

THE FREEDOM TO BE

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When I was in my forties, a cage with two parakeets (budgerigars) was handed on to me by my younger son, who developed allergies to the birds when they were housed in his room. I kept them in my study. One of them was blue, and his name was Azul. The other was yellow. Her name of course was Amarillo [a'ma'riy'yo].

I had had such parakeets when I was a boy myself. And at that time, I dreaded having to try to recapture them if they should escape the cage while I was dutifully cleaning it.

But that was not the case when I received Azul and Amarillo. I took them into my study and closed the door. I *wanted* them to fly free. I wanted to watch them enjoying a new freedom—the freedom just to be themselves—to be birds again, birds which *flew*.

I put the cage on a small table. I opened the door and sat back to watch. One, and then the other, sat on their perch bars, looking at the open door, without moving. Then slowly, Azul crept toward the open door. He hooked his beak on one of the steel wires which made the cage, and then moved his feet under himself. Then he did the same to the next wire, and in that way, he edged himself along the cage until he could set his feet on the bottom of the doorway. He was sitting, quietly, in the open doorway.

Slowly, timidly, Amarillo did the same, until they were sitting next to each other in the doorway. They sat there for some time, without moving. Then Azul turned and hopped back onto one of the perch bars inside the cage. Amarillo did the same.

The door to the cage remained open, but the birds explored it and found it to be too much for them. The freedom to fly, which perhaps they had never experienced in their lives, was not attractive or important enough to them to lead them to venture out into the world of open flight.

I was sad for them. They had turned down the offer of liberty. But I knew that they were frightened of the prospect of being on their own in the big world. I suppose they worried about what unknown dangers lurked out there in the open air of my 12' x 14' study. Freedom has its unknown costs, and they were frankly unwilling to pay those possible costs. So they returned to the safety of the cage.

Survival is the first priority of every living being, as Abraham Maslow famously wrote. And personal fulfillment is way down the list at number 6 or 7 in his list of human priorities.

It was the same for Azul and Amarillo. Avoiding danger was more important to them than flying. I thought, See what civilization does to free beings? It makes them afraid of everything that is new and unexplored. They cower before their fear and willingly walk back into the prison rather than live free.

There are uncivilized animals, of course, who *do* pursue their freedom, aggressively. We call them “wild” animals. In the biological group called Cervids (deer, elk, caribou, and moose), there is a rigid social structure. Each alpha male gathers for himself a harem of females to mate with. And these alpha males keep vigilant guard over the females in their harems, driving away any of the “bachelor males” who hang on the fringes of the herd, waiting for the opportunity to approach a female who is in her annual mating season.

In other words, a few of the strong and tough experienced males have all the females to themselves, while the remaining males linger just on the edges of the herd, sexually frustrated and angry. Once in a while, one of the bachelors gets angry enough or headstrong enough to challenge the alpha male for possession of its harem. The fight is brutal—a pushing battle of locked antlers and butting heads. (Mountain goats, and perhaps many other species, do the same. Perhaps you’ve seen films of these battles.)

In the end, one or the other of the battling males runs off, defeated and shamed. If it’s the bachelor male, he will lick his wounds for a while and then he’ll be back to fight again. But if it’s the alpha male who loses the contest, he will run off disgraced, leaving his harem behind, to live in retirement as just an old animal—too old to defend his females. And who gets the harem in that case? Well, the bachelor male who chased the old guy off, claiming for himself

the harem of females and the new title, “alpha male.” (And the ladies don’t mind at all having the young, buff male around at menses time.)

This story leads to the following general conclusion. Almost always, an entity pursuing its natural freedom to be itself must do battle with those in power who are always trying to maintain control by denying the freedom-seeker access to the freedom which it seeks by nature.

So, we have two classes of social animals, including human beings: We have those who seek freedom and are willing to suffer the costs of freedom, which may include loss of face in society, expulsion from the group, loneliness, lethargy, frustration at not having the freedom desired, fighting in self-defense, and even death.

And the second class is made up of those who do not seek freedom, even though freedom is natural to every being. These may be those who have never considered the idea of seeking freedom for themselves. Rather, they simply put their heads down and slog along through life, thinking that life is no more than their current condition. Or, on the other hand, they may be those who *have* confronted their freedom, as Azul and Amarillo did, and like them, chose to accept confinement rather than to accept the unknown and the unexpected, both of which accompany the possession of freedom.

