

How Will We Use Our Freedom?  
A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Strauss

Freedom is both a gift and a curse.  
We who have freedom cannot wait...we must learn to use it for  
the good of all.

Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness...

LIFE: where it all begins... The Biblical origin story sets man  
and woman in the Garden of Eden, but not for long was it idyllic.  
In no time Eve rebelled against the rules, Eden was surely  
beautiful...all the fresh fruit and cool spring water one could  
desire. Many animal companions. Pleasant weather. No stress.  
The earth was newly made and life in the garden was a paradise.

But how soon we tire of limits, how soon we humans have  
questions and a need to explore beyond whatever constraints we  
feel....be they physical or spiritual. Adam and Eve were, at first  
mere creatures under the thumb of God...Eden was a garden only,  
they wanted more...they wanted their freedom.

And so they were sent from the garden...in shame and with  
punishment, they were sent out into their freedom.

Freedom is a gift and a curse.

Now they were free to make their own choices. And free to make  
their own mistakes. We humans live with this legacy of free will.  
And truly, it is a gift. When things so well, it feels like a great  
gift, indeed. For those of us born into freedom, for those of us  
born into plenty and privilege, freedom of mind and body tends to  
go unquestioned. After all, most of us have always had it.

Every Fourth of July we celebrate the freedom of our country.  
And we feel proud. And, when I stop to think about it, I know I  
am lucky in my freedom.

LIFE: While on sabbatical I visited several churches in Montgomery county that had a visible majority of people of color. I noted that early in the service there was a moment of praise and thanksgiving spoken...for the joy of being alive.

I remember one man in particular who stood rather shakily with a cane, though he was fairly young...he stood during the time for prayers...and said that a week ago he had been in the hospital, that he had a life threatening condition and that he had almost died. He gave thanks and praise to God that he was alive that day.

His thanksgiving, his bearing, his voice, held the legacy of his family and his religious roots. It was more than recovering from a medical crisis...it was an awareness that life, each day of life – each day he can chose to come to church, each day he wakes up breathing...is a gift.

In that moment, I realized that I rarely give thanks for being alive. I want to do that this morning...will you join me? Let's say together...."Hallelujah, I'm alive today!" "Hallelujah, you're alive today!"

We who are born into freedom and plenty and privilege tend to take life for granted.

Just as we take our freedom for granted.

LIBERTY: This year, as we consider the gifts of freedom that are celebrated on the Fourth of July, I ask you to also consider the gift of our religious freedom...the particular gift of Unitarian Universalism.

There are three freedom stories at the heart of my sermon this morning...the Garden of Eden story, the Pilgrim/Puritan/Deist founding of our country story, and the ever changing story of Unitarian and Universalism.

This spring a group of our junior high students went on the heritage trip to Boston...UU congregations all over the country send their kids to Boston to learn about the roots of our faith.

They learn that Unitarians played a crucial role in American history. Unitarian ideas influenced the enlightenment thinking of the founders of our nation.

First, let me define Deist- Deists believed in a God that set creation in motion, but then stays uninvolved- a God who does not act in history. This was a radical step away from a strictly Biblical kind of God. Many of our founders were Deists.

Deists or Unitarians all: George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, James Madison, Ben Franklin, Thomas Paine. Jefferson in particular was influenced by the writings and sermons of Unitarian ministers such as Joseph Priestley.

There was a synergy among the scholars of Harvard and the dissenters from the established churches in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Pennsylvania...resulting in the doctrine of separation of church and state and an attitude of tolerance for religious difference among our Nations' leaders.

Just as the Puritans and Pilgrims left the confines of European Kings and Popes seeking a place they could freely practice their faith.

So the dissenters in New England a century or two later came out of the confines of the dry, doctrinal state-mandated churches...and became Unitarians.

## LIBERTY:

Like Eve, they chose the gift and curse of freedom over the comforts and familiarity of Eden. And also like Eve they suffered. Do you remember the story of Mary Dyer from your American history class. Mary Dyer lived from 1611-1660. She came to the colonies as an English Puritan. She became a follower of spiritual teacher, Anne Hutchinson, who was an outspoken supporter of religious tolerance.

Mary was among those who went to London to advocate for a charter of religious liberty for Roger Williams' Rhode Island colony. While in London, she became a Quaker. The Puritans in America persecuted Quakers. Mary Dyer was tried and banished from Boston. But returned and continued to witness to religious liberty. She was tried again and sentenced to be hanged. At the last minute her husband pleaded and won her release.

