



# What Does It Mean To Be a People of Freedom?



April 2019

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*“True wisdom comes in understanding that sometimes, you are both the prison and the key.”*

— Johnathan Jena

Freedom can be about struggling against “others.” There *are* forces, structures and people that put bars around us. Freedom and liberation are indeed about “opposing the powerful,” “dismantling systems of white supremacy,” and “fighting for freedom.” But sometimes the bars are of our own making. Sometimes the limits and boxes are self-imposed. Sometimes, we are indeed both the prison and the key.

So this month, let’s make sure to look in all directions. Let’s look honestly and hopefully at the many ways that freedom requires a clear-eyed re-assessment of our choices. All of the great religions agree: We are more powerful than we realize or want to admit. We can forgive and free ourselves from the cage of resentment. We can let go of jealousy. We can stop playing the self-defeating games of status, money and beauty. We can let that chip fall from our shoulder and freely move on. We can work for the freedom of others knowing that in the process we ourselves will also be liberated. For to be free is not merely to cast off one’s chains but to live in a way that enhances the freedom of others. With freedom comes responsibilities.

May this be the month when we notice what imprisons all of us and turn that key.

In faith,

Andrea Johnson  
Chalice Circle Coordinator

# Our Spiritual Exercises

## Option A: In Order to Remain Engaged

The task of creating a society in which none are oppressed and all are liberated is demanding and often discouraging work. The author and activist Alice Walker knows this work well: for 40 years she has been “standing on the frontlines of healing America’s own violent history.” She shares seven steps for how to remain a Love Activist without getting dragged down or burnt out:

- 1) Recommit Every Day
- 2) Protect What Matters Most
- 3) Embrace Your Joy
- 4) Stand for Truth
- 5) Be Courageous
- 6) Spread Forgiveness
- 7) Love the Earth

More here: <https://blog.theshiftnetwork.com/blog/alice-walkers-7-simple-steps-being-love-activist>. For this exercise, read through the list and choose the one that calls to you the most. What do you need to liberate from within you in order to remain engaged in the wider work of liberation? Once you have your answer, take some time this month to enact that step.

*Option B:*  
**Mark (and take control of) Your Hours!**

Freedom is often about simply waking up! Hour by hour, we give up intentionality and let life happen to us. This exercise invites us to liberate ourselves by waking up to what our hours actually look like.

Here's your assignment: Use the alarm clock on your cell phone (or some other device) to set off an hourly alert/chime. Have the alarm/chime go off every hour on the hour for the entire day, from the time you get up to the time you go to bed. Every time the hourly alarm goes off, make a one-word note in a journal or notepad that capture what you are doing in that moment. For instance, one day's worth of entries might look like: worrying, staring, working, working, working, eating, complaining, daydreaming, emailing, working, commuting, cooking, washing, emailing, dog-walking, nodding-off.

Do this at least 2-3 days, either in a row or at different times.

Now here's the catch: Notice the pattern and figure out how you want to change it. Don't over-plan it. Just give your day a little bit more intentionality. Keep your hourly alarm in your head and tell yourself that you want to end the day with a list that you can be proud of. Imagine what kind of list would make you smile, feel in control or feel free. For instance this kind of list: snoozing, jogging, enjoying, planning, working, experimenting, advocating, working, dreaming, laughing, cooking, reading, connecting, talking, loving, breathing. Or this kind of list from a day off of work: sleeping, sleeping, soaking, painting, painting, varnishing, indulging, napping, painting, painting, dining, dancing, dancing, gazing, dreaming. It's all about consciousness. It's all about freeing yourself by simply noticing. It's all about living life rather than letting life live you!

## Option C: **Let Your Precious Go**

In J.R.R. Tolkien's classic, The Lord of the Rings, we watch a creature named Gollum give his life and soul over to his "precious." That which empowered him, ended up destroying him. That which was meant to feed and protect him, depleted and betrayed him. It's meant to symbolize the destructive lure of addiction and power. It's an extreme example. But this trap is also commonplace. All of us do things that we think will make us feel better but end up making us feel worse. We all have our "precious" that ends up betraying us.

