



Freedom

The life of a congregation is a rich community tapestry of people, programs, ministries and worship. We lift up the patterns of this tapestry at Unity Church with the threads of monthly themes woven through our worship and programming. These themes deepen our understanding of our own faith and strengthen our bonds with one another in religious community. We explore each theme in worship and in our newsletter; in covenant groups, guided writing sessions and Wednesday evening programming; and in our community outreach ministries, our literary journal and programs, and many other opportunities. The April theme is Freedom.

It was a warm spring day when our chimney began to sing. Birdsong reverberated down, an unexpected gift tumbling into the ashes. But soon after, more distressingly, came the frantic beating of wings. We had forgotten to close the flue and a small bird had dropped through the narrow opening, becoming trapped behind the glass fireplace doors. So with a hastily hatched plan, we coaxed the bird into a large blue bed sheet, naively hoping it might look like sky. Then, drawing up the corners to make a sack, we transported it outside and, with two of us, stretched the sheet wide like a trampoline, watching as the ashy bird spread its wings and launched skyward, not once looking back.

Freedom conjures images of open space and the movement it allows – an open sky and birds that cross it; an open field and dogs and children bounding into it; or open water and the blade

of a boat's bow slicing through it. We know freedom in our bodies and with metaphors of movement, though it also applies, and profoundly so, to the inner realms of mind and heart and spirit.

Talking with a reporter last winter, a young Egyptian teacher protesting in Cairo before Mubarek's departure noted that Egyptians have had their minds "in chains" from their earliest school years. "Where is the space I need," Abd al-Rahman asked, pointing to his own chest, "to make a new thing?"

Since then, with the world eagerly watching, Egypt has begun opening and claiming that free space, the space for making a new thing. First, in Cairo's Tahrir Square, then throughout the nation, and significantly, in the inner landscape of Egyptians' hearts and minds, they are opening new space for freedom.

In religious teachings, the word liberation is often used to emphasize the process of becoming free, a process that is ongoing and compelled by an "overspill" of longing. In Judeo Christianity, liberation has been described as the "journey with others and for others toward God's future," or toward that holy horizon of justice and peace for all. In India's major religions, the Sanskrit word *mukti*, meaning "release" or "letting go," refers to the liberation of the soul, a process requiring many lifetimes of training and discipline and practice.

"There is no external means of taking freedom by the throat," Rabindranath Tagore wrote. "Bondage in all its forms has its stronghold in the inner self and not in the outside world; it is

in the dimming of our consciousness, in the narrowing of our perspective, in the wrong valuation of things." The liberated soul, he said, lightened and enlightened, is freed from "the isolation of self, from the isolation of things."

This is not to deny the crime and iniquity of tyrannies in the outside world. But it points to the inner bondage upon which oppression of all kinds depends. Here, in the "land of the free," it also invites us to consider how bondage can be made of our own insistent isolation in the name of individuality or independence. What liberating joy might we discover if we could let go of the illusion of separate destinies, if we acknowledged how interconnected we all are?

Terry Tempest Williams has speculated wishfully that one day we might write a "Declaration of Interdependence that will be read and honored alongside the Declaration of Independence: proof of our evolution, revolution of our own growth and understanding."

Recalling that spring day when we released the bird outside our house, I remember the way my heart opened like a mirror image of the sky above – wide, endless and full of light – as the bird's wings unfolded. Surely freedom must be shared if it is to be known at all.

"The first sky is inside you, friend, open at either end of day," wrote the poet Li Young Lee. "The work of wings was always freedom, fastening one heart to every falling thing."

~ Karen Hering,
Consulting Literary Minister

Worship Theme Resources

BOOKS

The Open Space of Democracy, by Terry Tempest Williams

Whose Freedom?, by George Lakoff

The American Creed, by Forrest Church

FILM

The Shawshank Redemption (1994)
Two imprisoned men bond over a number of years, finding solace and eventual freedom through acts of common decency.