

Waging Freedom
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We often hear the phrase, "Freedom Isn't Free." What does that mean within a liberal and free faith? What does it mean to pursue freedom of religion, from poverty, the freedom for equal marriage rights, the pursuit of happiness within our Land of the Free? Waging freedom isn't passive - it takes action, dedication, and intention.

Poverty is a huge bar to freedom. The myth that all can make it in America is just that. While there are many opportunities available, without adequate education and access to resources it is a steep playing field. My first year in seminary I worked at the Emmaus House Poverty Rights office as part of my contextual education as a seminary student at Candler. There I worked with the homeless, unemployed, working poor, and generally disenfranchised persons. If I didn't understand that our current system fails in so many ways, then working with distraught mothers trying to keep on the heat for the winter, helping a recently released female convict with no place to stay obtain an ID - so she can find shelter and get a job, and listening to hundreds of stories of pain and struggle have made an impact. It is expensive to be poor. If you don't have transportation, the local grocery store is more expensive and has fewer fresh food choices, gas prices are higher in bad neighborhoods, and there are often few choices for shopping as is the case near the Emmaus House in downtown Atlanta. The sandwiches we hand out at the Poverty Rights Office can mean a little less hunger, but in the end a sandwich doesn't fill a stomach. I served persons on the brink of making it out of homelessness and transitional housing, both parents can be working and maybe even a teenager and then an injury or illness happens. There is no paid leave. There is little money for doctors, and what about getting to the doctor in the first place? Making less than a living wage, makes it almost insurmountable to break out of the cycle of poverty. How can you afford a deposit on an apartment that has fewer sirens waking you at night. I've only met some of Georgia's disenfranchised. I can tell you the majority of them are neither

lazy, untalented, or underserving. It is the American Dream that when you work hard, you get ahead. The American Dream is not working for millions of people, and it is indeed a nightmare situation for many.

The Summary of the UUA Resolutions and Social Justice Statements on Economic Justice states, “Working for a just society is central to the Unitarian Universalist faith - a faith based in the creation of justice and peace here on earth and among our common world community.” In the United States, more than 28 million people, about a quarter of the workforce between the ages of 18 and 64, are minimum wage workers – earning less than the poverty level for their families. Nearly two thirds are women, and almost one third of those women are raising children. A full-time minimum wage job covers, on average, only 34 percent of a family’s basic costs of living.

Raising the minimum wage above poverty level is perhaps the most effective instrument for combating poverty and supporting the human rights of children, women, and people of color in the United States. No other single issue or movement can so directly improve the lives of the working poor in this country. But just wages make ethical sense as well as economic sense. On the basis of our faith and our basic commitment to human dignity, the UUSC, the Unitarian Universalist Service committee, is working with Let Justice Roll and other groups to improve the equation for working families, waging freedom and economic justice.

There is a poverty in our national spirit when our messages on wellness, health, and happiness come from the magazine rack in the grocery aisle or slapped on the side of the bus we ride to work. How free are we from corporate advertising machine? The message of salvation lies in a brand new shampoo or fruit-shaped artificial cereal. How destructive are the magazines and ads that tear down a person's self worth all for the price of a bottle of cologne or the right lipstick? Waging the truth in the face of billion dollar conglomerates and a consumptionist culture takes more than tivoing through the commercials. It takes informed buyers. It takes fighting for advertising with realistic and healthy body sizes. It takes advocacy and education.

How free are our clothing choices or hairstyles? Expressing self is another freedom that often gets affected by media or corporate dress codes. Is your skirt the right length? Men, you can't wear your hair long now – *that isn't professional*. I have always chafed at mores of what is “allowed” and “not allowed.” Growing up in South Carolina, my family was steeped in family traditions that my grandmother wanted to pass down in heavy obligation. I was supposed to have been a debutante, married into “the right kind of family,” have pledged to my family's legacy sorority and of course – still be a Christian. Needless to say, I sidestepped those plaguing definitions and moved onto less certain ground. Yes, less certain. While it is great to have my freedom from that legacy, I'm still riding into new territory. It takes vigilance not to fall back to the certainty of the way things have always been, and even braver to reclaim the words and traditions of my childhood faith or history with my own definitions and interpretation. Christmas is Yule - our Yule tree is a recycled Maypole and yard materials, and my children's bedtime prayers call on the Great Mother as well as the Father. I am following in the our family's traditional path of ministry which I bucked for so long, though now I have found my own way to walk it.

Once upon a time in this great nation, culture dictated that women were relegated to working in the home, or in pursuits fitting a “feminine” tempermant. Suffragists blazed a new way. Women fought for the right to vote, the right to work, and the right to govern their bodies. Once upon a time in this great nation some of my own ancestors owned people, though they weren't considered people by the writ of law. Enslaved peoples, Abolitionists and the Underground railroad gave a light to a new way. The fight for equality in housing, jobs, and the right to vote have been fought...and the fight goes on. This land has known many fights for freedom, one prominent battle currently on our horizon is for equal marriage rights. Legislators, activists, and ordinary people march, shout, write, and speak the truth that love is sacred regardless of gender or orientation.

