

How Free Are We, Really? A Reflection on the 4<sup>th</sup> principle

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There lived a pious man in Bengal. Every day a Sanskrit scholar would come to his house and read aloud a few soul-stirring spiritual teachings from the Gita, the Upanishads and the Vedas. The master of the house listened devoutly to these discourses. The family had a bird called Krishna. It was kept in a cage in the room where the discourses were given and also listened to these talks.

One day the bird spoke to its master and said, "Could you please tell me what benefit you derive from these spiritual talks?"

The master answered, "Krishna, you don't seem to understand that these spiritual talks will liberate me, free me from bondage!"

The bird said, "You have been listening to these discourses for the last ten years, but I don't see any changes in you. Would you kindly ask your teacher what will actually happen to you?"

On the following day the master of the house said to his teacher, "Guru, I have been listening to your spiritual talks for the last ten years. Is it true that I will get liberation and freedom?"

The teacher was still. He scratched his head, pondering the question, but found no reply. He remained silent for about an hour and then left the house.

The master of the house was stunned. His guru could not give an answer to the bird's question, but the bird found the answer.

From that day on, the bird stopped eating. It stopped singing. It became absolutely silent. The master and his family placed food inside the cage every day, but the bird would not touch anything.

One day the master looked at the bird and, seeing no sign of life in it, took it gently out of the cage. With a sad heart, he placed his Krishna on the floor. In a twinkling the bird flew away into the infinite freedom of the sky!

The bird taught. Its master and his guru learned.

Sri Chinmoy, who tells this story in his book *The Garden of the Soul*, concludes by saying; “silence liberates”.

I love this story, but I am confounded by the concluding remarks. It wasn't simply silence that freed that bird!

**The process of liberation began when the bird spoke up.** I identify with the bird when it questioned the “status quo”, when it asked what was meant to be the result of his master's long time practice.

When the process of liberation begins with a question, it sounds UU to me!

Searching for truth and meaning means asking questions, doesn't it?

Our fourth principle states, that we covenant (we promise) to affirm and promote... “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning”.

We value the freedom to question. We want to know if the expected end results are in line with the means of getting there. Like Dr. Phil, we seem compelled to ask: “Is that working for you!”

I have to wonder what made the bird wait ten years to say something!

Who knows!

Maybe it was the beginning of a New Year. When a new beginning rolls around, many of us ask ourselves if our means have been achieving our ends! When we find the answer to be “no”, we make a promise to do something different. We resolve to change a behavior that hasn't brought about what we hoped for.

Perhaps, many of you have spent at least a little time reflecting on how you might be freer in this New Year to be the person you want and long to be. Perhaps, you have made a resolution to do what appears necessary to metaphorically open the door of the cage you have been in. Perhaps, you have resolved to engage in a new behavior that you hope will make you, your family, your congregation, your world more responsible for a more truthful and meaningful life.

The caged bird finally grew tired of hearing religious discourses that seemed to do nothing to free his master, much less himself! He asked a question and he made an observation. “You have been listening to this for ten years, and I don't see any changes in you!”

**The process of liberation continued when that bird resolved to make a change** based on his observation that the way things were weren't working...He resolved that he would do what was necessary to cause his master to open the cage door, so he could be free!

We UU's are members of a religious tradition that is full of heroes and heroines who with great resolve, and at great risk, did something to advance liberty, believing that only in freedom could we truly live with truth and meaning. Many of our heroes gave their lives to change the status quo, to liberate, to cause doors to be opened...

Unlike the bird in this story, our great heroes didn't keep silent, nor did they play dead!

Michael Servetus is one of our heroes who spoke out during the religious turmoil of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The struggle for religious freedom would eventually lead to greatly increased freedom and liberty for all individuals. Servetus and others who spoke up began the long march toward the rights and privileges we so take for granted today. Servetus was burned at the stake at in 1553, not by the Catholics, but by other Protestant Reformers.

Servetus grew up witnessing the Spanish Inquisition when Jews and Muslims were forced with to flee their homes, their country, and their businesses; to convert to Christianity or be put to death. During that time, Jews and Muslims had to say they believed in Catholic dogma; especially that they believed in the trinity, or lose everything.

When Servetus got old enough, educated enough, and privileged enough to read the bible, he found that there wasn't anything there that said one had to believe in the trinity! After reading the script for himself, he believed that the God that Jews and Muslims worshipped was the same God that Christians knew. He was 21 when he published his book, *On the Errors of the Trinity*, proclaiming himself as a Unitarian, one who believed there was One God.

For the rest of his life, he tried to convince the great Protestant Reformers, Luther and Calvin, who had refuted so many of the errors of Catholicism, that they also needed to move past a fixation on the doctrine of the Trinity. He pushed for them to go further.

Over and over again, when individuals hear a message of liberation and observe that the practices of their day are not yet effectively leading to the fulfillment of this message they have been moved to act.

Michael Servetus was burned at the stake because he was an irritant to the other Reformers.

As the news of his death spread, Protestants everywhere realized that they could not and should not stop the march for full religious freedom, the freedom to search for truth and meaning, and not just accept what an “authority” said.

We trace our roots to Michael Servetus and many other heretics like him who questioned the doctrines of their day. Heirs of what became known as the Radical Reformation, we continue to promote the necessity of liberation from bondage of all kinds, for freedom of thought and worship, combined with the practice of social agitation to advance liberty, as a central affirmation of our Free Church tradition.

A.C. Grayling in his new book *Toward the Light of Liberty*...details the long and arduous march for liberation from the religious reforms of the Reformation to the continued liberation movements of today. He says; “...today’s ordinary {Western} citizen is, in sixteenth century terms, a lord: a possessor of rights, entitlements, opportunities and resources that only an aristocrat of that earlier period could hope for...Out of growing liberty came more desire for liberty.”

Unitarians and Universalists have been over and over at the forefront of social movements for liberation, asking the questions of the status quo, making observations about what isn’t working and agitating for change that will free those who are “in bondage”.

Ours is a religious movement that values speaking up. Seeking truth and meaning, requires the freedom to ask questions...

No wonder that I am confounded by the author’s conclusion that “silence liberates”!

With the freedom to look beyond familiar sources, to look beyond myself, beyond my heritage, to get out of my particular cage...I turned to Buddhism to explain this concluding remark...

In my search to understand how silence could liberate, I found Sylvia Boorstein’s words in her book; *That’s Funny, You Don’t Look Buddhist: On Being a Faithful Jew and a Passionate Buddhist*....

She says: “Being silent for me doesn’t require being in a quiet place and it doesn’t mean not saying words. It means, receiving in a balanced, non-combative way what is happening. With or without words, the hope of my heart is that it will be able to relax and acknowledge the truth of my situation with compassion.”

“Able to relax”... What a concept! That bird was certainly relaxed, no singing, no eating, finally so relaxed it fell to the bottom of the cage.

“Acknowledge the truth of my situation with compassion”.

That bird was kind and gentle with its questions, saying “please” and “would you kindly”.

That bird evoked tender hearted compassion from its master, who thinking it dead, took it gently out of the cage.

This is the lesson we have to learn, we UU’s, we Americans...to relax, to acknowledge the truth of our situation with compassion, compassion that evokes compassion.

Seeking justice, with compassion. Compassion that evokes compassion...

May we, one day, be *free*...

Amen!