

**"THE LIMITS OF FREEDOM"**  
**A sermon by Rev. Roger Bertschausen**  
**Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**  
**Appleton, Wisconsin**  
[www.fvuuf.org](http://www.fvuuf.org)

**April 5-6, 2014**

Call to Gather

*In a piece about the Jewish Passover tradition, The Rev. Jane Rzepka, the emeritus minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Larger Fellowship, writes:*

If we (Unitarian Universalists) were forced to leave our homes as a group and head for a promised land, what common practices would we take along?

I could make a very long list, but I'll name just six examples.

- If we believe in a god at all, it's a benevolent one, not a frightening or punishing god. That's something Unitarian Universalists carry with us on our journeys.
- We believe in the humanity of Jesus, whom we view as a wise and wonderful teacher, but not a god. That's something Unitarian Universalists carry with us.
- We reject the doctrine of innate depravity. We do not believe in original sin; that becomes crystal clear when you listen to the words of our child dedications. We carry the theology of potential goodness with us.
- We believe in free will, not predestination. Events are not preordained, nor "meant to be." We have the power to act in the world. We carry that free will with us as Unitarian Universalists.
- We believe in freedom of conscience, that creeds do not serve us well. We carry that freedom of conscience with us.
- And we believe in the use of reason as part of determining personal religious truth. We carry that use of reason with us.

May we carry (these things) with us, that they may offer us solace when we need it, inspiration when the world seems dull, challenge when we are lulled into complacency, and the seeds of love and friendship when we feel alone in the world.<sup>1</sup>

Sermon

In the early and mid-1990s, I earned a reputation in the Unitarian Universalist Association as one of the most outspoken proponents of individual freedom. I won an award for a sermon on the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.questformeaning.org/page/reflecting/carrying-the-language-of-freedom>.

subject and preached the sermon at a General Assembly, the annual gathering of American Unitarian Universalists. I served as President of Unitarian Universalists for Freedom of Conscience. Most notably, I engaged in a brief but intense debate about the limits of freedom with another minister in a widely read monthly publication for Unitarian Universalist ministers. When I googled myself shortly after Google was invented, another colleague's sermon attacking me popped up. Basically he accused me of making a false idol of freedom. How can this be? I wondered. Isn't the freedom to construct one's own beliefs the hallmark of our creed-less tradition?

In recent years I've hinted at something that I want to make explicit today: I was wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong! Today I'm coming clean about this.

At its heart, my mistake came from a profound misunderstanding of freedom. I confused freedom with individual license. I believed that because of the primacy of individual freedom of conscience, each Unitarian Universalist has the categorical right to come to his or her personal beliefs and understanding of the world. Really? Does this mean that I have the right as a Unitarian Universalist to believe in white supremacy? Do I have a right as a UU to believe that I have no responsibility to care for those who are suffering, impoverished, or discriminated against? Do I have a right as a UU to believe something that is completely contrary to the historical tradition of our faith—say, that it's really the afterlife and not life in the here and now of this world that truly counts?

In the 1990s, I would have answered yes to these questions. Okay, maybe not that it's okay to be a white supremacist Unitarian Universalist. I acknowledged that there is some outer limit of what's acceptable as a Unitarian Universalist, but I declared that boundary to be very, very far out—so far out as to be almost meaningless. Basically, aside from that very rare kind of exception, I would have subscribed to the simple understanding of Unitarian Universalism articulated by many of Unitarian Universalists in recent years (including here): In our faith, you can believe anything you want. Ours is pretty much an "anything goes" faith.

What I was advocating was license, not true freedom. My colleague Michael Schuler from First Unitarian Society in Madison defines license as tolerating no restriction. It demands absolute autonomy. License, according to Schuler, says that "no matter that my belief is ill-founded, irrational, and pernicious, it is my categorical right to claim it."<sup>2</sup>

More than anything else, my mistaken understanding of freedom opens the door for ours to be a faith of narcissism. It's all about you. It's all about what you want to believe, what works for you. Reason, critical thinking, the common good: don't worry about these things! As long as what you believe makes sense to you—more to the point: is good for you—well, then everything's cool.<sup>3</sup>

What I would say now is that true freedom has constraints. Balance is inherent to freedom. Of course freedom includes individual autonomy, but this individual autonomy is not an absolute. It's not a categorical right. Individual autonomy must be *balanced* by the common good. And in

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.clfuu.org/read-mobile/quest/freedom/freedom-is-a-funny-word/>.