This exercise simply asks you to use this month to work on facing your "precious" and make some small step in letting it go. There are no complicated instructions than this: Free yourself from your "precious."

Here is some inspiration and guidance:

[http://gretchenrubin.com/happiness\\_project/2015/03/like-gollum-do-you-have-something-precious-that-isnt-good-for-you/](http://gretchenrubin.com/happiness_project/2015/03/like-gollum-do-you-have-something-precious-that-isnt-good-for-you/)

# Your Question

*As always, don't treat these questions like "homework" or try to answer every single one. Instead, make time to meditate and reflect on the list and then pick the one question that speaks to you most. The goal is to figure out which question is "yours." Which question captures the call of your inner voice? Which one contains "your work"? What is it trying to get you to notice? Where is it trying to lead you?*

1. The sculptor Michelangelo was once asked how it was that he could create such beautiful works. "It's very simple," he answered. "When I look at a block of marble, I see the sculpture inside it. All I have to do is remove what doesn't belong." What can you remove that doesn't belong in yourself? What might be liberated by removing what doesn't belong? What beauty is waiting for you to give it a bit more room?
2. Have you let yourself become imprisoned by the fear of missing out? By the imaginings of what might have been or what others have?
3. Do you need to free yourself from the ordinary? ("When things are taking their ordinary course, it is hard to remember what matters." -Marilynne Robinson)
4. Have you been helping people but ignoring the call for liberation? ("If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together." - Lila Watson)
5. How is your balance between spiritual/personal liberation and social/political liberation? Are they feeding each other or fighting? Or just not talking?
6. Is the thing you do to feel better actually making you feel worse? Has what you turn to for freedom become a bit of a trap?
7. Is it time to forgive (and free) yourself?
8. Are you ready to take off the mask? Do you even notice that it is on?
9. Are you looking for freedom in far away places and possibly not noticing it is waiting for you right back at home? Or right there where you are standing now?
10. Is kindness waiting for you to pick it up and free someone? Maybe even yourself?

**What's your question?** Your question may not be listed above. As always, if the above questions don't include what life is asking from you, spend the month listening to your days to hear it.

# **Companion Pieces**

## **Recommended Resources for Personal Exploration & Reflection**

*The following resources are not required reading. We will not analyze these pieces in our group. Instead they are here to companion you on your journey this month, get your thinking started and open you to new ways of thinking about what it means to be part of a people of Freedom.*

### **Word Roots**

**Freedom:** the power or right to act, speak, or think as one wants without hindrance or restraint. The state of not being imprisoned or enslaved. Synonym: **liberation** – the act or process of freeing someone or something from another's control; the removal of traditional social rules, attitudes etc., a movement seeking equal rights and status for a group.

### **Wise Words**

We are not trapped or locked up in these bones. No, no. We are free to change. And love changes us. And if we can love one another, we can break open the sky.

~ *Walter Mosley*

No one can be perfectly free until all are free.

~ *Herbert Spencer*

If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.

~ *Lila Watson*

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.

~ *Henry David Thoreau*

It was during those long and lonely years that my hunger for the freedom of my own people became a hunger for the

freedom of all people...the oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed. One who takes away another's freedom is a prisoner of hatred, locked behind the bars of prejudice and narrow mindedness. I am not truly free if I am taking away someone else's freedom, just as surely as I am not free when my freedom is taken from me. The oppressed and the oppressor alike are robbed of their humanity. The truth is we are not yet free; we have merely achieved the freedom to be free, the right not be oppressed. For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others. That is the true test of our devotion to freedom. With freedom comes responsibilities.

~ *Nelson Mandela's Long Walk to Freedom*

Jesus's resurrection is the beginning of God's new project not to snatch people away from earth to heaven but to colonize earth with the life of heaven. That, after all, is what the Lord's Prayer is about.

~ *N.T. Wright*

We can't even remotely fathom that whatever is ending for us is always more than an ending. ...This is the magic and meaning of Easter.

~ *Craig D. Lounsbrough*

True wisdom comes in understanding that sometimes, you are both the prison and the key.

