

Our Free Church

The day after the storm dawned clear. A sparkling winter wonderland, the sky bright blue. A pair of woodpeckers strangely close to the kitchen window—the birch had fallen during the storm, just missing the house.

The beauty of the morning filled me with a sense of expansiveness. Freedom in the moment: freedom from cares and chores, errands and calls. And a sense of spaciousness, too: a reminder to enjoy my cherished correspondence with a trio of college friends, perhaps pick up a book, take time to just be.

A short-lived moment, however! I'd taken a chair out onto the deck and was happily soaking up the March sun until it became clear that the pleasant dripping sounds of snow melting off the roof was in fact an over-flowing gutter. Up on the ladder, a few fistfuls of leaves did the trick, and fast-moving waves of dammed up water splashed toward the downspout. With freedom on my mind, that's what it looked like—obstacles out of the way and swift steady flow re-established.

That morning, the theme of possibility and setting things aright continued. We cleared away the fallen tree, taking care of business. Along with satisfaction came exhilaration at moving forward and on to the next good thing. In taking action, a sense of freedom.

Freedom has many faces. Our faith tradition, Unitarian Universalism, is steeped in freedom. The word “free” and the theme of freedom appear throughout our history: freedom of belief, freedom in church governance, freedom of expression, freedom of the pulpit, to name a few.

4th century theologians sought freedom from doctrine, questioning original sin and the divinity of Jesus. Free-thinkers in the Renaissance continued the conversation, challenging the Trinity. For a shining moment in the 1500s, a Unitarian king in Transylvania made freedom of religion the law of the land. The first churches of the Massachusetts Bay Colony stood free of religious hierarchy, freedom to govern themselves a founding principle. Our religious ancestors have debated freedom of will—are humans born sinful or neutral or good? Do we have free will to change, to better ourselves?

In the mid-1800s, New England Unitarians took the notion of freedom further, opening up the idea of God and finding God - mystery - the holy - not in doctrines and long, dry church services but outside in rocks, trees and creatures, everywhere. Talk about freedom!

In UU history (and we'll have a UU101 course in the spring), the concept of “a free church” turns up frequently. It appears throughout Rev. Mark Harris's reference book, *The A to Z of Unitarian Universalism*.¹ In the 1860s a group of Massachusetts ministers formed The Free Religious Association, their goal to advance “complete spiritual freedom from irrational doctrines and traditional authorities.” The Free Religious Association lasted only two decades—ironically, their insistence on freedom was problematic. They were unable, Harris reports, to

¹ Mark Harris, *The A to Z of Unitarian Universalism*. Scarecrow Press, 2009. The following quotes on pp. 193-198.

“speak as a united front...because members were only responsible for their own opinions.” Even so, he writes, the Free Religious Association “ had a profound influence upon transforming Unitarianism into a broader more universal and humanistic faith.”

The term “free church” emerged again in the 1930s when the president of the American Unitarian Association proposed a Free Church Fellowship, in which all liberal Protestants would exist—this was also short-lived, also thought influential in the eventual merger of Unitarianism and Universalism in 1966.

We just heard James Luther Adam’s well-known “I Call That Church Free.”² To this day Adams is revered as the single most influential Unitarian Universalist of our times.³ Adams warned against our denomination’s being too free, too vague in belief. Scholar, activist and theist during WWII and after, when humanism was on the rise, Adams believed in naming more about this sparkling free faith. He called “that church free” which covenants with the unknowable, brings individuals into right relationship, and, bursting through rigid tradition, is new and alive. Most famously, calling on the language of Christian scripture, Adams saw the goal of “that free church” as not only “the priesthood of all”—where we care for and heal one other—but also “the prophethood” of all—each of us a prophet, a teacher, one who sees what needs to be done and acts on it. Adams believed that liberal religion needed more grit, more principle in challenging times.⁴

Freedom has drawn many of us here. We’re not, though, as some say, a church where you can believe and do whatever you want. This faith calls us to a higher plane. Here, we live in covenant ...agreement...about how to be in community with one another. You can read our covenant on the proclamation in the front hall downstairs. Every congregation, when it formally joins the Unitarian Universalist Association, *covenants* not only to “affirm and promote” our seven principles (OOS), but, as the proclamation reads: “As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising one another our mutual trust and support.”⁵ UU congregations exercise our freedoms within this framework of this covenant.

Liberal activist, prolific author and minister in the 1940s of All Souls Church in Washington, A. Powell Davies writes of this “free church.” Some abbreviated excerpts from a sermon:⁶

We are the consummation of thousands of years of religious history....

Yet in this world of blood and sorrow it is...hardly worth mentioning, unless in addition we are the beginning of something, unless our religion is new – ... the religion that has been buried over and over again in creeds and rituals... yet has always come to life....

² See p. 5.

³ <http://uudb.org/articles/jameslutheradams.html>

⁴ James Luther Adams, “I Call That Church Free,” #591 in the *Singing the Living Tradition* hymnal.

