



## Liberating the Outlaw

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Tena koutou whanau a Tāmaki Unitarians. It's great to be able to speak to you all today, and particularly to those of you, whom I know.

Today I am speaking about Freedom. A huge subject of which I will only be able to skim the surface. Even this talk was cut down from a three hour exploration of the subject.

To some peoples of the world **Freedom** is easy to define. Freedom from oppression by a dominant culture. The freedom to walk the streets unaccosted. The freedom to live safely in their own homes. The freedom to say or write what they think without fear of being imprisoned or worse. But we in western democratic societies are free aren't we? Those sort of issues aren't ours to fear. Or at least haven't been for the last few decades. Right?

Right now some are kicking against what they feel is a deprivation of their fundamental freedoms. The right to move and associate freely. Has the leadership of our society the right to limit that freedom under the circumstances? Most of us would concede that they do, for the greater good.

So when are we free to do and be whatever we like in the moment? What gives us that sense of freedom? Or limits it? What supports the illusion of freedom? It is just an illusion isn't it? What is freedom to us, in a supposedly free society? Why would we willingly give it up?

Some define freedom as having choice, having options, but if you've ever been in a large European or American supermarket with a hundred different types of milk to choose from it doesn't feel like freedom. If your life is always full of that many choices it often feels stressful, more like a burden than freedom. So how far does freedom extend before it ceases to be freedom? Or imposes on another's freedoms?

Part of the social contract in a free society is that my freedom ends where it impinges on the freedoms of others. So am I allowed to take risks that affect others? This is a far more complex formula than it initially seems.

Many of us have a temporary solution that delivers a sense of freedom when we feel burdened by responsibility; the responsibilities of employment, parenting, etc, ... by life. An escape from reality that provides moments in which we can recuperate, rebalance, and restore ourselves ready to re-enter the fray of daily life.

We find a physical or mental escape in a sport, DIY, craft or hobby; reading a book or playing a piece of music. A walk in nature or a game of chance.

There are as many possibilities as there are people to imagine them. Researching and writing, or collecting bottle-caps. Restoring furniture, or a car, etc. Why does this feel freeing?

They may provide an environment with its own rules and disciplines. A sport has rules common to all players, so a cohesive community with clear insiders and outlaws. A community that knows the rules. A referee who enforces them.

These escapes all provide a time out from the real world where mundane concerns can be forgotten in the moment, in fact need to be if you are going to be effective in doing the diversion. They provide a temporary freedom ... or at least an illusion of freedom. And oddly enough not by increasing choice or reducing constraints, but by clearly defining them.

Some seek a more permanent freedom by escaping from society and its demands; its responsibilities. From the compromises required to balance their freedoms with those of others around them.

Hermits withdraw to remote locations in isolated places that the majority would not consider. Vagabonds and nomads relinquish material burdens, social responsibilities and security, for the freedom of the road. But are they free? Is their idea of freedom having nothing, so that there is nothing to lose, as Kris Kristofferson's ballad "Me and Bobby McGee" suggests?

Each freedom gained by this sort of retreat is bought at a high price. All the benefits of community, social interaction, modern medicine, technology, joint food production, etc. is exchanged for a lot of hard work. Subsistence living. A more direct form of responsibility. This is a price only a special few are willing or able to pay.

So some seek to build an alternative society. Becoming outsiders. Similar to the individual hermits, but a compromise, with the best and worst of both options perhaps. But being a smaller community of like-minded people it has a chance of providing that sense of freedom.

Others seek to build a community within the society. Cultural clubs or support groups, where members share a common understanding. Whether they are of a particular geographical origin, a common experience like surviving cancer, or a shared philosophy or religion.

My impression is that the feeling of freedom comes from having a world view which correlates with the world view of the community you are in; you fit in, belong. The comfort of understanding and sharing the rules and conventions to which everyone abides. Being willing to abide by them oneself. Doing so reflexively, without thought, because it is so ingrained that it is natural ... obvious, the right thing. Many of our choices predefined and limited by the culture. Options refined. We feel safer; more secure, free from having to be constantly alert and guarded. Free from having to make choices.

Perhaps we feel that we are an individual who chooses to rebel and flout convention. But how far outside those conventions do we really venture? The answer will differ from individual to individual. But we are strongly influenced by our conditioning.

