

Williamsburg Unitarian Universalists

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“Truth and Freedom at the Heart of Our Religious Lives”

Story: Mum Bett and the Sheffield Resolves

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Mum Bett and the Sheffield Resolves

Where I come from in Western Massachusetts – the Berkshires – Mum Bett is famous, a celebrated figure. School children write essays about her and visit places where she lived and is buried. You've probably never heard of her, but Mum Bett is an important figure in our history. If you go to the Stockbridge cemetery, you will find her grave. She is buried near Norman Rockwell, as well as a number of Unitarian luminaries of the 19th century. She is also called Elizabeth Freeman, which is her post-slavery name. Mum Bett, Elizabeth Freeman, is the first slave freed in America by governmental authority, and her story intersects with our American political and religious stories of freedom.

I have visited the house where Bett lived as a slave – Colonel Ashley's house. They were not terrible to her, relatively speaking – though the loss of liberty is unfathomably horrible by itself – however, there is a story of a younger slave girl (her sister? her daughter?) being badly hurt by the mistress. There is also a proud story of Mum Bett bravely hiding the family silver from the British. She was highly regarded.

One cold January, in 1773, a few people who cared about freedom gathered at the Ashley house, a committee, including Theodore Sedgwick, clerk of the committee, and father of Catherine Sedgwick – she became a Unitarian, author, and reformer. (And dare I throw in the strange six degrees of separation, to note that actress Kyra Sedgwick, married to actor Kevin Bacon, is also a direct descendent of Theodore Sedgwick?) It is believed that Mum Bett was there for the committee meeting, serving refreshments, and listening to the freedom talk.

Theodore did the writing of the Sheffield Resolves, or the Sheffield Declaration, as it was also called, similar to the role Thomas Jefferson played in writing the Declaration that the nation celebrates today, and actually, the writing is similar to the Declaration of Independence, but 3 _ years earlier

Mum Bett was about 30 years old and was interested in all the talk about rights and freedom, and she thought it applied to her as well. A few years later, she took as her lawyer that same Theodore Sedgwick, and sued for her freedom. Similar to Rosa Parks, who sat down where she believed she belonged, Mum Bett stood up where she knew she belonged – equal to those around her. Elizabeth Freeman was freed by the Courts, which directed the legislature to change the laws, so slavery became illegal first in Massachusetts, based on the same principles of freedom and equality as were fought for in the American Revolution.

Elizabeth Freeman finished her life in the Sedgwick home as a beloved member of the family, and is buried in the Sedgwick family plot in the Stockbridge cemetery. Because she dared to believe the truth that freedom applied to her life, Bett and her freedom loving, proto-Unitarian lawyer, Theodore Sedgwick, helped change the country and the world.

Truth and Freedom at the Heart of Our Religious Lives

You will know the truth and the truth will set you free. A slave woman named Bett knew the truth about her life and worth, and she understood freedom, and we are all much freer because of this woman who dared to take the first step to end slavery.

On July 4th we celebrate freedom and the birth of this country, and when you think about it, it's an odd date in some ways. This is not the beginning of resistance to colonial rule, nor the start of the Continental Congress, nor is this the victory date for the revolution, nor is it the beginning of self-governance, nor yet the birth of the United States Constitution. July 4th is an important date, though, because our leaders of this emerging nation made a declaration about truth on this day. "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

We have forgotten the long list of facts in the Declaration of Independence about what the King of Great Britain did wrong, and we barely know the reasoning they used to justify the start of a new nation, as detailed in this document, but we don't forget that equality and certain rights were held up as "unalienable", or "inalienable" as we'd say these days. In other words, these three rights of life, liberty, and happiness, are so true that they cannot be taken away, surrendered, transferred. As the truth emerges for us we may change in certain understandings, but it remains true that everyone has the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, and that all are equal.

When they wrote, "we hold these truths to be self-evident" about these rights and our equality, though, it was actually emerging truth. In much of the history around the world before July 4th, 1776, folks would not have believed that people are equal – we

didn't even believe it yet about women or blacks – or that the right of life really was inalienable, let alone liberty, or being able to seek happiness – we barely believed the ideas then and today they are still radical to many. How many places today are these truths hidden in the dark?

The truth about our rights emerged further as our nation grew. We added a Bill of Rights and other amendments to our Constitution that gave us many social and political rights and freedoms that seem very much to be the truth about how society functions. Yes, we love freedom of religion, the first right mentioned in the Bill of Rights, and we believe that it is so basic, so inalienable, that it is a truth, along with many other rights.

Freedom – this is the weekend we celebrate freedom more than any other time, as we commemorate one of the beginning points of achieving political freedom in these United States – the Declaration of Independence. A previous beginning point occurred in my previous hometown of Great Barrington, Massachusetts, at the Town Hall site, which was a courthouse at the time in August 1774. That is where the first open and armed resistance to the British rule took place, although folks rarely know about it – probably because no one died.

Over 1000 people showed up with their pitchforks and muskets to prevent the British tribunal from entering. They closed the work of the Courthouse until a constitution was drawn up for Massachusetts. And these Berkshire Constitutionals spread the closing of courts throughout the county until 1780 when Massachusetts approved its constitution, now the oldest constitution in the world, a constitution that was clear enough about freedom and equality that it was called upon to guarantee equal marriage for the first time in these United States, just a few years ago, and by the same

process that slavery was banned. By the way, that courthouse/town hall was where William Cullen Bryant recorded that Unitarians were meeting, a few decades later, though they never formed a congregation until we did in 1996.

