

Did Jefferson Mean What I Mean?

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Welcome, Centering, Kindling, Opening Words:

We are here
after a week of sun and gray, rain and warmth,
to worship, to claim once more our responsibility
in making history, in engaging the wide world,
and to be strengthened
by the vision of universal love and justice
which so quickened our courageous ancestors

**And so, we pledge to journey together along the ways of truth and affection,
as best as we can name them now, or may learn them in days to come; that
we and our children may be fulfilled, and that we may speak to our world in
words and lives of peace, justice and goodwill.**

Story (Henry's Freedom Box), News, Affirmation, Song, the Sequence:

O Love,
you are neither the shake of earthquakes
nor the roar of battle helicopters.
You are neither the incense of the magnolia
nor the rain-water scent of new clover,
nor the purple of a pansy-blossom,
although they certainly offer hints.
Red roses do not finally define you,
nor does the cruel death of an ancient Galilean
proclaim you.
The lyric of a beautiful song
is like your echo, echo, echo;
the laughter of children at play, a flashing glimpse
of you in the corner of my eye.
O Love,
you are a map, a path, a compass.
You are a goal and an inn on the way.
You are the womb that births freedom,
the seed that blossoms as forgiveness,
the power that pulses our hearts
when we see ourselves in the mirror of others,
or return to others the truth of their own face.

You are muscles in the neck that refuse to flinch
and turn away from the broken heart, the homeless child, or the visible practices of hatred based
on appearance, status, affection or doubt.
You are the muscles in the arm and leg,
which call us to move forward to salve the wounds
and rectify the brokenness as best we can.
You are the gravity that gathers us
when we need to be together,
in power or praise,
and the confidence we need
when we go deep
within our alone selves,
and risk the honesty
of silence.

silence

Love, you are in our lives. Sometimes bright,
sometimes hidden. But you are there.
In the names and faces of those whom we love, or who love us.
As our spirit prompts us, may we see, before our inner eye,
the faces of those who rise now out of the
treasure-house of our hearts, naming them in love or
care or conflict or grief---spoken aloud
or spoken in silence...

naming

Love, the beauty of a song is your echo...but that echo reverberates through our hearts for
days...

Choral Music

The First Reading *is from a letter that Thomas Jefferson wrote to Isaac Tiffany in 1819. Tiffany was a young man from a small town in New York state who asked the former president about the quality of a certain translation of Aristotle. After several exchanges, Jefferson offered the following definition of freedom, of liberty.*

"Liberty, I would say, is unobstructed action according to our will. But rightful liberty is unobstructed action according to our will *within limits drawn around us by the equal rights of others*. I do not add 'within the limits of the law,' because law is often but the tyrant's will, and always so when it violates the right of an individual."

The Second Reading comes from the excellent work by Annette Gordon-Reed, called *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemmings: An American Controversy* which came out in 1997-8. This is a longer reading, but it tells an amazing story I had not heard before.

In October 1994 the Association of the Bar of the City of New York sponsored a mock trial of Thomas Jefferson. The issue to be decided by the trial was whether examples of hypocrisy in Jefferson's life significantly diminished his contributions to American society. Charles Ogletree of the Harvard Law School served as a prosecutor of the case, and Drew Days, the solicitor general of the United States was the attorney for the defense. William Rehnquist of the United States Supreme Court presided as trial judge. The jury consisted of audience members, including myself and my husband; we arrived early to get a seat.

The irony was exquisite. Two distinguished black attorneys stood in front of a predominately white audience, and presented the cases for and against Thomas Jefferson, a man who had owned blacks and disparaged their mental abilities. That this event was made possible because of some of the other loftier ideals Jefferson expounded is clear. What is less clear is whether he would have been delighted or horrified at that thought.

After presenting their opening arguments, the lawyers called historians as expert witnesses to make their respective cases. Each talked about Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence, with his plantations worked by black slaves; Jefferson the republican, with his royal tastes in food, wine and property; Jefferson, proponent of the rights of man and opponent of the rights of women. When it came to a vote, my husband and I, along with the overwhelming majority of the other members of the audience, voted in favor of Jefferson.