I believe that we are guided through life by an unconscious map some call our ego or superego, created by our experiences of family, community, society, culture, religion or philosophy, and physical environment throughout our lives but particularly during our childhood. A time when our map is mostly blank; uncluttered.

The more fully one's map fits the social norms of our environment the more secure and at home we feel; the freer one is to move within these unconscious boundaries or even push against them to some degree.

Not everyone has that comfort. I would say that few have a perfect fit.

The ones who do feel perfectly aligned are the ones who are most sure of who else belongs ... or does not ... and perhaps a little doubt is not a bad thing.

As I said earlier, part of the social contract in a free society is that my freedom ends where it impinges upon the freedoms of others. If everyone is working from the same or very similar maps that contractual clause isn't usually a problem. Most of the time we are happily constrained by convention. But if someone or some circumstance insists the map needs to be redrawn or even replaced, this challenges the unconscious comfort we know.

So we dance gently around the rights to meet our own needs and the responsibilities that accompany them in society. But why?

I believe that, in the natural order of things, we earn rights by bearing responsibility. That these two things are irrevocably entwined. That when we abdicate or relinquish responsibility, we surrender rights to those who then must bear them. Equally we see that they who take on greater responsibility within society attain or assume greater rights.

So in a socially responsible society which says it will care for your health when you are ill or injured, thus freeing you from that burden, one loses the right to object if the same society insists you take care of your health by wearing a bicycle helmet or a seatbelt, or demands safe work practices, or restricts your food choices and risk taking behaviours. Or even says you may not leave your home for a fortnight.

A parent takes on enormous responsibility when they become a parent, and must have the rights required to raise that child. Responsibilities that the child cannot bear and rights that the child cannot exercise fall to the parent. And one of the many skills of parenting is finding how and when to pass on those responsibilities and relinquish the rights that go with them. Why doesn't that always feel freeing? Some societies manage to share the child rearing burden. The responsibilities. So what rights do they assume?

As with all things a balance must be found. The freedom from the burden of responsibility? Or the right, the freedom, to choose the risks? Which provides the greater freedom?

What if you didn't grow up in this society? ... Or if you experienced different cultural parameters, rules and expectations to the norm. Or belonged to a different religion or race perhaps. You may have different expectations as to what your rights and responsibilities are? A quite different map.

Not being able to live by your own unconscious map you may become very conscious of the differences. You might judge the society you are in, to be wrong, even corrupt. Or more likely you will simply feel alien; oppressed, inhibited and uncomfortable. Not free.

Insiders might, acting out of their unconscious '*knowing*', make you an outsider, an outlaw. They might perceive you to be a '*misfit*'; that all people of your kind, ... identified by appearance, colour, customs, accent, culture, age, economic status, education, or gender ... tend not to conform to their norms and therefore must all be outlaws ... No matter how much you might endeavour to conform. Or *you* might view *them* in such a way.

This by definition is prejudice. Profiling, stereotyping and generalising your kind vs their kind. Unconsciously they have already profiled their kind, and you are not it.

Whatever the basis, it's a discrimination. A judgement of your worth based on a perception of you versus their perception of themselves. Neither on your true merit nor on theirs.

So you are an outlaw. An outsider, for differing from the norm. Yet you may know that your unconscious cultural perspective is right and that they have it wrong. Just as they know otherwise.

Or perhaps you feel they are right. You are an inferior, a misfit, an outlaw. If they are the majority they definitely have the power. They have social dominance. This no doubt discomforts you, possibly angers you, even if you don't fully understand where the anger is coming from. So what do you do with the anger? Some turn it outward on those who reject them. Some turn it inward on themselves and their kind for being inferior. Many do both.

So you have choices that you make ... how you will be in that society. Often these are unconscious but they are what you, at some level, perceive work for you. Ideally they would be conscious choices but they usually aren't.

The choices are; to deny *yourself*, your culture, all the different expectations you experienced and try to adapt; to submit. Or to embrace the outlaw label. Break the rules, live outside the society. Express the anger. This may feel like freedom or at least more free than submission does.

Some become the hermit or the vagabond. Or if they have the numbers, create their own little society within the greater one. Their Chinatown or cultural club. But to do this requires sufficient of your kind to band together to resist the dominant culture.