Freedom is a word that is tossed around a lot this time of year, and also during an election season. How free is a predominantly two-party system? How free is the money-driven necessities of

getting elected? Some would say that it is free enough, others might say, “Not nearly enough.” Without our votes, our voices, and our impact, freedom isn't exercised and power is abdicated. According to the Center for the Study of the American Electorate, voter turnout for the 2008 presidential primaries was 30.3 percent of eligible voters, the highest it's been since 1972, when 30.9 percent voted in the primaries. The realist in me is excited, the idealist in me is wondering whether the other 70% are scarfing down donuts. Whether this upswing was related to the energy around Obama or Hillary, or people simply reacting to uncertain economic times - the code word on the airways has been that people want something different to happen.

The old saying is that if you aren't a part of the solution, then you are part of the problem. A democracy is as strong as its participation. The ACLU website states that the American system of government is founded on two counterbalancing principles: that the majority of the people governs, through democratically elected representatives, and that the power even of a democratic majority must be limited, to ensure individual rights. Majority power is limited by the Constitution's Bill of Rights, which consists of the original ten amendments ratified in 1791, plus the three post-Civil War amendments (the 13th, 14th and 15th), and the 19th Amendment (women's suffrage), adopted in 1920. The first slogan on the ACLU website states, “Because Freedom Can't Protect Itself.” We hear these lines from both sides of the political line. It is used to fight for the rights of speech and privacy and it is used to justify war, or places like Guantanamo Bay. It is a word that can be wielded, worshiped, and sanctified. It is easy for people to get excited about the idea. Our nation is still enraptured by the open skies and wild spaces, manifest destiny, and the cowboy “do it yourself” mentality. Freedom is often the theological watch word in the halls of American patriotism. Freedom has the icons of the Statue of Liberty and the Liberty Bell, as well as iconic men like Benjamin Franklin – a free thinker, George Washington - our nation's first president, and Abraham Lincoln - who signed the Emancipation Proclamation. Freedom is so important, that we must not get lost in lauding its value only to lose it with apathy or fear.

At General Assembly last week I saw a button that caught my eye in the Exhibitor's Hall, "I wasn't really using my civil rights anyway." This seems like just a snarky button, but this age of the "War on Terror" has also been a war on our civil rights. The question has been asked on both sides of the fence, "Freedom, at what cost?" Are we to lose our civil liberties to be safer from a perceived threat? How much freedom is enough to lose? Many worry that the line of losing liberty is a slippery slope at best. While there is a measure of caution both warranted and justified in protecting our nation and her people, one must continue to be watchful of our liberties. This shouldn't be a zero sum game.

There have been different times in our country where the culture of fear has put freedom at risk – the McCarthy era when the witchhunt for communists plagued artists, free thinkers, and ordinary citizens; the recent era of wiretapping, watch lists, Guatanemo Bay, and the "You're With Us or You're Against Us" foreign and internal policy culture. At the recent General Assembly, it took a federal identification card to access the annual meeting of congregations of our free faith. I participated in General Assembly, knowing that others could not attend or would not attend due to these strictures. I participated as a delegate in the inspiring and chaotic democratic processes of Actions of Immediate witness and voting on other major items up for vote. Our voices can arise in our absences and the unified cry against injustice.

When we move away from fear, we lose the shackles placed upon upon us. When we disengage from the zero sum game and approach our obstactles from a place of love and truth, we are set free again. Spiritual activist and author, Marianne Williamson said, "And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our fear, our presence automatically liberates others." She also stated that, "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us." It is frightening to wage freedom, to move against the vast inertia of apathy, blasé coffee talk and hopelessness. If we are to shake the halls of justice, uphold the rights that many

have died and fought to keep, we *must* not let fear dampen our inner light, our inner voice.

Unitarian Universalists are notorious for our free thinking, our cantankerous coffee hours, and our rugged individualism. It is what makes us great, sets us free, and sometimes what keeps us apart. What brings us together can certainly be the saving message of a free and liberal faith. In our churches, at our workplaces, it is easy to talk about what divides us. Is it the theists or humanists – the democrats or republicans? Watching the process on the floor of the General Assembly was a lot like watching pure democracy: any delegate can bring forth an action of immediate witness, people are trying to get enough signatures to get the item to the vote, and questions and emotions are all across the map. Yet, heated debate didn't keep us from the evening worship or the awe of Jason Shelton's cantata. It is in the process of participation, overcoming apathy and fear of rejection, the process of letting that inner voice speak loud and clear that freedom is waged. Some UU's were part of the voting process, others participated by sending a message to the UUA by boycotting altogether. It is the engagement, not how it is done. It is the intention and action that beat inertia.

Forrest Church, a prominent Unitarian Universalist minister and writer, says that courage is when fear speaks and the heart answers. After absorbing fear's best argument, the heart says no. As Church explains, nothing out of the ordinary is required. Anyone, and at almost any time, can find the courage to answer fear. I heard Forrest Church speak at this year's General Assembly, and he said when you move away from fear you move towards love. I believe that it is from a place of love that we must wage freedom - not just because our mind or gut tells us that it is right. This comes from the heart, the heart of knowing that each of us is a sacred part of the greater whole. It is the beacon of self that can not be denied. We are interconnected and therefore inseparable. Republican, Democrat pagan, and atheist, we breathe and birth in the same commons and anything that tells us otherwise is an imaginary line in the sand. We wage freedom, because it is sacred. We wage freedom, because it is who we are!