Note that the trial was not about whether Thomas Jefferson was prone to hypocrisy, which seems to have been taken as a given. The question for the evening was whether we were willing to forgive him for it. That the answer would be yes was never in doubt; even the "prosecutor" expressed relief at the decision. (After all,) Jefferson's authorship of the Declaration of Independence lifted him above the rest of the Founding Fathers. His vision of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness has been taken to heart by Americans, many of whom seem to think this triumvirate of rights is guaranteed by the Constitution. Thus, it is often said that Jefferson is the personification of America. His strengths are the strengths of the country, and the same can be said for his weaknesses. For this reason, the knowledge that Jefferson himself did not live up to the vision he set before us has troubled some Americans, from his time until today.

Sermon

It was more than four decades ago that I went with my family, on a summer vacation trip, to visit Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's plantation home in his beloved Virginia. I remember that my folks were delighted, naturally, that it was an Italian word (meaning "little mountain") and were overjoyed to find out that Mr. Jefferson not only knew Italian fluently, but was the first on these shores to eat both pasta and tomatoes regularly in his diet. Everyone else here in those days had convinced themselves that tomatoes, being of the Nightshade family botanically, were

poisonous, and so refused to eat them. Jefferson had noticed on his travels that neither the Italians nor the French were the worse for wear for eating these crimson globes, and so cultivated them himself in his magnificent gardens. These gardens also impressed my folks, who kept on wishing aloud that my grandfathers (the two VERY green thumbs in the family) could be there to see the intricate beds and garden structures.

I don't remember much more than that now. I suppose we saw the inside of the place, with its many Jeffersonian inventions of delight, and perhaps we were told about his slaves, and shown their quarters...I just don't remember now. I sort of remember the outside of the house, and its dome, which delighted me. But that's all.

In trying to unpack the meanings of the word "freedom" this month, I naturally thought of Mr. Jefferson. Although my memory of Monticello arrived in fragments, my memory of his mighty words on liberty were still echoing majestically through my soul years after I first read them. I don't know about you, but my schooling was filled with Jefferson...not just *life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness* in the *Declaration of Independence*, but his masterwork, the *Statute of Virginia on Religious Freedom*. He actually had the names of both these works engraved on his tombstone to serve as his principle memorial.

His understanding of *political* freedom and his understanding of *religious* freedom, represented by these two amazing writings, seem to contrast. For Jefferson, political freedom meant the right and power of the citizens to check the government as often as they needed to. "God forbid," he wrote to William Smith in 1787, "we should ever be twenty years without...rebellion. The people cannot be all, and always, well informed. If they remain quiet under such misconceptions, it is lethargy, the forerunner of death to liberty. And what country can preserve its liberties if their rulers are not warned, from time to time, that their people preserve the spirit of resistance?" So I have to imagine that he would have loudly applauded the 11,000 of us who were down by the Statehouse yesterday afternoon proclaiming... without any lethargy... our own "spirit of resistance" to the recently passed and deeply controversial bill SB5. Jefferson, in fact, went a lot further in his understanding of rebellion than we did yesterday. He called for the shedding of "patriot blood" in such purifying uprisings of the people.

But his understanding of *religious* freedom is *entirely* distinct from these political notions of spilled blood or rebellion. Religious freedom in fact, wants NO spilled blood. Rather, it focuses instead on the right of religious individuals to freely live next door to people of wildly differing viewpoints, with the caveat that all of these different religious have to leave each other alone. For Jefferson, no one can be forced to support or abandon any religion. No one can be forced to believe anything they do not believe. And, Jefferson wanted non-believers in Virginia to trust that religious freedom *existed for them too*, and that they too could run for office and be elected, since there could be no religious test for public office. In 1779, he wrote in his essay on religious freedom: "our civil rights have no dependence on our religious opinions, any more than our opinions in physics or geometry." He went on for pages uplifting that principle.

Of course, Jefferson's rather high opinion of religious freedom has fallen on hard times. In Ohio, I am one of many not allowed to get married, nor would my marriage be considered a civil right. My own religious institution, my Unitarian Universalist congregation, has no present problem with such ceremonies; and I myself have performed them since 1979, despite the state's view of my religious beliefs. But only religions which are *against such civil rights* are allowed to affect policy in Ohio on this and on many other issues. There appear to be "right religions" and "wrong religions" in our state. Ours is obviously on the wrong side of some issues, according to the legislation and presently elected leadership of our state.