Why does turning away from freedom cause such sadness in those who have accepted their freedom? Why was I sad that my birds did not joyfully take to the air instead of peering cowardly at their invitation to freedom and then rejecting it? The reason, for me, is that the being, in turning away from freedom, is denying itself full growth and maturity. It is what is inherently sad in observing a plant which has put out a bud which never blossomed. The plant was too weak, perhaps, or ill, to energize itself to bloom into its full beauty.

And every being is just like a blossoming plant. Every being changes, of course, as the Greek philosopher Heraclitus observed twenty five hundred years ago: *Panta Rhei*—he said (in Greek): Everything flows along, like a river. It’s never the same two moments in a row.

And indeed, we all change from moment to moment: our physical position changes, our mood changes, the topic of our conversation or thought changes, our reaction to our environment changes. *Panta rhei*: it all changes.

But we observe that human change is more than simply being one way at one moment, and then being another way at the second moment. It seems clear, at least on the macro level (that is, beyond randomness), that we change in patterned ways, according to our natures. When we are born, we do not speak immediately, we do not immediately recognize the people and objects in our environment, we do not stand up and walk over to the card table and play a hand of pinochle. And as children, we generally do not grow grey hair and wrinkled skin; nor as ninety-year-olds do we have heads full of naturally thick, dark hair, and firm, healthy skin.

No, in our physical and psychological life processes, we change according to general patterns, just as all nature does, just as the seasons do, and the tides, and the phases of the moon, and the leafing of the maples. Human babies are characteristically newborns, then infants, then children, and so on until they cease to be, each of them following the same general pattern if they are healthy and able overall.

So I prefer to think of human change not in terms of randomness and not in terms of self-determined, planned change, toward some goal or achievement (as in “By the time I’m twenty, I will be a billionaire.”) Rather, I prefer to think of all change in beings as growth of some sort. The apt analogy is the process of flowering. Just as the plant grows from a seed (let’s say) and is quite vulnerable at the beginning of life, and then goes on to mature, according to its nature, and then produces buds which bloom into flowers of great beauty, and then its flowers lose their petals and turn to seed, and then the plant loses its vigor and turns brown and dry, and then dies, so also we have a spiritual as well as a physical life, and these do the same sort of thing as the plant does. They change according to the general pattern of life. Both aspects of life are vulnerable when we are born, but as we mature, we grow stronger and more stable. At maturity we may blossom, both physically and spiritually, according to our individual natures, and make our contribution to the well-being of our society or species. And then, as time passes, we weaken and eventually cease to be.

There are differences, of course, between the spiritual aspect of our being and our physical aspect, if we wish to call them two separate things. I usually do not. But here a point can be made clearly by separating the two aspects of life for a moment. And the point is this: physical maturity usually precedes spiritual maturity by many years and decades. And a very old person may still be growing and maturing spiritually, even at the point of ceasing to be.

The heart seems to be timeless, as we experience it. If a person loves, old age does not suppress that love. Rather, old age usually increases that love in the heart, and causes an elderly loving person to bloom anew in heart. The more open and accepting the heart is, the less there is to fear and the more there is to appreciate.

There is another aspect to this “growth” that beings undergo which is important to our discussion. Not only is this changing, which we are calling “growth,” patterned according to general (genetic) principles, but there is very little anyone can do about the course of that growth which we experience, except to interrupt it by violence. If the growth of a young tree in a forest is stunted by the overshadowing of the taller trees, so that the young tree receives no direct sunlight, that young tree will not thrive. It will either continue to live as a perhaps sickly stunted tree or it will die from lack of sunlight. The tree itself can do nothing about the course of its individual life, for it was simply “born into,” or it sprouted into, an un-nourishing environment.

Likewise, people like to believe that they are able to make “free choices,” based on calculations of costs vs. benefits, or on simple likes and dislikes, or on the basis of a code of values, and so on. This belief in “free choice” appears true on its face, as people make many “free choices” every day. We decide what, if anything, to eat or drink for breakfast, what we will wear that day, which route to take to work, how to behave toward co-workers who gossip about us, and so on.

