November 2021

Dear Friends in the Journey,

I do love the early days of November because so much is packed in there for us to reflect on.

We have All Saints and All Souls day where we reflect upon all those who have gone before us, honor the contributions that they have made to our lives and commit ourselves to carrying forward the good work of being ‘church’ in the world.

We have election day where we as a collective have a chance to elect representatives who, ideally, will be stewards of the public good. It is a time every year where we decide by voting, ‘What kind of vision for society do we want?” This is no small question.

We have the initial cold that starts appearing (at least in Northern climates). We can feel the transition to a new season, and the first frost always signals to the plants, trees and animals that it is time to move towards the quieting.

It is such a spiritually rich time that offers much for reflection – and that does not even include all of the particulars of life that are happening to each one of us!

But this spiritual richness might not always bear much fruit. Most of us probably have a lot of distractions in our lives, and our culture moves at a fast pace. Or maybe we get caught up in details or expectations that tighten us up. Maybe we’re stuck in the past somehow and acting out old dramas that don’t let us be free to be in the moment.

Imagine being free.

Imagine liberation.

These are two of the of the most important spiritual themes of our scriptural tradition, and they are not only spiritual realities. Liberation has concrete, physical implications as well. Inner and outer freedom are also deeply interconnected.

That’s what we will take up in these reflections.

I do hope that you are doing OK in the midst of so much. Please be sure to stay connected to others and yourselves as much as possible during these times.

Blessings,

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**I. Fire-Starter Questions**

1. When you hear the word liberation, what comes to mind?

2. What is one thing that you would like to be free from? What is something you want others to be free from?

3. What is something in our world that keeps people bound?

**II. Some Scripture Passages for Reflection**

**Isaiah 61: 1- 2**

*The Spirit of God is upon me because God anointed me. God sent me to preach good news to the poor, heal the heartbroken, Announce freedom to all captives, and pardon all prisoners.*

**John 10:10**

*I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly.*

**Galatians 5:1**

*Christ has set us free to live a free life. So take your stand! Never again let anyone put a harness of slavery on you.*

**Galatians 5: 13**

*It is absolutely clear that God has called you to a free life. Just make sure that you don’t use this freedom as an excuse to do whatever you want to do and destroy your freedom. Rather, use your freedom to serve one another in love; that’s how freedom grows.*

**III. Some Questions for Reflection**

1. The passage from Isaiah speaks of the one who will set Israel and all captives free. What holds people captive (physically and spiritually)?

2. What does “abundant life” mean for you? How does our wider culture define it?

3. What harnesses (physical, emotional, spiritual) have been put on you? How did they get there?

4. According to Paul, what is the purpose of liberation?

**IV. Commentary**

Lately I have been re-engaging the great Buddhist teacher Rev. angel Kyodo williams. At its core, Buddhism has a profound emphasis on freedom and liberation (not unlike Christianity), and so, as a Buddhist teacher, she speaks about this often. But she also speaks about liberation from her perspective as a queer, Black woman living in the world.

Like any great spiritual teacher, she says that we all have individual aspects of our lives that prevent our freedom or liberation. These could be anything from our addictions to everyday anxieties and worries that distract us. Many of us also have events that happened to us which introduced baggage into our lives that prevents our freedom as well. We have hang ups and habits that keep us stuck.

In a recent talk Rev. angel gave about contemplative practice, she said that a path to liberation requires a lot from us, and she’s clear that not everyone is even seeking liberation. She said it necessitates a reorientation of priorities and an intentional cultivation of the spirit. “It doesn’t sneak up on you while you are watching HBO…if it did our world would be in a whole different place!” Liberation doesn’t just happen. It requires focus, discipline and attention because we are constantly getting pulled in so many directions.

She identified 3 pillars to a personal practice towards liberation which really resonated for me: Commitment, Courage and Capacity.

* Commitment to a daily practice in order to stay on a path to liberation. She says quite honestly that many of us (and I would likely find myself in this category) dance around liberation. We read a book, attend a course or do something that engages us on the journey, but we don’t stick with it. These disconnected things can make us “feel like we’re about liberation” but we’re not getting much deeper into it. Combine that with the speed and momentum of life, and we quickly realize that cultivating a regular practice of contemplation requires a lot from us.
* Courage to face the things that arise during our contemplation. When we pause, things arise. Rev. angel says that not only do we need courage to face what arises internally – like our own pain, grief, failures and attachments - but a contemplative practice puts us at odds with business-as-usual and requires us to let go of some of what we had built our life around. We need courage both to let go of what we’re caught up into (which Buddha said is mostly just illusion) and what we experience inside (which can often be painful). And mind you, what we get caught up into is not always “bad” stuff. She said that many of us come to realize that our “aspirations have become our prisons.” I just stopped when I heard this because it feels so true to me. For many of us, we have great aspirations and intentions and start working towards things that are “good” in life – relationships, careers, status, education, wealth, security. But at some point, these take on a life of their own and then start to imprison us in ways that we did not originally intend.
* Capacity to keep expanding our ability to do this in our own lives which then increases our ability to move that way in the world. And she goes on to say that commitment goes a long way to increasing capacity.

