

Stewardship of Our Freedom  
October 31, 2010 – Stewardship Sunday  
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Being good stewards of our time, talent, and treasure begins with being good stewards of our freedom. What do we do with all of our freedom? Freedom is like the open space of our lives which we are allowed to fill with whatever we want.

Commercial about Sarah Palin's new TV show. "I rather be out here being free!"

It seems like there is a connection in our spirits between wide open physical spaces and our own feeling of being free. Expansive views from high places and views of the ocean. I can go to the ocean and stare at it for hours. I feel small, connected to the larger world, and free.

If we think of freedom as open space then there is open space on several levels. On the most basic human level we are radically free. According to existential philosophy we stand alone and isolated. Each of us have been thrown into an existence without meaning and purpose. Our freedom is so profound and scary that our freedom is directly connected to our responsibility to hammer out the meaning and purpose of our own lives. Such meaning and purpose does not come from outside of us. It comes from our ability to create and apply meaning to what goes on inside of us and to the events around us. We are surrounded by vast open space. Open space above us. Open space on each side of us and open space under our feet. We are free falling in freedom. This is the scary part that can lead us into despair. To avoid the despair of the human condition we create strategies to avoid our freedom and our responsibility.

Walter Kaufman wrote a book titled Without Guilt and Justice: From Decidophobia to Autonomy. In this book he wrote about all the ways we avoid making crucial decisions about the direction and purpose of our lives. We can runaway through addictions, education, marriage, religion, God and Country, on and on. All of the things we value as a society are held suspect as potential strategies to avoid being free and responsible.

It was in a summer class we read this book. All of us were sitting on the ground under this huge tree discussing this book. One of my classmates was a young woman who had just recently married and she was driving about 40 miles back and forth from Paducah, KY. Like Buddha finding enlightenment under the tree it hit her. She was kind of staring off. She was there and not there at the same time and she said, "You mean I don't really have to go home?"

In this particular instance she realized that she was living in the radical and scary open space of freedom and she really had the freedom to make a decision. Too often we cheat ourselves of an authentic life because we either believe we do not have the freedom or we are afraid to exercise our freedom. That woman went home but going home was never the same again after that realization.

This is how free we are and we have this open space on many levels. Political freedom is about the open space of our lives within a political structure. A free society means we can write, speak, assemble, practice religion, bear arms, and travel as our mature conscience leads us without hindrance or oppression from the government or other power groups.

Even in the most oppressive political systems we are free. I know this goes against our nationalism and patriotic grain but it is a truth that goes deeper than our identity as a citizen. It is an ontological statement, that is, a statement of what it means to be human in the most profound sense. A political oppression is horrible and great violence has come to many people in the name of an ideology promoted by a nation state. The twentieth century is enough evidence of that reality,, and yet, it is in the most organized state sponsored horror that Victor Frankel writes about the meaning of life. In reflecting on his thin thread of a life in a Nazi work camp he proclaims that even though there could be no greater example of political tyranny, the stripping away of freedom, and the stomping on human dignity, there was a place inside himself that they could not touch. A piece of his humanity remained free.

Is this what happens to children who are abused? Is this how slaves in the South kept their dignity alive, their communities intact, and their hope eternal? Is this an option for any person being oppressed and abused? A resolve to keep a part of themselves untouched and untouchable; free. The Color Purple/Infidel?

Again, I ask you to think as freedom as the open spaces of our lives. Moral freedom is again the open space of our lives to behave and act as a mature conscience leads us. Please note that I have qualified our radical freedom with the Phrase “as our mature conscience leads us”. This means what the Word About Life says, “Everything is permissible but not everything is beneficial” and as the story unfolds and love expresses and presses itself on the shaping of our conscience, we will put restraints on our freedom for the sake of love for another.

Some people may run around their house naked as an expression of freedom. Some may spend every penny in between every paycheck as an expression of freedom. Some may ride their motorcycle without a helmet as an expression of freedom. Others may take drugs, have multiple affairs, or drop out of society and be homeless as expressions of their radical freedom. And yet, a mature conscience is able to observe, judge, weigh up, decide, and act fully aware of the responsibilities being dodged and the wrecked lives left in the wake of such decisions.

Edwin Friedman, rabbi and family therapist, suggests that emotional and spiritual mature people do not act as a Savior for others, nor do they look for someone else to act as a Savior for them. Emotional and spiritual maturity is taking responsibility for your well being and for the destiny of your life.

This is your life and there is no other.

This is your world and there is no other.

It is our responsibility to hammer out the meaning of our lives.

Our state of human being is a state of living in life's wide open spaces without a net but it is also true that we do not live in a vacuum or isolated bubbles. We live with the rest of humanity. We live in proximity of others, the rest of humanity, who are our neighbors. We live in open space but we share this space with others and we share it on a beautiful and limited planet.

Think about our way of being human as a bank account at the Freedom Bank of Humanity. We can make withdrawals and deposits. We can make withdrawals of freedom and deposits of responsibility. In too many arenas we as a species have made too many withdrawals of freedom and not enough deposits of responsibility. Does this characterize our current economic situation, our environmental challenges, and the teetering of our social institutions such as education; too many withdrawals for the individual and not enough deposits for our communal life; our shared life?

Freedom gives us a flurry of choices which on the surface sounds great but is really meaningless chaos without decision, commitment, and responsibility. Our freedom is radical but it is not absolute. This is where true freedom is found. It is found in our free decision to love and honor each other and this is also where we discover the greatest meaning for our lives. It is not found in the wide open spaces of Alaska but in the mutual shared spaces of our hearts and minds.

So, I end as I began. What do we do with all of our freedom? Freedom is like the open space of our lives which we are allowed to fill with whatever we want.