On a deeper level of analysis, though, we find that it is difficult to make this “free choice” claim. If it is true that we *grow* into who we are by receiving and dealing with all the formative forces at play in our lives, then because of the influence of those very forces, not only

as they affected us in our youth, but as they still affect us today, we discover that when we are faced with a decision—a choice of one response to a situation over another—we generally make our decision automatically, instantly, and then we spend a lot of time talking ourselves into recognizing the choice that has already been made in our hearts, or else thinking about whether it was the right choice to make.

What I mean to say here is that we are, in many ways, the sum of the effects of those formative influences on us. Or rather, we are the sum of the *ways we have responded* to the effects of those formative influences on us. We are born with the ability to perceive and feel formative influences on us and to respond to them in our own ways—by emotional reactions, by “learning the lessons” that they teach us, by avoiding in the future the harmful situations which the influences put us in in the past, and so on, according to how we each are uniquely structured spiritually/psychologically/in our hearts/in our minds.

The fact of our lives is that people affect us and incidents impact us in the ways that they do. These formative experiences—such as car crashes, for example, or less dramatically, break-ups with our boyfriends or girlfriends—happen to us at certain points in our lives, but our dealing with them may go on for years or decades afterward, in our dreams or in our daydreams or in those regions deep within us that we are rarely aware of.

In fact, much of the work of seeking freedom comes down to becoming increasingly aware of these formative influences which we experienced with considerable pain or fear in our earlier lives, and of how we are currently dealing with them—and reconciling ourselves to the fact that they happened to us or that we ourselves brought them about. Those events and people which had deep impacts on our hearts—the centers of who we are—we tend to forget or to let slip away from us, especially if they caused pain or fear or shame in us. But those circumstances and people who influenced us deeply—and our hidden reactions to what we experienced from them—are, in large part, who we are as individuals—who we have become as a result of them and of how we deal with them.

So, we have to conclude that every choice we make comes from our whole history, from the responses we have made throughout our lives to those formative influences up to the

current moment. And this whole personal history, regardless of whether it was accurately remembered or not, is who we are. And since we are essentially the cumulative impact of all our personal history on us, what we “choose to do” must also be heavily, if not completely, influenced by all that we *are*. We cannot make “free choices” if we are yet bound and burdened by all the forces which have affected us throughout our lives.

Our choices and decisions, whether deliberate or impulsive, are the result in the current moment of who we have been and what we have experienced.

Our choices and decisions, then, are determined by all that we are. These choices and decisions are not “free.” They are us being us at that very moment, throwing our whole selves into the choices and decisions we make, always immediately, before we even think about them.

This line of thought leads to this conclusion: We do who we are. Our actions always arise from the depths of us, from what we have experienced in life.

When we stand on the brink of freedom, as my parakeets Azul and Amarillo did, the decision we make whether to follow the path of curiosity and discovery into the unknown, or whether to turn away from freedom into the security of the known, arises from who we are in our unique fullness at that moment. My birds chose predictability and seclusion. I have not.

Freedom, then, does not lie in some mythic ability or inclination to choose, for example, “good” over “evil” in a given decision. The belief that we have such an ability is the cage in which the parakeets twitter. The notions of *good* and *evil* are powerful concepts—ideas which entrap us in a two-dimensional moral universe, in which our destiny hangs in the balance as we accumulate honor cards for good acts and shame cards for bad acts—cards which, many adherents to religion believe, will be sorted out for each of us individually at the Final Reckoning, [where] ^[MS1], on the basis of the “card count,” we will be assigned to one cage or the other—the cage of glory or the cage of hell.

The fact of human life is that at this present moment, we can easily see that we live in both simultaneously. One easy example is when we find joy in our children but pain in our

relationship with our spouse. We want to give our children the best we can so that they mature into the kind of people we wish them to be, according to whatever our own behavioral code might be. At the same time, over the years, the joy and intimacy of the spouses' participating in each other's lives have drained away, and the two spouses are left living by habit together in an empty shell of a marriage, even if there is no fighting or violence. In those cases, we tell ourselves that we will endure the hard separateness and the loneliness of living with the spouse in order not to interrupt the normalcy of the children's upbringing (as though they are not being shaped subconsciously by the model before their eyes of "cold love.")

And as our children age, we begin to perceive in them that they are 90% the real, lived expression of their parents' ways of doing things, that they have been molded and formed, not into the perfect human beings we had hoped they would become, but into ordinary folks with many faults as well as many talents, which if we are courageous and perceptive enough to see it, are mirror images of the ways that we, their parents, are.