⁵ <https://www.uua.org/safe/handbook/leadership/165735.shtml>

⁶ A. Powell Davies, “Is This Your Religion?” *Without Apology: Collected Meditations on Liberal Religion*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 1998.

The religion that says freedom! – freedom from ignorance and false belief; freedom from spurious claims and bitter prejudices; freedom to seek the truth, both old and new, and freedom to follow it; freedom from the hate and greed that divide humankind and spill the blood of every generation; freedom for honest thought; freedom for equal justice; freedom to seek the true, the good and the beautiful....

The religion that says humankind is not divided – except by ignorance and prejudice and hate; the religion that sees humankind as naturally one and waiting to be spiritually united; the religion that proclaims an end to all exclusions – and declares a brotherhood and sisterhood unbounded! The religion that knows that we shall never find the fullness of the wonder and the glory of life until we are ready to share it, that we shall never have hearts big enough for...*love*...until we have made them big enough for the...*love* of one another.

As you have listened to me, have you thought perchance that this is your religion? If you have, do not congratulate yourself. Stop long enough to recollect the miseries of the world you live in: the fearful cruelties, the enmities, the hate, the bitter prejudices, the need of such a world for such a faith. And if you still can say that this of which I have spoken is your religion, then ask yourself this question: What are you doing with it?

This is the question. What are we doing with the freedoms of “this free church”? How will we live them here at UUFES? How do we want to live our freedoms into the future?

I often consult our website to read again the UUFES *mission*, our Fellowship’s stated reason to exist. Reading the UUFES mission last week, her *vision* also caught my eye. “Our vision,” it reads, “is that through action, we ourselves will become better people and our world a more peaceful place.” Through action.

Do you see the connection between action and the freedoms our religious ancestors worked and fought for? With freedom comes a choice about how we take action:

- How with freedom of belief, we claim our own understandings.
- How with free will, we are empowered to live a life of purpose.
- How, with freedom of governance, we lead to serve the common good.
- How, free of the doctrine of original sin, we live into our ancestors’ legacy of original blessing– a precious freedom, to live knowing you’re good and loved just as you are.
- How, with free speech, we speak. Does having something to say mean that we say it? Of course not. That’s why we have filters. I see free speech in our faith community as a free and responsible exchange of ideas and opinions. Members of our board and Committee on Ministry spoke recently with UUA staffer Joe Sullivan. About free speech in our congregations he said, “That’s just bad religion. If we can say we can do whatever we want, that’s a faith I don’t want to belong to.”⁷

⁷ Joe Sullivan (staff member, UUA New England Region), 1/23/18 teleconference.

With freedom comes responsibility: to be clear in our values, mindful of our larger purpose, our eyes on the prize of living in covenant with one another.

How can we exercise freedom responsibly *and* enjoy the gift of its spaciousness?

In our free country and our free faith, who doesn't long to feel free? Beloved teacher and Buddhist nun, Pema Chodron, addresses the desire to be free in her book *Taking the Leap: Freeing Ourselves from Old Habits and Fears*. She reminds us that we can find freedom anytime we want to by simply pausing. Taking a break from what we're doing or thinking, for a breath or two. Let's do that right now—pause and shake off your thoughts. Breathe in the morning...freedom.

Chodron writes that when we pause like this—dropping the narrative of our story, our opinions, our preoccupations—we allow ourselves to connect with our natural intelligence, our natural warmth and our natural spaciousness or openness.⁸ In this open state lies freedom from what constrains us. Chodron advises pausing often. Like a muscle that strengthens with use, she says, the more we consciously pause, the more fully and mindfully we live.

Let us be grateful for our freedoms and mindful in how we exercise them. We clear a blocked gutter to restore the free flow of water—now it functions as it was designed to do. When we orient ourselves toward purpose and clear out what stands in our way, we too return to the flow: expansive, spacious, exercising our God-given creativity and wisdom, moving forward with momentum and purpose. This is what we are here to do.

May it be so.

⁸ Pema Chodron, *Taking the Leap: Freeing Ourselves from Old Habits and Fears*. Shambala Press, Chapter 1.

READING: "I Call That Church Free" by Rev. James Luther Adams

I call that church free which enters into covenant with the ultimate source of existence, that sustaining and transforming power not made with human hands.

It binds together families and generations, protecting against the idolatry of any human claim to absolute truth or authority.

This covenant is the charter and responsibility and joy of worship in the face of death as well as life.

I call that church free which brings individuals into a caring, trusting fellowship, that protects and nourishes their integrity and spiritual freedom; that yearns to belong to the church universal;

It is open to insight and conscience from every source; it bursts through rigid tradition, giving rise to new and living language, to new and broader fellowship.

It is a pilgrim church, a servant church, on an adventure of the spirit.

The goal is the prophethood and priesthood of all believers, the one for the liberty of prophesying, the other for the ministry of healing.

It aims to find unity in diversity under the promptings of the spirit "that bloweth where it listeth...and maketh all things new."