

Freedom vs Liberty

Many people think the words “freedom” and “liberty” have the same meaning, but in my opinion, they do not. *Freedom* is natural, a quality directly related to all the power we’re born with and mature into. But *Liberty* is a different matter. It’s what’s left of our freedom after we agree to curb some of our power. We may have made that decision for any number of reasons, but most commonly we restrict our freedom because we see that if we exercise it we will get in trouble. We are *free* to do whatever we *can* do, but are at *liberty* to do only what stronger natures than ours permit us to do.

Those last words may seem somewhat restrictive, but freedom consists in just *that*, the *power* to do anything for

which we're willing to accept the consequences. If I choose to purchase an AR-15 and a thousand rounds of ammunition, and then kill as many people as will come in range, no law can deny me that power.

All things possess freedom, not just the living. Rocks, by their nature have the power to resist being crushed, but they do not and cannot *decide* to exercise that freedom. They just naturally resist forces that try to change them. *Living* things, even single-cell organisms, possess the power to choose. Placed on a smooth surface dotted here-and-there by microscopic hot spots, an amoeba as it moves about in search of food, will avoid the uncomfortable heat. That fact has been empirically demonstrated. There's no reason to believe amoebas are

conscious, but there's every reason to believe they possess more *power to choose* than a rock.

Raccoons possess more freedom than amoebas. They have the power to make broader assessments of danger, and in addition they can fight back. Human beings are able to perform many more kinds of actions than amoebas, and to think more things than a raccoon. We absolutely have the freedom to do anything within our power if we are willing to accept the consequences.

And ... *that is why governing human beings is so difficult.*

Governments therefore seek to limit their citizens' freedom, and thereby to *define* their *liberty*. They limit freedom by passing laws and organizing police forces.

Ostensibly they do this for the good of the people. It's clearly good that government seeks to limit our power to commit murder, and that it tells us on which side of the road we're to drive our cars. But since we're free to act foolishly, we're still free to disobey both laws.

Other laws are not as easily recognizable as being good for us. For instance, we must pay taxes. This might be okay if everyone agreed with the things government spends tax monies for, but that's hardly the case. I took a poll, and 100% of the people at my house object to spending 700 billion dollars to maintain a military force. And yet, government compels everyone to pay taxes, just as if we agreed with everything for which the taxes are

spent. We have the freedom to refuse to pay taxes ... but not the liberty.

So liberty is different from freedom. Nevertheless, we see and generally agree that too *much* freedom and too *little* liberty are both bad things. The badness of absolute freedom becomes obvious when we consider that without the ordinance we would be forced to negotiate with the driver of every oncoming vehicle to determine which side of the road to drive on. Conversely, if our freedom were so completely restricted that we are compelled to act as little more than robots ... that seems equally bad.

So government ... that is, *good government* ... consists in the art of balancing freedom and liberty. And that's where reality bares its claws. No government

anywhere has ever created a balance of freedom and liberty that pleases everyone.

I could stop here and invite your opinions about this delicate matter. But I want to talk about an aspect of governing upon which all of us can perhaps agree. I'm suggesting that whatever else government might do, it ought to nurture its citizens' power to *think clearly*. At the very least, people ought to be able to see the difference between freedom and liberty, and to appreciate the difficulty their government faces in trying to strike an acceptable balance. If the power to think clearly and broadly were cultivated in everyone, government's job would be a bit easier and our lives more enjoyable.

But “government” is not a flesh and blood entity possessing feelings and brains. Government is an abstraction that stands for a conglomeration of individual humans who don’t necessarily know they were hired to seek an acceptable balance between freedom and liberty. Their blindness to that fact is easily explained. They are, after all, not very much different from ordinary citizens. They work for a living and will, quite naturally, do anything in their power to make sure the source of their income is not threatened. More to the point, they exercise their freedom in ways to make sure they will be re-elected.

That fact is so well-known it has become a cliché. But the reverse of the cliché reflects an equally disturbing

fact: We citizens appear to believe that it would be a good thing if our representatives always sought to satisfy our personal wishes, implying that every person's wishes are always in line with the good of the nation.

But even we clear-headed Unitarian Universalists are not unanimous in our political wishes. We may in fact dramatically disagree among ourselves about this or that piece of legislation.