Jefferson relished his own religious freedom as well as protecting the religious freedom of others. He took pleasure in describing himself with a variety of religious views. He never claimed to be an atheist, although he was certainly vehemently labeled as one by his critics during election campaigns. Despite that label, he still managed to get elected President. Today, 200 and some years later, I'd need paddles to restart my heart if even a mildly agnostic Unitarian Universalist was considered for the presidential office for longer than two minutes.

Yet, Jefferson didn't let other people describe his religious views. He offered his self-evaluation many times. In a letter to Charles Thompson, he offered, in his words, "proof that I am a real Christian." The proof? His privately printed little edition of the gospels with all the miracles and resurrection stories removed with scissors. This is the so-called Jefferson Bible, still available today at your local bookstore or Amazon.com. Of course, no modern "mega-church" pastor down the street would agree that Jefferson was a Christian in their present understanding of the term. To lift up Jesus as a sort of Jewish Socrates, a philosopher of the good life, as Jefferson did to "prove" his Christian credentials, would hardly keep him out of eternal hellfire, according to many modern preachers, especially the ones with television shows.

But Jefferson's personal religious freedom proved eclectic indeed. To John Adams, in 1820, he boasted of his "creed of materialism." To Ezra Ely in 1819 he wrote, "I am a sect by myself." But, he also claimed to be an anti-Trinitarian in an 1816 letter to a man named Van De Kamp, referring sarcastically to the idea of the Trinity as the "abracadabra of mountebanks." And of course, he also self-defined as a Unitarian, in a letter to Benjamin Waterhouse in 1822, and, of all things, an Epicurean in a 1819 letter to William Short. (Epicurus was the Greek philosopher touting a simple, elegant life of virtue and humanistic calm. Jefferson loved the Greek and Roman philosophers, and was taken, not just by Epicurus, but by Seneca the Younger, whose writings on liberty clearly inspired his own.)

So Mr. Jefferson found a half-dozen ways to express himself about his religious proclamations. I don't think this means he was wiggling out of some religious commitment...after all, all of his religious claims are in the same general ball-park. It's not like he's saying that he's a Shia Muslim, a Christopher Hitchens atheist, a Krishna-centered Hindu and a Lakota shaman all at the same time. To think *that* would be a distortion of Jefferson's personal religious freedom. It's simpler for me to think that Jefferson just had a lively, eclectic vocabulary, and used different words to say similar things to very different people. He's not hurting anyone, or restraining anyone with all of this spiritual vitality.

And, frankly, this fits the definition he offers of liberty to Isaac Tiffany very neatly. Remember? “Liberty, I would say, is unobstructed action according to our will. But rightful liberty is unobstructed action according to our will *within limits drawn around us by the equal rights of others.*”

This is a brilliant definition, based on Greek and Roman philosophy to be sure. I do have to admit that it heavily stresses the individual as primary and the community as secondary, something I often question. But all in all, it’s pretty clear and clean. And this is where Jefferson gets into trouble.

For it’s clear to me that for Jefferson, “unobstructed action,” according to his will, meant *refusing* to let those equal rights of others...namely his slaves...deprive him of his own need to do whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted.

And this is why Jefferson, despite his undeniable brilliance around religious freedom and the Declaration, has always had a troubling reputation in the later years of the nation. He was often vilified during the Civil War because of his hypocrisy in keeping slaves, while writing so magnificently about liberty. His individualistic bent got him into trouble during the New Deal era, where his patrician class attitudes smudged over his brilliant cadenzas on liberty and freedom. And recently, there has been this whole thing about his slave, Sally Hemmings.