Another beginning point of our American freedom happened the year before the Great Barrington folks resisted the British, and was extremely important, and it took place just South of Great Barrington, in Sheffield. I spoke of it earlier. In January 1773, a few people gathered at Colonel Ashley's house in Sheffield, led by Theodore Sedgwick, clerk of the committee, and they put together the Sheffield Resolves, or the Sheffield Declaration. The writing is similar to the Declaration of Independence, but 3 _ years earlier, and it is thought that Thomas Jefferson read it before he wrote his more famous declaration. On January 12, 1773, the town of Sheffield unanimously approved the Resolves, which began this way:

Resolved that Mankind in a State of Nature are equal, free and independent of each other, and have a right to the undisturbed Enjoyment of their lives, their Liberty and Property.

It was signed by one of the founders of Sheffield, the town clerk, Stephen Dewey. He was the grandfather of the Rev. Dr. Orville Dewey, who went on to become a Unitarian minister and the 4th president of the American Unitarian Association.

Eight years later the slave present for those hearty discussions of liberty and equality, Elizabeth Freeman, was freed by the new Massachusetts constitution, fought for by those Great Barrington farmers with their mighty pitchforks, and others. As Cicero wrote, "We are in bondage to the law in order that we may be free." The law can be a freedom maker, and we are gratefully bound by such laws.

That is our past – we have been the truth seekers, the freedom seekers, the equal rights resolvers and voters. And it is amazing to realize that some little actions and a few words by a few people have made such huge differences. Back then. And now? What does it mean to be concerned about truth and freedom now? We have achieved so much, including the election of an African American president, including ever increasing rights for women and minorities, for folks regardless of their sexuality, but we have a long way to go.

Do we really cherish the truth? Do we actually understand freedom? Do we ever know how precious this life of liberty is? We are not “yearning to breathe free” any longer. Because it is as close to us as the air we breathe, as familiar to us as our smiles, as easy to countenance as a stroll, as quick to forget as what we ate for lunch a month ago – because freedom is all of this to us and not a struggle, not a central life concern, not a dearly desired and missing aspect of our lives, is then freedom susceptible? Yes, it surely is. We need these annual reminders, at least, to continue to honor and try to understand the importance of freedom, and thereby guard and guarantee it.

In the first amendment to the Constitution of the United States, the beginning of the Bill of Rights, freedom of religion is the first thing mentioned. It’s mostly how we Americans got here – pilgrims, puritans, and plenty of others came first for religious freedom. Europe was bloody from all the religious persecution and repression in the name of one or the other of the religious sects, but notably, not our religious ancestors. What if we were all required to go to one church, and it was one that we could not respect? What if we were forced to forsake all religion, and yet longed for the sustaining and comforting aspects of our religious traditions? If following our hearts and minds and

spirits, and the ways of our ancestors; if following the truth of our religion cost us our freedom, our homes, our lives, wouldn't we be willing to travel to the ends of the earth for religious freedom?

Religious freedom is at the heart of Unitarian Universalism. Earl Morse Wilbur, the 20th century historian of Unitarianism, concluded that we were centered in Freedom, Reason, and Tolerance. We would likely modify that trinity today. I would say that at the heart of our religious lives are Freedom and Truth, Inclusivity and Diversity, Responsibility and Creativity, Peace and Justice, Compassion and Community. Everything rests on the planks of truth and freedom, though. Gandhi wrote, "There is no god higher than truth." In our stirring song, "America" we hear freedom ringing from every mountainside and we proclaim, "Long may our land be bright with freedom's holy light." Truth and freedom are holy matters, and centers of our religious lives, upon which we build our religious homes.

We don't know what it would be like not to be able to meet together freely, speaking our minds and hearts, doing what it is that brings us joy, well-being, with the ones we love, on behalf of the world and our future generations, but we can imagine that our lives would feel both constricted and threatened, whereas now we feel open and comfortable – we feel free and truth-centered as Unitarian Universalists.

Truth and freedom are at the heart of the religious life also in terms of spirituality, which comes in many guises. Freedom of the spirit is both what we have and what we continue to seek when we seek the truth. We have the freedom to seek, to explore, to express, to bless, to follow our hearts, but only in so much as we are free within. Free of addictions of all kinds, free of the constraints of our past, free of the confinements of

selfishness, free from the controlling parts of our lives – none of these freedoms is a guarantee, and they involve inner work and much seeking of the truth, which yes, sets us free.

The old wisdom is that some form of spiritual discipline or practice is what actually sets us free, in terms of our inner lives. Just as for anyone who strives to do well at an art or a craft, it takes discipline, practice, patience, in order to make room to have the freedom to do well. As Unitarian Universalists we define spirituality and spiritual practices in each our own way, and this adds to the challenge to seek truth and the strength and freedom of the spirit. Simply though, our spiritual practice is this: we come together in truth, and we take time on our own, to study, to contemplate, to share, to give of ourselves, to strive to live responsible, creative, compassionate life, and this is what continues to set us free.

The ultimate freedom comes with the sense of oneness that is the truth at the heart of all religious practice, all religious belief. When we know that the well-being of anyone, of the whole world, is our well-being as well, then we are willing to do what the folks in Great Barrington and Sheffield and Philadelphia did in the 18th century, what Susan B. Anthony, Theodore Parker and Dorothea Dix did in the 19th century, and what Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela and Aung Sang Lee did in the 20th century – work for the freedom of all. We are not free until all are free, all over the world. Eugene Victor Debs said, “While there is a soul in prison, I am not free.”

While there is a soul in prison, either of bricks and mortar, or the state’s constraints, or the mind’s fortress – however we find ourselves imprisoned – ourselves, all of us – we have work to do for freedom. Go forth with whatever form of pitchfork of

truth is appropriate to you to work for this mighty cause, personal and global, to strive in truth to guarantee freedom for all. Amen.