But there is something remarkably different about us. We have a tendency to be reasonable people. Not always, I'm sure. I suspect that on some issues we are as closed-minded as the next person, but if we are as level-headed as I think we are, we will be obedient to the will of the majority while nevertheless arguing for our beliefs.

And *that* is the bright side of freedom. Just as we humans possess the power to rebel, we also possess the freedom to be reasonable. No law establishes or grants that power, and no law can ever deny it. As individuals we are free to rebel against the tethers that restrict our freedom ... or to work together to define our liberty.

Another way we can look at this: Every one of us, *individually*, must seek to strike a balance between our personal freedom and our personal liberty. As individuals, we must be self-governing.

Glance for a moment at the seven principles on the front of the order of service. They represent the UU idea of what being reasonable means. Oh we might disagree about the precise wording of the principles – Bonnie tells

me that such a discussion is underway – but regardless of their form, the principles reflect the way we have used our *freedom* to assist us in our role as governors of our selves.

The seven principles are not laws passed to define our liberty. They are lenses that focus our freedom.

Bonnie also pointed out to me that from their order the principles ascend from the personal level to the universal. I never noticed that before. They start with the inherent worth of every individual and ascend to the interdependence of all existence.

Look at the first principle. Some or all of us might conclude that this or that person has not acted in a way we ought to value. In particular cases that might be true, but the point is that we do not disapprove in a knee-jerk

fashion. Rather, we begin our interactions with others from the position that they too possess inherent worth and dignity. It's within that context that we decide on the acceptability of this or that person or action. Starting with that principle honestly in mind, we cannot be faulted for our notice of and opposition to unjust actions.

On a broader level, an axe-grinding lobbyist might argue that some part of the interdependent web of existence ought to be eradicated or exploited to the point of extinction. The same answer applies: In assessing the lobbyist's proposal we begin by assuming the interdependence of everything and only by an exercise of intelligence decide whether to go along. We may for example decide to eradicate smallpox and polio, or to

exploit a certain resource, even though they are integral parts of the web of existence.

We use our minds for the reason we have them.

Because of the nature of what freedom *means*, we understand that we may be mistaken in our decisions. So we don't mean that we're always right. We mean simply that we have thought deeply, and have conscientiously decided. That is how good government is supposed to work, whether personal or collective. There is not nor has there ever been a way to escape from the necessity to think.

The seven principles reflect several other effects of *freedom*. We as UU's have focused our freedom in order to express other vital elements of decency. We have not

only agreed to recognize the worth and dignity of all people. We have also agreed to seek justice, to accept one another as equals, and to achieve as best we can all the other decencies evoked by the principles. We do not do this by law or by any other form of coercion, but only by the power of what we *are*. We absolutely possess the freedom to act in a noble manner.

I understand we're considering changing the first word of the seventh principle from "*Respect*" to "*Reverence*" for the interdependent web of existence. There really is a shade of difference between the words "respect" and "reverence." The latter is a bit more religious-sounding. But the core statement made in the seventh principle is quite clear. We have agreed to guide

our thoughts and actions by the belief that the multitude of objects and minds that appear in the universe interact, consciously or unconsciously, to create reality. Those two words, “reflect” and “reverence,” simply reveal slightly different ways we relate to that core meaning. Some of us may *respect* that belief, others may *revere* it. But the reality is the same. Either singly or as members of this group, every UU, and everyone who is not a UU is an integral part of the interconnected and interdependent web of existence. With the 7th principle we exercise our freedom to affirm that we are conscious of our place in Nature.

As Unitarian Universalists we have recorded the principles we wish to guide our activities in the world.

Extending the implication of the word “reverence,” and becoming a bit more religious than some of us are prone to be ... when the web of existence functions well, we may say that it is infused with love ... and that when it doesn’t, hate has interfered. This may not be a fact, but if it is *we are not free to change it*. The interdependent web obeys two sets of laws, man’s laws and Nature’s. We are free to change the laws we have made, but Mother Nature has not given us the freedom to make hate work as well as love. And she does not negotiate that fact, nor does she compromise.

We either obey her laws, or she kills us.

What could be simpler?