~ *Johnathan Jena*

Blame is very tricky in that it seems like a way out when it is really a form of imprisonment.

~ Bryant McGill

## Poetry

Perhaps it would eventually erode, but...

Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer

**Full poem:** : <http://tinyurl.com/hoxjgx9>

That rock that we have been pushing up the hill—that one

that keeps rolling back down and we keep pushing back up—what if

we stopped? We are not Sisyphus. This rock is not a punishment.

It's something we've chosen to push....

### Everything Is Waiting For You

David Whyte

<http://www.awakin.org/read/view.php?tid=2296>

Your great mistake is to act the drama as if you were alone. As if life were a progressive and cunning crime with no witness to the tiny hidden transgressions. To feel abandoned is to deny the intimacy of your surroundings. Surely, even you, at times, have felt the grand array; the swelling presence, and the chorus, crowding out your solo voice. You must note the way the soap dish enables you, or the window latch grants you freedom. Alertness is the hidden discipline of familiarity.

The stairs are your mentor of things to come, the doors have always been there

to frighten you and invite you, and the tiny speaker in the phone is your dream-ladder to divinity.

Put down the weight of your aloneness and ease into the conversation. The kettle is singing even as it pours you a drink, the cooking pots have left their arrogant aloofness and seen the good in you at last. All the birds and creatures of the world are unutterably themselves. Everything is waiting for you.

### Caged Bird

Maya Angelou

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48989/caged-bird>

A free bird leaps on the back of the wind and floats downstream till the current ends and dips his wing in the orange sun rays and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks down his narrow cage can seldom see through his bars of rage his wings are clipped and his feet are tied so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings with a fearful trill of things unknown but longed for still and his tune is heard

on the distant hill  
for the caged bird  
sings of freedom.

The free bird thinks of another breeze  
and the trade winds soft through the  
sighing trees  
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn  
bright lawn  
and he names the sky his own

But a caged bird stands on the grave of  
dreams  
his shadow shouts on a nightmare  
scream  
his wings are clipped and his feet are  
tied  
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings  
with a fearful trill  
of things unknown  
but longed for still  
and his tune is heard  
on the distant hill  
for the caged bird  
sings of freedom.

### Autobiography of Eve

*Ansel Elkins*

<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/autobiography-eve>

Wearing nothing but snakeskin  
boots, I blazed a footpath, the first  
radical road out of that old kingdom  
toward a new unknown.  
When I came to those great flaming gates  
of burning gold,  
I stood alone in terror at the threshold  
between Paradise and Earth.  
There I heard a mysterious echo:  
my own voice  
singing to me from across the forbidden  
side. I shook awake—  
at once alive in a blaze of green fire.

Let it be known: I did not fall from grace.

I leapt

to freedom.

### I look at the World

*Langston Hughes*

[https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetry\\_magazine/poems/52005/i-look-at-the-world](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetry_magazine/poems/52005/i-look-at-the-world)

I look at the world  
From awakening eyes in a black face—  
And this is what I see:  
This fenced-off narrow space  
Assigned to me.

I look then at the silly walls  
Through dark eyes in a dark face—  
And this is what I know:  
That all these walls oppression builds  
Will have to go!

I look at my own body  
With eyes no longer blind—  
And I see that my own hands can make  
The world that's in my mind.  
Then let us hurry, comrades,  
The road to find.

## Articles, Podcasts and Videos

### The Freedom of Real Apologies

*Layli-long-soldier*

<https://onbeing.org/programs/layli-long-soldier-the-freedom-of-real-apologies-oct2018/>

Layli Long Soldier is a writer, a mother, a citizen of the United States, and a citizen of the Oglala Lakota Nation. She has a way of opening up this part of her life, and of American life, to inspire self-searching and tenderness. Her award-winning first book of poetry, *WHEREAS*, is a response to the U.S. government's official apology to Native peoples in 2009, which was done so quietly, with no ceremony, that it was practically a secret. Layli Long Soldier offers entry points for

us all — to events that are not merely about the past, and to the freedom real apologies might bring.

