



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Freedom from what, exactly?

John DiLeo © 30 January 2022

For much of my life, my conscious perspective on ‘freedom’ was always in terms of “freedom to.” As a child enjoying nearly every privilege one could – an able-bodied White, Christian, *cis*, *hetero* male of European descent, born to a reasonably stable two-parent household, and living in a quiet, small, lily-white town in rural Connecticut – “freedom from” wasn’t something I ever thought about.

Add to that the fact I was a “red-blooded American,” living in the “land of the free, and home of the brave.” I was growing up in a “free country,” which teachers and leaders held up as a “shining city on a hill,” the greatest example in all history of how democracy was done. My good fortune at being an American provided – I was told – complete freedom from tyranny, oppression, fascism, and (gasp!) socialism.

My general thinking on *personal* freedom could be summarised by the last line of the Wiccan Rede: “An ye harm none, do what ye will.” Basically, as long as my actions didn’t cause someone else real harm, I expected I should be free to do whatever brought me joy, whether in the moment or in the long run.

That tended to work out pretty well for me, thanks to my built-in privilege, coupled with other elements of good fortune.

As a young student, I was of well-above-average intelligence, and *really* good at taking standardised tests. My success on one test won me a full-tuition scholarship to a local private secondary school; that school’s strong academic reputation, along with *really* good scores on the PSAT and SAT, helped me gain admission to a top university – in Baltimore, as it happens.

When I finished my undergraduate degree, I got a decent engineering job right away. My college girlfriend and I found a nice house to rent and we started living the 9-to-5 life. Later the same year, we married. Less

than three years later, we bought a house – our first offer was accepted, and we obtained financing without incident.

After my first marriage fell apart, I decided to “blow up my life” and do something completely different. I quit my stable-but-boring government job, sold the house, got rid of most of my stuff, and entered a full-time Ph.D. program in Washington, DC.

After two years of being a student full-time, money was getting tight, so I decided I should look for a part-time engineering job. Within a few weeks, I started working for the MITRE Corporation in northern Virginia – which, by the way, is where Tess started working just two weeks later.

To be honest, things have gone that way for me a lot.

A more recent example: once Tess and I decided we *really* wanted to leave the US (in case you’re wondering, it was on the night of 8th November 2016), the pieces fell into place within a year. I found a job in Auckland, obtained my work visa quickly, and our new adventure began. This was another case of “blowing up our lives” – we sold our house and cars, donated or sold most of our stuff, and made the blind jump to New Zealand.

My point? It’s simple, really: my entire life, I’ve been leveraging my *freedom to* decide what I wanted to do and the *freedom to* go ahead and do it, with reasonable confidence everything would come right in the end. Without realising it, I was also enjoying freedom from – fear of rejection, discrimination, low expectations, want, and so on.

Not long after we moved here, though, I realised I’d been living much of my life *without* one freedom – from a specific fear. During the short time we had children attending school in the US, there were over 90 shootings in schools or on school grounds.

(In case you’re wondering, there *has* been a school shooting in New Zealand. It happened on 19th October 1993, in Waikino.)

In our neighbourhood, it was common to hear gunfire during the night. One night, a stray bullet even struck our home, breaking through a window, while we were all there.

A few months after our move, as I read about yet another school shooting in the US, I realised something had disappeared from my life: the constant fear that sending my children to school could get them

killed, or that being in the wrong place at the wrong time could make any of us a gunshot victim.

Until that moment, I hadn't recognised the presence of that fear in my life, nor how valuable my freedom from it would be. It's a freedom I didn't have, but I'd placed no value on it and didn't seek it, because it's something you just don't get to have, if you're living in the US.

For the moment, let's get back to the topic of "freedom to." Over the years, my awareness has increased of the harms that can and do arise from individual and collective choices, including environmental damage, economic impacts, elimination of jobs or entire industries, and so on. I would argue the general principle from the Wiccan Rede remains sound, provided we update our thinking to consider ways our choices could *indirectly or collectively* harm others.

This can quickly become a *really* deep rabbit hole, if taken to its logical extreme. A central plot element in the Netflix series *The Good Place*, involves the main characters learning that every decision *available* to modern humans has so many indirect negative consequences, nobody can ever make a 'good' choice that would help them avoid the Bad Place...so, that's where *everyone* ends up.

In one episode, Michael (a good-hearted demon, played by Ted Danson) points out:

"Life now is so complicated, it's impossible for anyone to be good enough for the Good Place...These days, just buying a tomato at a grocery store means that you are unwittingly supporting toxic pesticides, exploiting labor, contributing to global warming. Humans think that they're making one choice, but they're actually making dozens of choices they don't even know they're making!"

It shouldn't be surprising to hear what got me thinking about the nature of "freedom." Viewing the anti-masking and anti-vax fervour of protesters here in New Zealand, in the US, and throughout the world, I was really stumped. Did none of these people see the harm getting their way would do? Didn't they care about protecting the vulnerable from infection?

Slowly (a bit too slowly, I'll admit), it dawned on me that Brian Tamaki and his "Freedom and Rights Coalition," as well many of the myriad

protest groups in the US and other countries, aren't talking about the same "freedom" I am. *Their* cries for "freedom" are about the conservative brand, freedom from government interference in protecting and growing individual and corporate wealth – keeping mega Churches open, packing concerts and bars, and getting international student and tourist dollars back into the economy.

Any amount of potential harm to *others* – including deaths, hospitalisations, and "long COVID" – or potential cost to *other* taxpayers is acceptable, it seems, as long as they get to keep earning.

Now that I understand what the conservative concept of 'freedom' really means, and the harm those fighting for it are willing to inflict on others, I've realised I value another important freedom I don't have: freedom from the fear they'll get their way. As FDR pointed out over 80 years ago, securing our freedom from such a fear requires "collective, organized action."

Meditation / Conversation Starters:

- What freedoms do you value most?
- How have the "rankings" of your freedoms changed as you've grown older?