<sup>3</sup> <http://peterboullata.com/2011/12/29/the-liberal-church-finding-its-mission-its-not-about-you/>.

the context of our faith, individual autonomy must also be balanced by the tradition of our faith. This isn't to say that tradition trumps individual autonomy—it doesn't—but it's something to consider, to balance.

With the Supreme Court's *McCutcheon* decision this week, I couldn't help but think about freedom being a balancing act between personal autonomy and the common good. The *McCutcheon* decision struck down any limit on the total an individual can contribute to candidates in an election cycle. If freedom only means individual autonomy—or license—then the Supreme Court majority absolutely came to the right conclusion. Giving money to candidates you endorse is an expression of free speech. Placing a limit on what you can give circumscribes this right.

What the Supreme Court majority failed to do is balance individual autonomy with the common good. Unlimited money flooding our political system does tremendous harm to the common good. It puts enormous power into the hands of a few super-wealthy people who can now arguably buy elections and elected leaders. In recent days, Americans have been using "oligarchy" in disparaging ways to describe the current political system in Russia, where Vladimir Putin and a cadre of super-wealthy business leaders are calling the shots (oh, and, by the way, squelching individual autonomy). My dictionary defines oligarchy as "a form of government in which all power is vested in a few persons or in a dominant class or clique; government by the few." That is exactly the kind of government the Supreme Court majority made more likely with the *McCutcheon* ruling (as well as the earlier *Citizen's United* ruling). With these rulings, the Koch brothers or George Soros have way more of a say in who gets elected and the legislation and regulations they pass than you or me. Throwing up our hands and saying "What's the use in being involved?" further propels us down the road of low investment in the process by those of us who are not super rich people, and declining election turnout. I don't see any way you can argue that these Supreme Court decisions enhance the common good.

And let's not forget that the common good is not some concept foreign to our nation's founding principles. The concept of the common good was very much a part of the founding principles, even though it was neither completely embraced nor understood by all the founders. (Exhibit A: the enshrinement of slavery in the Constitution.)

How do we balance individual autonomy and the common good? This is not an easy question to answer. Tension between the two is implicitly part of the equation of freedom. We can err too far in one direction or the other. The *Citizens United* and the *McCutcheon* decisions are examples of erring too much on the side of individual autonomy.

In the *McCutcheon* majority opinion, Chief Justice John Roberts wrote, "If the First Amendment protects flag burning, funeral protests and Nazi parades — despite the profound offense such spectacles cause — it surely protects political campaign speech despite popular opposition."<sup>4</sup> I would argue that flag burning, funeral protests—even those horrible protests by the recently deceased Fred Phelps' "church"—and Nazi parades are far LESS injurious to the common good than flooding our political system with unregulated money. Phelps' picketing Matthew Shepherd's funeral with incredibly offensive signs was hurtful and outrageous, but it didn't

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/03/us/politics/supreme-court-ruling-on-campaign-contributions.html>.

threaten the core of our democracy. So I would allow flag burning, funeral protests (from a respectful distance) and Nazi parades. But I would not allow unlimited campaign contributions. To me allowing the former and not allowing the latter stakes out a good balance point between individual autonomy and the common good.

This same tension between individual autonomy and the common good plays out in our Unitarian Universalist congregations, too. My colleague Peter Boullata wrote in a blog a few years ago:

There is a contradiction inherent in liberal religion. We are free, autonomous individuals in community with one another. Tension exists between freedom and connection, autonomy and community. There is no getting around it. Our calling is to live gracefully in that tension, holding them with equanimity, without being weighted as we are now toward individual freedom and autonomy. Our capacity for being a transformative presence in the world is diminished when we neglect the communal, connected, covenanted aspect of our life together and when we focus primarily on the individual and their freedom. Our institutions suffer.<sup>5</sup>

Here at our Fellowship, we uphold this idea of balancing individual autonomy and the common good in our "Principles for a Healthy Congregation."<sup>6</sup> This is the statement our Fellowship adopted that describes how we aspire to interact with one another in our spiritual community. One of the principles lifted up in this statement says that we strive to "keep our individual needs in balance with the health and vitality of the community as a whole." This explicitly says that we aspire to find that balance point between individual autonomy and the well-being of the whole. This statement lifts up that none of us has a categorical or absolute right to believe, say, or do whatever we want here. If what we believe, say, or do causes significant harm to the common good of the Fellowship, then it's not allowed. "Anything goes" is NOT the spirit of this Fellowship. None of us has the categorical right to do something harmful to others because well, it's what we feel like doing. Balancing our individual needs with the health and vitality of the community as a whole: *this* is the spirit of the Fellowship.

