

Freedom – a condition of the human heart

In my previous 'Reflections' article (*Toward Synthesis*), I noted how the humanistic philosopher Erich Fromm viewed the modern world as suffering from the contradictory struggle between *having* and *being*. The human need to find meaning, well-being, and personal growth was in conflict with a different type of world external to us. For Fromm, the resolution of this conflict was to be found in 'a radical change of the human heart.' For me, the issue of personal well-being revolves around the perception and experience of freedom. The ability to recognize, and internalize, well-being is fundamentally linked to how a person experiences their freedom.

Freedom is not simply a condition linked to battlefields, nations, and human rights. On an essential level it concerns the freedom within the self, and our battle to maintain this personal freedom within our everyday life. Erich Fromm himself wrote much on our human fear of freedomⁱ. Fromm concluded that our in-born fear of pursuing freedom against social conditioning originates in our human birth process. The helplessness of the newly born child and the need for extra long dependency upon protection continues into adulthood in our need for human security. Fromm views our susceptibility to social conditioning as thus based upon a biological predisposition. This can perhaps explain why we often reach out to an outside authority (parent, teacher, partner/lover) as a power or force to recompense us for a sense of personal isolation. Modern society has exploited this tendency by approving and supporting our dependency upon external social systems. In the same way, our cultures often disapprove of those individuals that show high levels of self-reliance and independence. In a world moving toward greater connectedness, collaboration, and shared compassion, the presence of personal freedom is critical. For too long we have been focused upon the play of freedom as it is exhibited outside of us – by external powers – whilst blinded to the inner restraints of personal freedom. For me, freedom is nothing if it is not a freedom of the heart.

We often talk about freedom, or hear other people talk about it, in terms of *having*. In this way it becomes a value of possession. We either have it or we don't; other people have it, or manipulate it, or control it, etc. In our modern understanding of freedom we have turned it into a commodity – a material object that we bargain with. In many situations and for many people this has been true. Also, if a person has been kidnapped, or held in prison/confinement, then freedom becomes a very real physical reality. Yet this is just one manifestation of the essence of human freedom. For my purposes I wish to discuss freedom as a *state of being*.

On an interior level freedom is not about what we have; it is more about where we are and what we do. It is about having the right attitude and perspective. In this context freedom is a process: we need freedom *from* something or freedom *to* something. We don't have or possess freedom – we **do** freedom. It is important we create a freedom to move into, otherwise where are we going? We can create our freedom from the past – and even the present – if we wish to move *toward* a different place or state of being. For example, our past should not define how we wish our present to be. We can learn from it, and develop from its experience; yet if it is no longer useful, or even detrimental, then we need to learn how to leave it behind. We all have this choice of where we want **To Be**.

ⁱ See his book 'Fear of Freedom'

If we are unable to create this freedom within ourselves then we become, in the words of Doris Lessing, the ‘prisons we choose to live inside.’ⁱⁱ Let us not forget also that our interior freedom goes with us wherever we go. If we feel a lack of true freedom within then this will still travel with us whether we are in a meditation retreat in India, or in the Andes of South America. After all, we cannot escape from our very self. It is thus essential that we have the freedom to deal with the events that affect us on a daily basis. We cannot control what events happen to us, yet we do have the freedom of choice to choose how we respond to them. By progressing through our experiences, and by choosing connections and situations that are aligned with our heart, we can become an intentional traveler rather than a random one. The fundamental question to ask ourselves is: how do we want to live?

For me, how we answer this question is part of what I call the ‘living work’ – the work we do inside ourselves to prepare us and make us better for living in the outer world. This is where both aspects of freedom converge – at the intersection where interior and exterior worlds meet. This is where our image of the world and the physical reality of the world also merge. If we can realize that we only experience the world as ‘we are’, then the freedom we find in the world is but a reflection of the freedom we consciously – or unconsciously – perceive within us. In other words, our sense of freedom is as near or as far away as we make it. It may sound contradictory, yet what we need to achieve is the liberation of our own perceptions of freedom. The reason why many of us do not stop to consider this, or perhaps we don’t see it as necessary, is because we do not yet have the freedom to assess the state of our own freedom! As I stated earlier, freedom is not a possession, it is a process – an action – and therefore something to be worked for, to be involved with. Our own freedom is a *participatory process*.

Perhaps this process involves the freedom to do the small things that are important for our lives; not necessarily the freedom to ‘save the world’ or make a grand gesture. What we need within ourselves is the freedom to make a choice; to act as we feel best; to create moments of joy that can be shared. Or it could be the freedom to begin making a change by changing one thing at a time. Our lives are part of a grand human, living tapestry. By making one small change we can influence change in many other ways through countless visible and invisible connections. Freedom is about having the choice to make these changes, and to take responsibility for our participation in the living tapestry that is life.

Personal freedom is also an expression of intelligence: not intellectual learning but rather social intelligence, spiritual intelligence, emotional intelligence, and instinctive intelligence. All this is the intelligence of personal freedom. I am reminded of Rumi who wrote of the difference between instinctive and acquired intelligence: *‘There are two kinds of intelligence: One acquired/as a child in school memorizes facts and concepts/from books and from what the teacher says, collecting information from the traditional sciences/.....There is another kind/...one already completed and preserved inside you./A spring overflowing its spring box. A freshness/in the center of the chest.../This second knowing is a fountainhead/from within you, moving out.’* This second knowing – our instinctual intelligence – is already within each one of us. As a human being we inherently have this *knowing*. For me, freedom is being able to connect with this internal knowing – and to act from it. In the end, true freedom is a condition of the human heart.

ⁱⁱ See Doris Lessing, *Prisons We Choose To Live Inside* (1987)

“Loving freedom, to me, means having the freedom to love yourself deeply, others deeply, and accepting the never-ending truth of change. It means having the freedom to be happy on your own and happy with others as they come in and out of our lives.

It means having the freedom to connect wonderfully with those you meet and deal successfully with those who are difficult to relate to well.”

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