Such recognitions as this, that we have produced children who are younger versions of the mix of the characters of their parents, who ourselves have many failings and some talents worth having, are often difficult for parents to face—and so they blame the child for the faults which they are blind to in themselves. And such bitter accusations and abandonments can go on in a family for decades, with no one understanding that everyone taking part in the struggle is simply seeing in other people what they refuse to admit emanates from them.

So, freedom does not appear to lie in the realm of morality—of "choosing to do good"—nor in the imagined quality of free will, which, many believe, invests them with the power to make sound decisions based in reason rather than in emotion or whim. For, each of these views of human ability assumes that we humans can change the world for the better in some significant way. We assume that choosing well will result in living happily.

My friend, do you have evidence that that is the case? Do you genuinely believe that somehow over the course of the last two or four thousand years—or million years—that human life has become noticeably happier? I will grant you that over those periods of time human life

has changed drastically. We have transportation devices which take us to awe-inspiring places (where we snap some photos of ourselves standing in front of man-made signs, to prove that we were actually there, as a way of substantiating our boasting about our wealth and worldliness.) We have modern economies that have apparently improved the living conditions of many of us, providing us with technologies which solve many of our plaguing problems (in medicine, for example) and which give us in the newly emerged “middle class” a level of comfort which only the wealthiest people had previously had access to. We have developed a system of learning and of passing on to the next generation the results—the wisdom—of what has been learned thus far. We have developed—in “democracy”—a way of living as a society in which every person has the opportunity to contribute to making the decisions which affect the well-being of all the people.

If this is the sort of evidence that you might use to defend the proposition that human life has “improved” or has become “happier” over the course of the history of civilization, I will admire with you the accomplishments of the best and the brightest. I will admire with you the architectural wonders, the scope of vision of many, the beauty of the places on Earth that we are able to access now, the general prosperity of our first-world countries, the miracles of medical technology, and the brilliance of scientific theorizing.

But I ask again, where is the increase in happiness? In what way have we found access to freedom? In fact, even in the “land of plenty” which we hail as the United States, and as President Trump might boast, the greatest nation in the history of our galaxy, many live in misery, in deprivation, in abandonment, in ignorance, in fear, and in slavery. I am not speaking only of those in the misery of widowhood or child-loss or chronic illness, but also of those living in the misery of disrespect, the victims of bigotry and prejudice, the targets of vengeance on the highways, those from the impoverished parts of town who have zero actual chance of penetrating the sleek and affluent way of life that we in the middle class pride ourselves on having. Are those who are sex-trafficked in the underbelly of our so proud society enjoying the happiness and freedom of which we boast?

And what have we in the middle class to boast about? We are the serfs of an essentially feudal system of wealth control. We drive to work each day, many of us frustrated and enraged without knowing the reasons for these feelings, having to leave our children in the hands of strangers whose real values we do not know, regardless of the words they speak to us, limping through our marriages which essentially come to life only a few hours a week, if that. We have too much to do—our bosses expect more productivity in less time—and little time to relax and rest. We receive one or two or four weeks of vacation time—the dates of which are often selected by our bosses rather than by us—and then grind away at petty, often meaningless jobs for the rest of the year, earning just barely enough to pay the bills which bring us what we consider the “essentials” of middle class life: phone, internet, television, Facebook, financial advisors, and so on.

And we send our children to schools which at best demand some study of human values and the products of human “free thinking”—the Liberal Arts,¹ which are the outcomes of the lives of those who break free of the overwhelmingly burdensome restraints on the human spirit which I have just been describing. But over the past two hundred years, these schools have tended more and more to de-emphasize the Liberal Arts and to focus the students’ attention more completely on job training. Thus our culture and its government deters the development of free, liberal spirits in our young people and gives them no option other than to fall into the conformity line and aim toward economic success. Our best and our brightest get steered into career paths and thus, enslaved to the success game.

