Through A Glass, Darkly

Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society
June 1, 2025

The Rev. Craig M. Nowak

As many of you know prior to coming to Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society I served a decade as minister of Brookfield Unitarian Universalist Church in Brookfield, Massachusetts. When Brookfield Unitarian Universalist Church was gathered in 1717, over 300 years ago, the United states had not yet been founded. There was no Constitution. No Bill of Rights. The town of Brookfield was part of the Province of Massachusetts, a colony of Great Britain. And, in 1717, there was no formally organized Unitarian or Universalist denomination or association. History that reminds me both our nation and our faith emerged from an idea residing within the hearts and minds of men…and women. The idea of freedom.

I say the idea of the freedom because freedom is something that is multidimensional and thus requires thoughtful effort to understand and exercise, lest it become atrophied by extended unreflective utterance.

Indeed, when many present day Americans and even many present day Unitarian Universalists, speak of freedom, we tend to emphasize a single dimension of freedom, "external liberty", that is the ability to go and do and buy and say what we want with little constraint. Yet, as Krista Tippett, host of On Being, a long running radio program and podcast on religion and spirituality, reminds us, "It is easy to forget…how much trial and error went into the creation of American democracy; how much of what Americans now take for granted wasn't fully formed for decades after 1776."

Referencing the work of the late philosopher Jacob Needleman, Tippett notes, “every iconic institution, every political value, had "inward work" of conscience behind it. Every hard-won right had a corresponding responsibility.”

This “inward work” was of great concern to Needleman, who cautioned, “We certainly need external liberty. But without the inner meaning of freedom and liberty, we have to ask, "Well, what is this freedom for?” His is a call, not unlike Philip Appleman’s plea to, “teach the believers [in freedom] how to think.”

In an interview with D. Patrick Miller, Needleman shares a favorite story about Abraham Lincoln which took place when Lincoln was still a lawyer in Springfield. According to Needleman’s retelling of the story,

“Lincoln was representing a client who was fighting the railroad interests. A friend approaching Lincoln’s office saw a man come sailing out of a second-story window, hit the ground, get up, brush himself off, and run away. The friend rushed upstairs to ask Lincoln what had happened.
“I threw him out the window”, Lincoln said.
“Why?” “What did he do?”
“He was a lawyer for the railroad and he asked me to cheat.
He offered me five thousand dollars, but I turned him down.
Then he offered me ten thousand dollars, and I turned him down again.
Finally he offered me fifteen thousand dollars and I threw him out the window.”
The friend asked Lincoln why he chose that point to throw the man out, and not earlier.
“Because, Lincoln answered, “he was getting near my price.”’

This anecdote from the life of one of American's greatest political figures, humorous as it is, nonetheless makes a point about the necessity and effect of the inward work of freedom as a counterweight to external liberty.

Although Lincoln was an ambitious man, he was also a man of character, aware of his limits, including the temptation to sell out if given the chance. Lincoln's life and particularly his presidency illustrates his awareness on some level that external liberty absent the internal work of freedom enslaves us to whims of our ego. Lincoln, being a man of character and a true leader, understood his life to be in service to something greater than himself. And indeed in Lincoln we see a man humbled by power rather than intoxicated by it. A mark of genuine strength and greatness that eludes history's bullies and strongmen.

While we may not be given power akin to that afforded presidents, however worthy of unworthy they may be, each of us do enjoy significant power through the rights afforded us as citizens of a democratic republic. Nonetheless, as Jacob Needleman observed, "A democratic citizen is not a citizen who can do anything he wants; it's a citizen who has an obligation at the same time."

To illustrate his point, Needleman, references freedom of speech and asks, "What is the duty associated with it?" "Well, if you ponder that a little bit", he notes, "you'll come to the conclusion very clearly that the right of free speech implies the duty of allowing others to speak. If I have the right to speak, I have the duty to let you speak." But, Needleman, insists, "That's not so simple. It doesn't mean just to stop my talking and wait till you're finished and then come in and get you. It means I have an obligation inwardly.... Inwardly, I have to work at listening to you. That means I don't have to agree with you, but I have to let your thought into my mind to have a real democratic exchange between us." Needleman calls this, the "Very interesting work of the human being."

Many of the same observations made about the United States this morning can be made about our Unitarian Universalist faith, especially here in the US. Unitarian Universalism did not emerge fully formed. Indeed it is the product of much trial and error and the deeply committed "inward work" of its adherents past and present. People whose names are familiar to many of us, like Channing, Ballou, Emerson, Murray and many more scarcely known. And, like our secular freedom, the freedom of our faith is only truly secured by acceptance of the responsibility that accompanies it. And so, while we prize the external freedom of our faith…and often evangelize - or at least tout it- as THE "selling point" of Unitarian Universalism to others, particularly those disenchanted with their childhood faith or religion in general, we'd do well to give greater attention to the inner meaning of this free faith. To ask, "What is this freedom for?"

This is an especially relevant question given both our right to practice our faith and the right of others to not to be bothered by our or any one else's faith…A right that's at the heart of the 1st Amendment's section on religion in the Bill of Rights, which reads, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; [or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."]

Considering this civil right and its attendant obligations in the context of our long history of forwarding our vision through social justice and reform efforts while showing a decided reluctance to talk about our faith outside of church, we are drawn once again to the question, "What is this freedom for?"

A question without which we condemn ourselves to view and practice our faith and freedom "through a glass, darkly", which is to say partially, without the depth

and clarity of reflection and understanding it is due and is necessary that it may fulfill its more noble promise.

Likewise a nation that questions not the purpose of its freedom risks, as Frederick Douglass observed, “the cause of liberty [may be] being stabbed by those [the men] who glory in the deeds of its [your] ancestors [fathers].”
The very questions Needleman proposed Americans devote regular reflection to concerning this nation and the idea of freedom are equally applicable to our faith. These include, not just, What is our freedom for? But…

What are we defending?
and
What are we trying to give the world?

Questions he says lead us to then ask,
What is humanity for?
What is noble within us?
and
How is our nobility best nurtured and defended?

Questions that can also deepen our understanding, appreciation, and promotion of all the rights enumerated in our story of all ages, “We All Born Free” which was based on The Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Inherent to this questioning applied to our faith is the intention to immerse ourselves in and reaffirm the myth of our faith. The deeper story of what it’s about, that current ever flowing beneath the historical record and influenced by our attention, fidelity, and resistance to it over time.

We live in a country and practice a faith rooted in the idea of freedom, which is beyond the exercise of personal will. One, finds expression of this idea in the founding documents of this nation and further articulation in the Bill of Rights. The other, our faith, finds expression of this idea in our shared values and further articulation in our association and congregational covenants.

We have the freedom, and a right, afforded us by the laws of this land and the values of our faith, that historically speaking most people before us did not enjoy… the right to practice our own religion, which is to say, to freely and responsibly search for truth and meaning. And so I invite you to take with you the question, “What is this freedom for?” and to hold it ever close to your heart living within this nation born of a now imperiled idea of freedom and living into this free faith.

May it be so.

Amen and Blessed Be