I should also just mention that she is clear that a person who is liberated is not suddenly free from any concerns and difficulties. If we’re living a human life, we will have concerns and difficulties. She says, however, that a path to liberation enables us to meet those concerns and ourselves in this moment, as we are.

Let’s pause for a moment. What’s coming up for you?

While I have been referencing Rev. angel, we could easily find so many places where Jesus said very similar things. He told his disciples to make sure that they had a quiet place to go to in the midst of things (Mark 6). He told them to not be anxious about worries associated with their lives (Matthew 6). He said that we needed to keep practicing our faith so that it has greater and greater capacity to impact the world (Luke 17; Mark 9). And he recognized that not everyone is even interested in this path (John 6).

In her profound article, *Your Liberation Is on the Line*[[1]](#footnote-1), Rev. angel makes it explicit that our path to liberation is not just for us to become better or holier people. She says that, “no one who has ever touched liberation could possibly want anything other than liberation for everyone.” Our personal freedom is intertwined with the freedom of all sentient beings.

Of course Martin Luther King reminded us of this during the 1960’s when he said things like, ““Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere,” and that we are all bound “in an inescapable network of mutuality.” He went on to say that, "Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly,” and that “no one is free until we are all free.”

So she makes explicit the connections between cultivating our own personal understandings and seeing the world more clearly (especially in terms of privilege and justice). “We need to understand the parts of ourselves that we don’t want to know. We need to understand the parts that society tells us we should have shame about. We need to understand our history and our context and then live through that, live into that truth. We don’t have to know the answers. We just have to choose to live into the truth. And the truth, both universal and ever-unfolding from moment to moment, is not easy for most of us to apprehend.”

She also says that all of us have been harmed by the systems of oppression that we all inhabit, but that “many people in positions of dominance don’t know their own story. They don’t know their story in the way that when you’re marginalized, you are forced to know your story, to understand that you have a story, that you’re affected by a larger story, and that you’re working with all of it. When you presume that this is just the way it is, or that you got here on your own strengths, then you don’t recognize that you even have a story.”

Moreover, when oppressed and marginalized people advocate for their own freedom and liberation, we owe them a debt of gratitude. “The fact that they have joy in their hearts at all is phenomenal, given the weight that they bear in their trans bodies, their queer bodies, their disabled bodies, their neurodiverse bodies, their female bodies, their Black bodies. We should celebrate them all, because anyone who has insisted on liberation so that they may know joy and love represents for the rest of us the possibility [that] liberation is possible even for you.”

What I love about Rev. angel’s work (and why it reminds me so much of Jesus) is that she has done so much inner work related to liberation and sees the personal/collective connections so profoundly. Of course she gets upset and angry with injustice. But she responds to it differently. “The only way I can sit here and not be absolutely furious, livid with every man, every white body, every straight body, is because of my path. Even when I want to be mad or hating on folks because they represent dominant paradigms, I cannot, because liberation wants nothing else but liberation for all. That’s the only reason I can speak from this place—because one day I woke up and much to my chagrin, I loved the very same people who would rather see my body lying in the street. I loved the very same people who would ignore me…I loved the very same people who would make me invisible. I didn’t say I liked them! But I do love them. This is not the path of “Everything is going to be neat.” This is not the path of “All the answers will make you feel good.” This is a path of complexity. And that love is not an easy burden.”

So if you think the path of liberation is easy, think again!

Facing our own demons – whether they be personal or collective - takes commitment, courage and capacity. And it takes community.

Because this path is so demanding, we can not do it alone. We need each other and we need mentors and teachers who show us the way. Rev. angel is one of those teachers. So is Jesus.

Beginning or recommitting to the path of liberation can start today.

And Rev. angel says that we should not make it too complicated. “You start exactly where you are, the truth of your existence right here and now. Know that no one has your answers. Just commit—that’s your job.” She goes on to acknowledge that “it’s a path of confusion. [And] in order to undo the confusion you don’t know you have, you first have to be completely confused. Everything you think you know about how things are has to be set aside. To do that, you must acknowledge, with absolute certainty, that you have been completely caught up.”

Ultimately, she says, “It comes down to this: if you don’t get on your path, I don’t get to finish mine. We’re bound.” We need everyone on board for liberation.

**V. Action Step**

One action I will take after reading these guidelines is…

1. https://www.lionsroar.com/your-liberation-is-on-the-line/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)