Again she was banished, and again she returned and was sentenced to be hanged. In 1660, she indeed was martyred along with two Quaker Friends. Today you can see a statue of Mary Dyer on Beacon Hill just up the street from the UUA headquarters.

We, here gathered are inherit our freedom from those martyrs and courageous forebears.

It matters to me that we not take our freedoms for granted...and most especially our religious freedom. It is our faiths' greatest legacy...and to preserve religious inclusion and freedom of conscience is our unique calling.

Ours is the faith of a larger liberty..., In the United States of America no state can require a religious oath, freedom of speech extends to the free expression of beliefs, no state religion can dictate dress codes or prayers in school, or attendance at church.

Our children are not taught creationism in public schools (or are they?) No one will pressure us to baptize our children or eat a communion wafer.

When someone asks me about my religion, I wax eloquent about our freedoms...UU congregations are unique in our religious and spiritual and philosophical mix. We affirm and promote a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We are blessed with freedom of conscience...how wonderful that we do not think or believe alike.

How wonderful is our free faith.

Unitarianism is more than the theological belief that God is One, it is also the Enlightenment principle that reason is at the heart of our faith.

And Universalism is the extension of free thought that led to rejecting the doctrine of salvation of a few and to the belief that all people are worthy of redemption.

Our freedoms matter to me especially this week...This past Tuesday a new child was born into our family. Taiyo Arthur Strauss Vanderpool will someday soon be introduced to the congregation of the Unitarian Church of Baltimore where his parents and sister, Sasha regularly attend.

I am indebted to all the congregations where my children and grandchildren have been accepted and nurtured. My children, when young, went on the Boston trips, they took OWL, they sang in children's choirs...and learned about Emerson and Thoreau and Ceasar Chavez and Paul Robeson, and Jane Addams. They have seen their mother ordained to our ministry.

They have thrived within the embrace of our religious freedom.

They also know that all over the world people still suffer for lack of tolerance of religious difference. They know there are people

in this country who would force their religion on others and into national policy.

LIBERTY: From the abortion debate and encroachment on the right of choice, to challenges to Darwinian science, to prayer breakfasts in the halls of congress, to the fight to keep sex education in the schools, and protections and treatments for those with HIV, and rights for gay, lesbian and transgendered people- we know the work of freedom continues...my children and all of us know that there are those who believe in Satan and sin and the "end times" and still push a hateful Fundamentalist agenda.

My children grew up in the Unitarian Universalist church of Knoxville, Tennessee where, several years ago, congregants were shot and killed on a Sunday morning- Unitarian Universalists killed for their religious views.

We cannot take our freedoms for granted. Let us give thanks for our free faith.

LIFE, LIBERTY...AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS:

I define happiness this morning as that which is Good for All. None are free until all are free. Can we have happiness while others are enslaved, justly imprisoned, tortured, starving?

Those of us born into freedom can become complacent.

Those of us enjoying the fruits of freedom can become too comfortable. At times we are tempted to create our own walled gardens...where there is light and beauty and safety, but little new life. Sometimes we forget what we owe.

There's a poem by Antonio Machado called "The Wind, One Brilliant Day" – it is a conversation between "The Wind" and the "Soul of Man".

*The wind, one brilliant day, called  
to my soul with an odor of jasmine.  
"In return for the odor of my jasmine,  
I'd like all the odor of your roses."  
"I have no roses; all the flowers  
in my garden are dead."  
"Well then, I'll take the withered petals and  
the yellow leaves and the waters of the fountain."  
The wind left. And I wept. And I said to myself:  
"What have you done with the garden  
that was entrusted to you?"*

We must keep alive all the gifts that have been bequeathed to us...the responsible exercise of our freedoms asks something of us...someday we will be asked what we have saved. Perhaps our grandchildren will someday ask us what we did to preserve our religious heritage.

When you are invited into the work of the church, into growing your soul and spirit...you are being invited to keep our precious gift of free faith alive.

When you invite a friend or neighbor to a service or event, you are keeping our faith alive. When we reach out into the larger community, we are sharing our faith.

Each of us have the freedom to choose. We have the freedom to consider what we owe. How will you use the gift of your freedom?

Let us meditate upon this Question/Amen