### **Liberation through Art: Beyoncé's Visionary Fiction – Formation**

<http://tinyurl.com/gtclrvd>

From the video's review: "We create from what we can imagine. We are living right now inside the imaginings of people whose mental illness makes them believe they are superior to other human beings. This video is part of the resistance, the new imaginings that we use to pull ourselves towards liberation."

### **The Exodus Story and the Necessity of Desire for Liberation**

<http://www.onbeing.org/blog/exodus-story-and-necessity-desire-liberation/3840>

This podcast explores the story of Exodus from the Hebrew Bible as myth, which is "not about something that never happened. It is about something that happens over and over again." The myth of Exodus is the story of liberation, happening over and over again.

### **Liberation as Harmony with Nature and Another Person**

<https://www.facebook.com/morgan.burks.92/videos/10153769033350630/?fref=nf>

### **Somewhere in America (3 minutes)**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cD6UrVHNRMc>

A liberation poem performed by three young women who bravely speak unspoken truths that are all too often silenced.

### **Beauty Harmonizes Law and Liberty**

Rabindranath Tagore

<http://www.awakin.org/read/view.php?tid=983>

When we come to literature we find that though it conforms to rules of grammar it

is yet a thing of joy, it is freedom itself. The beauty of a poem is bound by strict laws, yet it transcends them. The laws are its wings, they do not keep it weighed down, they carry it to freedom. Its form is in law but its spirit is in beauty. Law is the first step towards freedom, and beauty is the complete liberation which stands on the pedestal of law. Beauty harmonizes in itself the limit and the beyond, the law and the liberty.

### **The Oppressor and the Oppressed Must Both be Liberated**

Nelson Mandela

<http://www.awakin.org/read/view.php?tid=2175>

When I walked out of prison, that was my mission, to liberate the oppressed and the oppressor both. Some say that has now been achieved. But I know that that is not the case... We have not taken the final step of our journey, but the first step on a longer and even more difficult road. For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others. The true test of our devotion to freedom is just beginning.

### **Missing Out: Liberating ourselves from the curse of our unlived lives**

[https://www.brainpickings.org/2015/08/17/missing-out-adam-phillips/?mc\\_cid=74b7067de7&mc\\_eid=04e3c8a6e2](https://www.brainpickings.org/2015/08/17/missing-out-adam-phillips/?mc_cid=74b7067de7&mc_eid=04e3c8a6e2)

An effort to help liberate us from our culture so plagued by the fear of missing out on what might have been or what others have.

### **Gollum's Ring & Liberation**

[http://gretchenrubin.com/happiness\\_project/2015/03/like-gollum-do-you-have-something-precious-that-isnt-good-for-you/](http://gretchenrubin.com/happiness_project/2015/03/like-gollum-do-you-have-something-precious-that-isnt-good-for-you/)

Has “your precious” become your prison? Is the thing you do to feel better actually making you feel worse?

### A Simple Way To Break a Bad Habit - TED Talk

[http://www.ted.com/talks/judson\\_brewer\\_a\\_simple\\_way\\_to\\_break\\_a\\_bad\\_habit?utm\\_source=newsletter\\_weekly\\_2016-02-06&utm\\_campaign=newletter\\_weekly&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_content=talk\\_of\\_the\\_week\\_button](http://www.ted.com/talks/judson_brewer_a_simple_way_to_break_a_bad_habit?utm_source=newsletter_weekly_2016-02-06&utm_campaign=newletter_weekly&utm_medium=email&utm_content=talk_of_the_week_button)

Can we break bad habits by being more curious about them?

### “Hearing the Right Voices” by Cami Applequist

[http://www.uuworld.org/articles/hearing-right-voices?utm\\_source=n](http://www.uuworld.org/articles/hearing-right-voices?utm_source=n)

A woman reflects on what happens when she listened to “all of the wrong voices” about her body, and how the words of two young girls liberated her from that shame.

### Toni Morrison on the Deepest Meaning of Freedom

Maria Popova

<https://www.brainpickings.org/2018/09/10/toni-morrison-beloved-freedom/>

Painting the state of being unlatched in her protagonist after escaping from enslavement, Morrison considers the deepest meaning of freedom:

Listening to the doves in Alfred, Georgia, and having neither the right nor the permission to enjoy it because in that place mist, doves, sunlight, copper dirt, moon — everything belonged to the men who had the guns. Little men, some of them, big men too, each one of whom he could snap like a twig if he wanted to.

