnel, paymaster, and counseling troops along with my assigned duties of medical operations and supply.

While I was in Vietnam, there were only three instances where I was harassed because of my conscientious objector status. First, a major assigned me to identify bodies at the morgue. When I returned, he said, “Now do you want to kill a bunch of gooks?” I answered, “No sir. That’s not the point.” He said, “Well at least you’re not a chickenshit. You are here.” I saluted the rank on his shoulder and had no respect whatsoever for him. Second, an infantry lieutenant essentially called me out because he found out I was a conscientious objector. When I convinced him that I would protect myself, he dropped the issue. Finally, Pres. Eisenhower died while I was there. We had a military formation as the flag was retrieved to half-mast. A Lt. Col. told me that I needed to check out a side arm from the quartermaster because that was part of the uniform. I told him I was a conscientious objector and did not carry a weapon. He insisted I check out the weapon. I did but I did

not holster it. Our battalion commander, a full bird colonel, came along and asked what the problem was. The Lieut. Col. told him that I was disobeying an order. I told him I was a conscientious objector and would not carry a weapon. I always carried a copy of my conscientious objector confirmation from the conscientious objector review board in my pocket. The battalion commander told the Lt. Col. to take my weapon and check it into the quartermaster. I went to the formation with an empty holster and the flap turned up to show it was empty. Other than these instances no one ever said anything about my conscientious objector status. I just did my job. I served in Vietnam from January 1969 to December 1969. I often say that I don't know exactly how long my service was but I think it was approximately 10 months, 5 days, 3 hours and 46 seconds from touchdown to lift off at Ben Hoa Airbase. I returned home December 8, 1969.

Seventeen years after my return, during December 1986, PTSD symptoms began to surface significantly enough for me to recognize them and to ask for help. Fortunately, I had the support of a loving family, Hollis Hackman of the Sheridan VA, the Casper Vet Center and the generous permission of Chief Redman, Arapaho Native American medicine man, to participate in the Native American sweat, called the Day of the Howling Dog. As a result, true healing was begun and continues to this day. There remains a pilgrimage back to Vietnam to continue the healing process by, perhaps, returning with an additional more positive set of memories.

A guiding influence for me came at the end of the movie "Platoon". Taylor, the protagonist, is reflecting on his war experience as he is lifted off the battlefield in a Dustoff chopper to go home. He says,

"I think now, looking back, we did not fight the enemy. We fought ourselves and the enemy was within us. The war is over for me now but will be there the rest of my days. ...."But, be that as it may, those of us who did make it, have an obligation to build again, to teach to others what we know, and to try with what's left of our lives to find a goodness and meaning to this life."

I have taken that last paragraph very seriously in my life. As I conclude, I need you to know that I learned that I'm more of a patriot than I thought I was before my Vietnam experiences. I believe in the principles that our flag represents and that we as responsible citizens must speak and act to uphold those principles and to bring them forward in an appropriate form to each new day and for each new generation. In addition, I believe more strongly that war is not the answer. At the same time, I believe each individual needs to search inside themselves to determine where they will draw the line and, yes, possibly act violently to protect themselves, their love ones, and vulnerable others in this world. I have learned that I have no right to judge anyone about how they deal with this issue. Neither does anyone have a right to judge me. Each individual must struggle with this issue themselves.

That is where freedom of conscience and freedom of choice hold sway. Those freedoms, in my experience, are available in our country. I, for one, have benefitted my whole life because of them.

Fortunately, I have my wife and my children to remind me of what's important.

Amy in 1989 at 13 years old – “We must not bury the darkness of yesterday if we are to uncover a brighter tomorrow.

Doug in 1989 at 10 years old. – “All I can say is, Peace, Pop.”

Dona Nobis Pacem – Give Us Peace

And Let Freedom Ring

May it be so.

Readings accompanying this presentation are on the following pages. Will

“I shall take my words wherever there are those who want to hear the melody of freedom or the words that might inspire hope and courage in the face of despair and fear. My weapons are peaceful, for it is only by peace that peace can be attained. The song of freedom must prevail.”

Paul Robeson

“Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet deprecate agitation, are people who want crops without plowing up the ground.

They want rain without thunder and lightning; they want the ocean without the awful roar of its waters.

This struggle may be a moral one; or maybe both moral and physical; but it must be a struggle.

Power concedes nothing without a demand; it never did and it never will.

Find out what people will submit to, and you have found out the exact amount of injustice which will be imposed upon them.

The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress.”

Frederick Douglass

### Cherish Your Doubts

“Cherish your doubts, for doubt is the attendant of truth.

Doubt is the key to the door of knowledge; it is the servant of discovery.

A belief which may not be questioned binds us to error, for there is incompleteness and imperfection in every belief.

Doubt is the touchstone of truth; it is an acid which eats away the false.

Let no one fear for the truth, that doubt may consume it; for doubt is a testing of belief.

The truth stands boldly and unafraid; it is not shaken by the testing:

for truth, if it be true, arises from each testing stronger, more secure.”

“Those that would silence doubt are filled with fear; their houses are built on shifting sands.

But those who fear not doubt, and know its use, are founded on rock.

They shall walk in the light of growing knowledge; the work of their hands shall endure.

Therefore let us not fear doubt, but let us rejoice in its help; it is to the wise as a staff to the blindness; doubt is the attendant of truth.”

Robert T. Weston