Those who embracing the outlaw status and the feelings of freedom it brings, might choose to break all the rules and laws; oppressive or not; might join gangs such as the Mongrel Mob or Black Power, which are very tribal and feel very culturally appropriate to their members ... perhaps an example of creating one's own cultural community. An outlaw community that fits the familiar rules. Tribal, loyal, sharing, protective, with a hierarchical power base, but outside the dominant society's control. An attempt to empower those who feel powerless in the dominant society. Conforming to what are often an even stricter set of rules and conventions; more harshly imposed.

So if the dominant society objects to these outlaws what can they do about it?

Traditionally we separate outlaws from our society. We lock them up and isolate them from ‘decent’ society for a while. Take away their freedom. Diminish their rights for their irresponsibility. But history shows us that this doesn’t solve the problems. Not permanently anyway. In fact it often creates more and bigger problems.

For the disempowered it may accentuate the need to belong to an outlaw group that can manifest some power. For some it becomes a rite of passage to outlawdom. We have tried this way for hundreds of years without success. Perhaps it is time we tried something radically different.

Past efforts to reform have all been driven by our existing paradigms and therefore possibly missed the point. From time to time, in fact *constantly* within my lifetime, our society feels the need to review its perspectives on various norms. Working conditions ... from slavery to equal pay for equal work, anti-war movements, universal suffrage, the women’s movement, abortion rights, racial equality, cultural acceptance, and currently drug management, environmental issues and end of life choices. All driven by the desire for greater freedoms.

So how do we liberate the outlaw?

No change is easy. Especially since so much of our map is an unconscious construct. And a culture is just a shared unconscious construct. It takes a sustained effort and time to raise an individual’s awareness, let alone sufficient individuals to shift the entire society’s awareness.

Pushing the envelope and weathering the push back. And we seem to be heading into an era of backlash against the liberal. Sustaining that effort to educate is a lot of work and may take generations.

Recent research indicates that fake news spreads faster than real news and is harder to dispel. Apparently this is because it is usually targeted at our fears and insecurities. Our sense of power over our lives and our freedoms.

The antidote is thought to be, to get ahead of the potential falsehoods with the “truths”. To me this suggests that we need to embrace the use of positive propaganda ... a word that has taken on very negative connotations since world war two, but really just means promoting ideas. We need to research and educate about sciences, both physical and social, so that people have more informed choice.

However, as much of our decision making is subliminal, it also means consciously and deliberately moulding early experience and influences in formative years. Encouraging an interest in self awareness and an individual understanding of the influences on ones-self. Philosophers have advised this for aeons. The Delphi gate was inscribed “Know yourself” in 1400BC.

This becomes even more important as those influences become more manipulable by powerful new technologies. I guess I’m proposing fighting fire with fire. Using positive social influence to counter self serving commercial influence.

The danger in this is the unconsciousness of our beliefs. We are in danger of pushing our prejudices so to do it well requires a softer grip on our own belief systems. To soften our grip we require a better understanding of the dynamics. Bringing to consciousness the underlying signposts that control our responses to every aspect of life. Reviewing our maps. Making clear and conscious choices that supersede the unconscious reflexive ones dictated by our conditioning.

Many we will choose to keep. Some we will want to modify. Others we will keenly discard. This surely will increase our freedom from compulsive or reactive living. And with it our general sense of freedom.

Buddhism is based on this principle. The concept of 'cleaning out' the ego by detaching from those rules and judgements that are not serving us. Freeing up the boundaries that limit us. Reaching for boundlessness. Enlightenment.

Once we are clearer about the changes we seek and why we seek them. Once we are freer in ourselves to understand and accept difference, then we can move to educate and encourage others. Not imposing our will or suppressing their freedoms, but if their freedom is based on the oppression of our freedoms, raising their awareness, encouraging their change.

Since community requires compromise there will always be a subtle ebb and flow of individual freedoms. But as long as that remains subtle that's fine. A society that is ruled for the sake of the society over the individual becomes fascism. A society that over emphasises the individual to the detriment of society can become anarchy.

So my belief is that freedom, or at the least the sense of it, is largely a perception; a state of mind. A thing that can be taken from us by fearmongering or increased by surety, confidence in one's security. That we can increase our own sense of freedom by increasing that sense in everyone within our community. And to do that we must work toward a mutual accommodation.

What do you think?