I also have come to believe that in the context of this spiritual community, we need to balance the tradition of our faith with our individual autonomy. We are not completely bound by tradition--to say we're bound by tradition would actually be contrary to our tradition because Unitarianism and Universalism have never lifted up the binding nature of tradition. But we have to *take into account* our tradition. If we believe that it's the afterlife that matters and not this world; if we say that some people are saved and others are condemned to hell—either in this life or the next; if our actions show complete disregard for the well-being of the earth: these things are so contrary to our tradition that I believe they are out of bounds here. It's not to say you can't believe or say or do these things as a human being. You can. But in my view, saying or believing or doing these things is fundamentally incompatible with being a Unitarian Universalist.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://peterboullata.com/2011/12/29/the-liberal-church-finding-its-mission-its-not-about-you/>.

<sup>6</sup> [http://fvuuf.org/wp-content/uploads/images/stories/principles\\_for\\_a\\_hc/principles\\_for\\_a\\_healthy\\_congregation.pdf](http://fvuuf.org/wp-content/uploads/images/stories/principles_for_a_hc/principles_for_a_healthy_congregation.pdf).

I want to suggest one additional question to ponder as we contemplate the idea of freedom this month: What are you going to do with the precious gift of the freedom you have been given? What are you going to use it for? If your answer is all or mostly about what benefits you, then I want to challenge you to balance your focus on self with a focus on the common good. As Unitarian Universalism skewed toward individual autonomy and away from the common good in the twentieth century, our faith became increasingly characterized by narcissism. Peter Boullata writes in the blog I quoted earlier that we managed to institutionalize narcissism--and that's a pretty extraordinary accomplishment. And it's not a good accomplishment! This skewing reached its zenith in a marketing campaign of the Unitarian Universalist Association in the 1990s: Unitarian Universalism is "the religion that puts its faith in you," the ad proclaimed. Maybe a more apt motto would have been: "Unitarian Universalism--putting the "I" back in religion." Is that really what our faith is all about? I hope not!

This impacts our understanding of the minister's role in a congregation. Peter Boullata tells the story of a workshop for a congregation and its newly settled minister. The facilitator of the workshop asked the members of the congregation, "What is the minister's primary job?" Boullata writes:

Somebody answered, "To make us happy." "To serve our needs," somebody else chimed. The (facilitator) replied, "Guess what? The minister's job is not to make you happy. The minister's job is to serve the mission of the church." There was a sharp intake of breath in the room. That moment was such a shock of recognition that the people who were there remember it still. *It's not all about me. It's not all about my needs.*<sup>7</sup>

We would do well to consider this over the next six weeks as we collectively contemplate whether to call Leah Hart-Landsberg as our Associate Minister. The question before each one of us is not whether Leah makes me individually happy or whether Leah serves my individual needs, but whether she serves the mission of the Fellowship.

I'll conclude by talking about the Fellowship's mission: welcoming everyone, growing in mind and spirit, and leading in social justice. My colleague Leah has helped me understand these three legs of our mission as thoroughly interrelated. Welcoming newcomers into the Fellowship helps us grow in mind and spirit. Growing in mind and spirit helps us become more welcoming. The radical inclusion of truly welcoming others helps us be leaders in social justice in our increasingly diverse and multicultural community. So does growing in mind and spirit. Leading in social justice helps us grow in mind and spirit. It's all connected. It's all mutually reinforcing.

And our mission isn't all about meeting our individual needs. It's not all about me or you as an individual. Welcoming everyone obviously calls us beyond our individual needs. This piece of our mission has beckoned us forward to change the Fellowship so it can be more welcoming—even though we may love the Fellowship *exactly* as it is at the moment. Growing in mind and spirit isn't just about me or you as an individual growing; it's also about you and me helping each other grow. And leading in social justice isn't about patting ourselves on the back or marketing

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<sup>7</sup> <http://peterboullata.com/2011/12/29/the-liberal-church-finding-its-mission-its-not-about-you/>.

the Fellowship. It's about doing our part—fulfilling our responsibility as a progressive Fox Valley congregation—to help build a better world.

May we embrace the tension implicit in freedom. May we balance our individual autonomy and needs with the health and vitality of the community as a whole. May we live gracefully and creatively in the tension.

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