Saddest of all in this arena, public education has deteriorated into a system which builds literacy and math competency only in the most dedicated students. The rest of the publicly educated students simply endure through their schooling, which is poorly funded by state and

¹ The English word “liberal” derives from the Latin words *libertas*, meaning “freedom” and *liber*, meaning “free.” The meaning of the later word, *liber*, was divinized as the ancient Roman god, Liber, who was “the Free One,” called also “the Free Father,” Liber Pater, during the early Roman Republic (510 – 27 BCE). Liber was the god of the grape and of wine flowing freely (hence the English word “liberality”). His annual festival on March 17 (!) celebrated the grape and was called the *Liberalia*. This festival became the legal, religious setting of public displays of civil disobedience and satire of the government by the common people (the “plebians”) of the Republic. For, Liber was the god of the common people, representing their freedom from the ruling rich of the Roman Republic. In fact, the Roman word, *liber*, derives from a supposed Proto-Indo-European word meaning “belonging to the people,” as opposed to belonging to the ruling class.

local governments and which is taught by many teachers who are only mediocre in their competence and willingness to teach. The states get what they pay for, and the states who pay their teachers poorly get graduates who can barely read, who cannot think abstractly enough to pass Algebra I, who cannot write a coherent paragraph about anything, and who are not trained at all in civics or democratic citizenship. Moreover, these students face the devastating hopelessness that with an education such as this, from which they graduate without fundamental skills, they have no chance of breaking into or succeeding in the affluent middle class world.

One would expect there to be rebellion and riots in the streets about this strangulation of the deprived and the undereducated by these underserved people themselves. One would expect an overwhelming outcry for quality education which breaks through the immobilizing restraints which the rich have imposed on the have-nots in our “upwardly mobile” society.

But there are no such acts of rebellion. Rather, there are despair and gutter warfare with the police. The people of the streets and the ghetto neighborhoods, out-equipped and outnumbered, slump their shoulders and withdraw into emptiness. (Why do you think there are National Guard Armories in every American city, each filled with armored personnel vehicles, other combat vehicles, water cannons and other crowd-control non-lethal weapons, and combat field weapons? It is certainly not to keep the Russians or Chinese at bay. And if these armories were for service by soldiers in defense against foreign enemies, or for other National Guard-provided services to the citizens, such as emergency relief, why not place the armories on side roads in less populated areas? The reason, of course, is that those armories are in the cities to protect the government (and the investments of the oligarch class in the government) from rebellion by the working class and the disenfranchised class. And they were used most obviously to suppress the Watts Riots in August 1965, when 4000 California National Guard soldiers were activated and sent to the scene of the riots. During the riots, I myself drove with friends into downtown Durham, North Carolina, near where I was going to graduate school and where no illegal crowd activity had been reported, and saw with my own eyes a heavy machine gun emplacement in a sandbag bunker situated strategically on one of the corners that made up the Five Points downtown intersection. I assumed that that gun was not

just for show, but that American troops would, if commanded to do so, fire on their fellow American citizens. That's when I began to understand the realities of American government.)

When the second American Civil War finally comes—and it is inevitable, as our Republic continues to turn into a dictatorship, just as happened in Rome in the first century B.C., in 1930s Germany, and indeed, in Bolshevik Russia, and then again in Putin's Russia—it will be, as all of these previous coups-d'état ended up being, a right-wing power-grab, led perhaps by Trump and his lackeys, and fought against patriotic armed services forces and against the American people by the battlefield-ready “Christian” patriots currently hiding out in their hate-filled encampments on mountainsides, in remote canyons, and in caves, waiting to descend on the people, when Trump gives the order, to “purify” the nation and to “make America great again.”

All this will have been inevitably brought about by three failures: the failure of the Congress of the United States to govern in the people's interests, because our representatives were distracted by the amount of money they could make selling their votes to the power-interests; the failure of American Christianity to teach beneficial social conduct effectively; and the failure of the virtually abandoned public school systems in the United States to teach the people to think clearly and rationally. And so, the uneducated and the dangerously ignorant will be the forces of oppression used to subjugate the American people and to give absolute power to the American oligarchs.

Thus will political freedom, as enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and in the American Constitution, die in the United States.

But the former Roman slave and philosopher, Epictetus, taught us long ago that even political enslavement cannot prevent a person from enjoying perfect freedom. He wrote that a slave is a slave only so long as the slave accepts the master as his master. When the slave turns his back on the master and walks away from the master in freedom, the master can do nothing to deprive the slave of the freedom he has found, except to kill him. Nonetheless, the killed man dies a free human being.

