

Is Freedom Really Just Another Word for Nothing Left to Lose?
Sunday April 12, 2015

Last Sunday after our Easter celebration here, Chuck, the boys, and I went to some friends' home for their Passover celebration. Though I'd celebrated Passover in other UU churches and with the Jewish students at Wellesley, I'd never been to a home seder before. Have any of you?

Every year at Passover, Jews remember the time when they were slaves in Egypt over 3,000 years ago and the events which led them to freedom. At seders in homes over the seven or eight nights of the festival, the story is re-told through words, songs, ritual, and food. The word seder means "order" and there is an order to the event: you bless wine, you wash hands, you tell the story, you eat matzah and other symbolic foods, and you remember the ways slavery is still a reality in our lives and in our world and recommit yourself to the ways of freedom. But each family does it differently. For instance, instead of reading from the book of Exodus the story of the Jews' enslavement, the development of Moses as a leader, his confrontation with the Pharaoh, and the flight of the Jews from Egypt, our friends had the guests become actors in a play telling the story. And while we sang traditional songs like "Dayenu," a song of gratitude which enumerates all the gifts Yahweh gave the people, in which each action is blessed as "dayenu" or "sufficient", we also channeled our inner Ethel Mermans by singing There's No Seder Like our Seder and Take Us Out of Egypt.

We had fun, but we didn't lose the seriousness of the event. At one point, as we were considering what it means to be a slave, our hosts asked the guests to reflect on ways we are held down in our own lives and in the world. One guest talked about being a slave to her job. Another said she was a slave to her cell phone. Another shared grief at the situation of the Palestinians. Then we were invited to imagine what we would need to take with us, metaphorically, to make the journey from slavery to freedom. Three strengths were named: a vision of a freed life, courage to set out towards that vision, and companions for the journey.

Vision, courage, and companions: whether Passover is part of our tradition or not, those are components of all our stories. As the seder reminds us every year, slavery is part of all our lives. In our country we tend to think of slavery in terms of the African people who were captured, shipped half-way around the world, and forced into brutal servitude. And that kind of slavery still exists. But there are many forms of slavery. The story told around the Passover tables begins 400 years before Moses, when Joseph was an advisor to the Pharaoh. You may remember the story: one night the Pharaoh dreamed of seven fat cows coming out of the Nile and then seven emaciated cows following and swallowing them; the next night he dreamed of seven strong healthy heads of grain growing on a single stalk and then seven more heads sprouted, but these were thin and scorched, and they swallowed up the healthy heads. When the Pharaoh looked for someone who could interpret the dreams, his chief steward brought him Joseph who explained that the dreams

foretold seven years of fat harvests which would be followed by seven years of famine. Impressed, the Pharaoh appointed Joseph to administer the land during the years of good harvest to mitigate the effects of the coming famine. During those famine years, Joseph reunited with his father and brothers and they and their families moved to Egypt. So the Hebrew people had come to Egypt as part of the family of Pharaoh's right hand man. It was only over many years as their influence waned and the Egyptians felt threatened by their growing numbers that they became enslaved people. They were like the proverbial frog sitting in a pot of slowly heating water – not noticing until too late.

So do we sometimes become enslaved so slowly that we don't notice until we are trapped. In a relationship, in a job, in the ways we look for relief from stress, patterns evolve slowly, so that by the time we realize that we are being abused, or taken advantage of, or using alcohol, drugs, food, or screens to dull our pain, we don't know how we can change. Though sometimes we are dragged into our slavery – the circumstances of our birth or the consequences of illness or accident, war or disaster can trap us.

However we have entered into bondage, it feels that there is no way out, no way to move into fullness of life. And there isn't until we have a vision of what that life might look like. Janis Joplin sang, "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose," but I would say that freedom comes after you realize that there's nothing left to lose. In AA terms, it's only after you hit bottom that you can summon the courage to change your life. Spiritually, as Rachel Barenblatt describes it, you realize that you are ready to go through the birth canal into new life. But change can be painful and frightening, and even hitting bottom can just lead to despair if you don't have a vision of what life could be like if you could free yourself. For how can you move into new life if you don't believe that there is something beyond your prison? And how can you endure the process of moving from slavery to freedom without a vision of your destination? The Israelites spent 40 years wandering in the desert; a midrash on that story says it wasn't that they were lost or that Moses refused to ask for directions, but that it took that time for them psychologically and spiritually to change their understanding of themselves to one which would allow them truly to live in freedom. In the early years they often would demand that Moses return them to Egypt because they felt that though they were slaves, life was safer than in the desert. It was only the strength of the community and the vision and courage of their leaders Moses, Miriam, and Aaron which kept them slogging on to the Promised Land.

So it is the community which helps us to cast the vision and find the courage to live into it. At the seder we attended, though we couldn't help the situation in the Middle East, we did try to help the guests enslaved by a job and by a phone to imagine what life might be like if they could take steps to finding a new job or shutting down the phone. We listened to their fears and hopes and strategized about small steps they could take toward change – talking to a supervisor about working conditions, shutting down the phone for a weekly Sabbath. I don't know

what they will do, but each left the seder feeling more hopeful that, as the seder ritual proclaims, “this year we are slaves; next year we will be free people”.

We can move toward that freedom in small steps as well as in leaps. It may involve cutting threads which hold us down as well as breaking chains. Perhaps your step toward freedom involves finding the courage to speak directly to someone who has done something you don’t like or who you feel has slighted you instead of your usual pattern of remaining silent or complaining to others who may sympathize but can’t help. Perhaps your step toward freedom involves saying no to another obligation which doesn’t nourish you. Perhaps your step toward freedom involves letting yourself fail and realizing that the world still goes on. Perhaps your step toward freedom involves taking 15 minutes each day to meditate, reflect, keep silence, and allow yourself to remember who you really are. We all are held captive in different ways, and what feels like slavery to one may not feel the same to another. In supporting one another as a church community, as companions on the long journey to fullness of life, we are here to help one another discern what that means to each of us and then to take the risks necessary to get there. Speaking your mind directly may feel natural to one person; to another it may feel like a huge risk. Companions don’t judge the conditions of slavery; they merely offer the encouragement to step towards freedom. We are here to be such companions to one another.

As Rachel Barenblatt wrote, “Infinity is calling us forth.” But our time to answer that call is finite. Let us not spend more time held captive by our fears, by our feelings of unworthiness, by the weight of others’ unfitting expectations. Let us together, “Wear God like a cloak and stride forth with confidence,” trusting that the Love we carry within and among us will sustain us.

- Pamela M. Barz