Men who knew their manhood lay in their guns and were not even embarrassed by the knowledge that without gunshot fox would laugh at them. And these “men” who made even vixen laugh could, if you let them, stop you from hearing doves or

loving moonlight. So you protected yourself and loved small. Picked the tiniest stars out of the sky to own; lay down with head twisted in order to see the loved one over the rim of the trench before you slept. Stole shy glances at her between the trees at chain-up. Grass blades, salamanders, spiders, woodpeckers, beetles, a kingdom of ants. Anything bigger wouldn’t do. A woman, a child, a brother — a big love like that would split you wide open in Alfred, Georgia. He knew exactly what she meant: to get to a place where you could love anything you chose — not to need permission for desire — well now, *that* was freedom.

### “What is Liberation Theology?” by Tony Campolo

<http://www.faithstreet.com/onfaith/2008/04/30/what-is-liberation-theology/3419>

Liberation theology is “the simple belief that in the struggles of poor and oppressed people against their powerful and rich oppressors, God sides with the oppressed against the oppressors.”

### Movies

#### The Shawshank Redemption

[http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/shawshank\\_redemption/](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/shawshank_redemption/)

#### Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0295297/>

The theme of liberation is an undercurrent throughout the Harry Potter series; it is vividly illustrated throughout *Chamber of Secrets*, especially in the story of Dobby the house elf.

#### The Circle

<https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/films/reviews/view/2746/the-circle>

A riveting Iranian drama set in modern day Teheran, showing how a group of

women, severely constrained by the patriarchy, religion, and custom, nevertheless nurture their souls with the tonic of freedom.

## Books

### Liberation: New Works on Freedom from Internationally Renowned Poets

*Mark Ludwig*

<http://www.beacon.org/Liberation-P1146.aspx>

A collection of poems from around the world that explore the question, *What does it mean to be free?*

### Beloved

*Toni Morrison*

[https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/6149.Beloved?from\\_search=true](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/6149.Beloved?from_search=true)

Staring unflinchingly into the abyss of slavery, this spellbinding novel transforms history into a story as powerful as Exodus and as intimate as a lullaby.

### Long Walk to Freedom

*Nelson Mandela*

[https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/318431.Long\\_Walk\\_to\\_Freedom?from\\_search=true](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/318431.Long_Walk_to_Freedom?from_search=true)

Nelson Mandela is one of the great moral and political leaders of our time: an international hero whose lifelong dedication to the fight against racial oppression in South Africa won him the Nobel Peace Prize and the presidency of his country.

### My Bondage and My Freedom

*Fredrick Douglass, John David Smith*

[https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/771085.My\\_Bondage\\_and\\_My\\_Freedom?from\\_search=true](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/771085.My_Bondage_and_My_Freedom?from_search=true)

Ex-slave Frederick Douglass's second autobiography-written after ten years of reflection following his legal emancipation in 1846 and his break with

Chalice Circles

his mentor William Lloyd Garrison-catapulted Douglass into the international spotlight as the foremost spokesman for American blacks, both freed and slave.

## Songs

### "Take My Hand, Precious Lord" by Ledisi from the Selma Movie Soundtrack

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qxVpHiyT5kE>

### "I Want to Break Free" by Queen

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f4Mc-NYPHaQ>

### "Formation" by Beyonce

<http://adriennemareebrown.net/2016/02/07/beyonces-visionary-fiction-formation/>

### "Pressure" by David Bowie, January, 8 1947 – January 10, 2016

A song about the liberating power of love amid all the pressures pushing us down.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YoDhgHDvkk>

### "Lift Me" by the Bengsons

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X9262w6umIM>

### "I Wanna Get Better" - The Bleachers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=khPf88uxyFo>

This packet has been created by Andrea Johnson using the Soul Matters Model of Small Groups. For use at Unity Unitarian Church only.



<https://www.soulmatterssharingcircle.com/>