This scenario of oppression by our democratic government, and the comments of Epictetus on such slavery, teach us a profound lesson. The lesson is that freedom is not a gift to the people by a government or, as in American chattel slavery in the 18th and 19th century, by the prevailing social system. Freedom is inherent in each being, and therefore, in each human being.

Freedom, then, is not an exterior practice, like voting. Rather, it is an interior state of being, like loving. It is a “way of living,” if you will; it is not simply the exercise of some periodic formal proceedings, such as jury duty or singing the national anthem at sports events.

Since freedom is not bestowed by government on us, our knowledge of it and our desire for it must arise *within* us. Having no external source, the urge to be free must arise naturally from within us. In this way we are no different from other entities in our environment, who also expect to have the liberty to be and to do what they are able to do. Many animals which humans have domesticated, such as horses, which in the wild are completely self-directed, must be “broken” (as in “broken in spirit”) in order to accept the bridle and the saddle.

But being born into freedom does not mean that each of us accepts our freedom or fights for it or grows to maturity in it. Organized society, as we live it, puts many obstacles in the way of our living the free life. For, real freedom threatens the systems of oppression by which the powerful remain in power and the rich become richer. In the United States, in general, our people are not free human beings. No one has taught us how to be free. Rather, we are simply less oppressed than the citizenry of nations with fiercer systems of wealth acquisition, such as those of China, Russia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, El Salvador, and so on. And the reason we are less oppressed is that we are more willing to ignore the needs of the destitute and to cooperate with the wealth acquisition system to which we are shackled, because we feel that it rewards us more generously than do the economic systems of other nations.

Unlike our people, who are enmired in ignorance and in greed and the lust to acquire, truly free people consciously embrace their freedom, exercise their curiosity, probe their self-awareness, and use their thoughtfulness productively.

You might wonder at this point, If freedom is inherent in us, why do we have to strive to attain freedom? This question—a good question—can be answered more clearly if we divide it into two questions: How do we know that freedom is inherent in us? And, Why must we strive to attain freedom? Let us discuss each question in order.

First, Is freedom inherent in us? The conclusion is Yes, it is. Here is the reasoning. Of all natural phenomena, the most worthy is existence. *Phenomena* are the impacts on us of the beings² we sense to be around us. All natural phenomena impact us. A beautiful sunrise, or a beautiful operatic aria, or a terrible car crash, or a hateful or vengeful crime which we have witnessed—all of these are existing events which may have a deep impact upon us spiritually/psychologically/in our hearts/in our minds. But if something does not exist, it cannot impact us in any other way—neither by its beauty or by the horror that it generates nor by its violence or fearfulness. Non-existing things can have no impact upon us spiritually.

And so, existence is *the* primary quality or characteristic of any being. An entity must exist first, before we can be impacted by its other qualities. And when an entity *does* exist, its existence is the “container” of its other qualities, such as shape, color, shadowing, weight, texture, and so on. Only what exists of an entity, such as a coffee mug, for example, is able to display these other characteristics.

In the macro world in which we ordinarily live (that is, the world above the level of sub-atomic particles), we notice and experience changes in ourselves. (For example, 12-year-old boy: “Hey!! I’m getting dark hairs on my upper lip!! I’m becoming a man!”. 12-year-old girl: “O God! I’m getting dark hairs on my upper lip!! I’m going to be sooooo ugly. Nobody is going to like me! Mom!!!”)

² I use the term *being* in the broadest sense, to include *existing entities* (such as “inanimate” objects, people, and other living things), *events* which have occurred or which are occurring, and also *qualities* which characterize members of the first two categories here. I use the term *occurrences* as synonymous with *events*. And I use the terms *characteristics*, *circumstances*, and *conditions* as synonymous with *qualities*.

But these changes which we experience in our senses and in our awareness of ourselves all occur within the unchanging matrix of our individual existence. Our existence is so central to our sense of ourselves and of our environment that we usually pay zero attention to it, taking it for granted. It is only when our existence is threatened that we realize how much we cherish it, as in “I don’t want to die. I have so much more to see and to do!”

Our existence is the foundation (like a building’s foundation) on which the components of ourselves and of our environments are assembled. Or again, our existence is like the smooth, flat, white wall or screen on which the color show of our lives, frame by frame speeding by, is projected. If our lives are like the always changing light and sound show of a movie, then our existence is the screen on which we experience the show.