Frankly, Annette Gordon-Reed makes it clear that the actual evidence about Sally Hemmings and Jefferson having children together is inconclusive. The DNA tests don’t prove anything finally, since there were other men with the same DNA (his brother, for example) who could have fathered those children. I tend to think he did, because of the dates of her pregnancies, but the fact is, in the end, whether or not he had children with Sally Hemmings *is not the issue that matters.*

The issue is that he *preached* liberty and *kept* slaves. The issue is that he claimed to OWN Sally Hemmings. The issue is that many of the white historians who have written about this were troubled more by the fact that Jefferson, a man of English ancestry, bonded with Sally Hemmings, a woman of African ancestry. A black and white person in a bed together. That’s what bothered many white historians. And please, this is not some outdated ante-bellum attitude from the distant past. Just this week, some of you may have read, April 7, 2011, a reliable poll showed that 46 percent (!) of the Republican voters in Mississippi think that black and white marriage *should be made illegal again.* Forget that gay marriage thing. Bring back the old days when blacks and whites were separate and unequal!

At first I thought that Jefferson might have agreed with the voters of Mississippi, since he didn’t have a very high opinion of black people. He thought they were inferior intellectually and limited in what they could achieve. Yet, I just don’t know. When a white friend of his wanted to marry one of his slaves, he gladly *approved* the selling of this black woman to his friend so they could get married. He never dissed their marriage, and retained friendship with this man and this

woman for years afterward. There can be no doubt that Jefferson was the most complex of human beings.

But here we're back to the original problem... Jefferson, father of our liberty, kept slaves. In 1782, he wrote: "In a warm climate, no man will labour for himself who can make another labour for him. This is so true, that of the proprietors of slaves a very small proportion indeed are ever seen to labour."

So there you have it. Virginia was his home. Virginia has a warm climate. So Jefferson had others labor for him. He didn't *hire* a housecleaner. He *owned* a housecleaner. He didn't *hire* a gardener. He *owned* a gardener. And there is nothing good or just or free in such a notion. Jefferson simply could not put into practice his undeniably brilliant definition of liberty in his letter to Isaac Tiffany: "rightful liberty is unobstructed action according to our will *within limits drawn around us by the equal rights of others.*"

With lines drawn around us by the equal rights of others. GREAT LINE! Rightful freedom is not doing whatever you want, whenever you want. There are others in the world. *Rightful* freedom sometimes surprisingly demands that we box ourselves in, restrain ourselves, hold back a bit. The children's story about the young slave Henry mailing himself to freedom in a box is a brilliant image rising from an absolutely true historical story. After losing so much...his wife, his children...all due to the true evil of slavery, Henry found his freedom by allowing himself to be constrained in a box. It was the box that brought him to liberty.

In the same way our liberty entirely depends on the limits, the box, that we are willing to draw around our own freedoms by valuing the equal rights of others as the honest and sensible cost of our own. My capacity to marry is related to your capacity to marry. My capacity to be free is related to your capacity to be free. There are, you see, no classes of humanity that the title "fully human" does not apply to. Every color expresses full humanity. Every sexual preference expresses full humanity. Every gender or age or ability expresses full humanity. Every broken mind and wounded heart expresses full humanity. And yes, even a deeply flawed practitioner of liberty like Thomas Jefferson expresses full humanity.

Thomas Jefferson is a cautionary reminder of ourselves. As Annette Gordon Reed put it in the first reading, "it is often said that Jefferson is the personification of America. His strengths are the strengths of the country, and the same can be said for his weaknesses." I agree. In other words, any human being here in America who claims to be perfect...all strength, no weaknesses ...misses the boat. But any human being who doesn't work at trying to practice a stronger liberty, stronger love, stronger justice and stronger honesty has also missed the boat, and tossed aside the best and most brilliant dreams Jefferson himself had for this nation.

Like I said, I don't remember seeing the slave quarters near the gardens of Monticello. But I know they were there, inhabited for many years by people who were as wholly an expression of full humanity as was Jefferson. The mock court trial, while acknowledging his hypocrisy, voted to forgive Jefferson in the end *because* of that common humanity.

I wonder, after spending so much time this week with this amazing, aggravating man, how would I have voted at that trial if I had been on the jury? But since I too am a fully human American with flaws aplenty, I wonder how Jefferson would vote if I were the one on trial instead? Or, you?

Offering

New Member Ceremony on Insert

Song

Blessing, Choral Response