First, we exist, as the fundamental fact of our lives. Then, within our existence, we experience the people and events and other beings which comprise the continually changing kaleidoscope of our lives. And then, apparently, we cease to exist. Without existence, we can experience nothing else.

Our existence is the most valuable possession we each have. But in human society in general, including in our society, we demonstrate how little we respect existence as a valued possession by how we treat one another. We murder each other, and we murder others whom we declare war upon. We curse each other routinely, rather than honoring the existence of the other. We have granted ourselves the right of ownership of the planetary environment, and we have given ourselves the privilege of uprooting the existence of trees and native plants in areas which we have designated as cultivated areas. (Witness the Amazon firestorm in 2019 which threatened the entire earth’s oxygen supply—fires which were intentionally started by farmers wishing to occupy more arable land.) We cover fertile ground with asphalt and concrete. We suck our rivers dry to quench the thirst of lawns planted in the desert. As Capitalist profiteers, we take from others what we have the power to take, often by deception, and having gained profit for ourselves, we ignore the impact which our taking has had on these other people. The day-by-day suffering and deprivation of others, even in our own midst, mean nothing to us, as long as we have what we think we need. People die in our streets and we do nothing but take

photos of them in their agony with our cell phones. The murder of Kitty Genovese in 1964 in Kew Gardens, Queens, New York City, while thirty-eight people watched without helping her is the icon of our disregard for existence as the fundamentally valuable component of our lives.

What causes fear and cowardice in us, what prevents us from accepting that our existence is both valuable and terminable, is what we hide behind in order not to respect (and when needed, defend) the dignity of our own existence and/or of the existence of other beings. Whatever keeps us from respecting ourselves and all other things keeps us from engaging our own freedom.

When we grow to respect our own existence and to respect the existence of all other beings, even those we must kill in order to survive, we enter then into the freedom which has been available to us all along, to which we had been blinded by our culturally-instilled values and prejudices. We enter then into a “partnership,” if you will, with all other beings in our perceptible universe. We then, each of us, proclaim our existence simply by existing in our self-respect, and we accept and welcome the existence of every other being, simply because each being proclaims its own respectable existence along with us. In respect we live with the other beings in our environment, co-habiting our planet in mutual regard.

In the United States, we killed off the Native American way of life before these people could teach us these truths and correct our self-destroying life habits.

So the conclusion to the first question in this presentation is, Yes, freedom is inherent in us simply because we exist. For freedom *is* the recognition of the worthy and respectable existence of all beings—of ourselves and of all other beings. However, our cultural ways of conducting ourselves—in raw emotion, in greed, in dishonesty, in self-deception—blind us to our own freedom and dignity.

And so, to the second question: Why must we strive to attain freedom? The answer to this question is apparent in the conclusion to the first question, just above. Each of us is born

into a culture which includes its own self-glorifying mythology, its own, often misdirected, values and prejudices, and its human leaders with their own failings, as well as talents.

We know now that this second question means, How can we strip ourselves of our cultural shackles, which have so thoroughly penetrated our lives, and which keep us blind to our own freedom?

I don't like the term "strip ourselves of" in the previous sentence. I prefer the term "transcend." And so, the question is, How can we transcend our cultural shackles, which have so thoroughly penetrated our lives, and which keep us blind to our own freedom?

We saw early on in this essay that wishing to have freedom won't make it so. And that's also the case with "willing" change upon ourselves. Life-altering change within us does not happen because we decide that it should happen. As we said above, the lives of each of us every minute are the product of the vast number of formative influences and experiences which have impacted and shaped our lives. This means that every time we have found a disrespectful criticism of a private person acceptable, we have further cemented ourselves to a value system which offends the foundational respect for other beings, which is the gateway to personal freedom. The more years we live in such slavery to disrespect, the more difficult it is for us to open our eyes to the simplicity of joining all the beings in our environment in welcoming all the others with an embrace of shared respect.

What this last paragraph means to say is that we cannot bring about change in ourselves. Rather, we must simply wait and accept the changes, joyful or painful, for better or for worse, which grow up within us. But while we are waiting for that prized but unanticipated experience when for a brief moment, we glimpse the pure and vividly real presence of the things around us, we can prepare—as a mother prepares a room for her child yet to be born—by testing out our courage in giving compassion to others, of watching without judgment the ways of the beings in our environment, of seeing from their point of view, and particularly, of listening to the silences which occur between the words of that constant narrative voice that interprets and evaluates and comments on our actions in the world and the world's actions which impact us, rather than listening to the words themselves.

We cannot bring about change in ourselves. But we *can* refocus our eyes and pay attention to what we have not paid attention to before. This re-direction of attention, by the way, is the first step in breaking all worthless habits. Our first effective step is to become conscious right now of what we are doing right now, which we have been doing by habit (such as, for example, indulging in prejudice and judgmentalism, or overeating, or gossiping, or disregarding what we damage by not watching where we are walking.)

When we see ourselves engaging in self-destructive or self-deceptive strategies for “staying normal,”—when we see the games we play, the lies we tell to others and to ourselves, the values we pretend to have and to uphold, and in particular, when we begin to challenge the large-scale structures which have been holding us in bondage, such as the religious and governmental mythologies which we have been taught from childhood are the truth, and when we stop believing and become skeptical of the self-serving words of our leaders, then our vision clarifies and our field of vision widens. We begin to understand the real moral texture of the world we live in, at least in these Capitalist United States.

For example, when you finally stop and reflect on all the work you are going through just to cut through that impossibly difficult plastic packaging to get a new AA battery for your television remote, and all the expense which the battery manufacturer endured to get the batteries packaged in that bulletproof, knifeproof, scissorsproof plastic container (which also contains an anti-theft device which triggers an alarm if you try to walk out the doorway without paying)—if you reflect on what that impenetrable package says about what the battery manufacturer thinks of its customers, you begin to see clearly the truth of the way in which capitalist Americans (of whatever socio-economic category) perceive the people around them—their friends and neighbors.

The truth is this: We simply don't respect one another deeply enough to trust each other. The battery manufacturer packages *all* its products in this type of container, which takes a good deal of effort and public work to open, because, though perhaps a small percentage of users of these batteries are shoplifters, the manufacturer feels it has to assume that everyone is a shoplifter. So, the manufacturer would rather inconvenience 90% of its loyal and cash-

paying customers than blind itself to the 10% who would attempt to steal the battery package. And here's the rub: We paying customers go along with the manufacturer! Not only do we pay for the more expensive armored plastic container, but we also allow the manufacturer to assume that we honest customers are thieves. That's how we treat each other in this land of plenty. See it for what it is.

In truth, when I purchase an item of several parts from a big-box store, I also open the package to see that all the necessary parts are in the package. I do this because I have had many, many experiences where I paid for the item and took it home unopened, opened it, and found that some good citizen had stolen one of the parts from the package I bought—probably to get the part which someone before him had stolen from the package *he* bought.

See clearly in the human world around you what the belief system you are operating under really is and what the values are which arise from those beliefs. In these few examples, we see widespread mistrust, which means that the innocent-looking people who say they are trying to serve you really see you as a thief, not to be trusted, and second, that many ordinary Joes who live their lives in that belief-set conform to it and become occasional thieves themselves.

If you haven't before seen the truth of these stories in present-day America, then perhaps you might look within to see if you yourself can be trusted. Courageous and truthful self-examination is what the seeker after freedom spends his or her time on, as they await the gift of pure reality.

And indeed, to one who practices internal silence—by paying attention to the silences between the internal words rather than to the words themselves—the silences will lengthen until for moments at a time, no words will arise and interrupt the silence. And at some point, the diligent seeker will be sitting silent, expecting nothing, when for an instant, the world around him will draw his heart into itself (as he is being welcomed by all existing things) and he will see and feel the splendid, silent union with all the vividly colorful and ever-so-present reality of all things.

In my personal experience, those first brief experiences of *realization* (the word itself meaning, “when everything becomes real”) were merely flashes of recognition, which in time grew more extensive in duration, though time itself evaporates as the experience begins.

The experience I am trying to describe here is the experience of personal freedom—the freedom to respect the joyful and beautiful individuality existing in, and manifested by, every being which we encounter. We find then that we as individuals are free only to the extent that we recognize and grant worth to the freedom of everything we encounter to be itself, to simply exist the way it has grown to be.

Happiness is the heart-thrill of rejoicing in the beautiful *freedom to be* which is inherent in all beings.

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