

Free Will?

The Rev. Laura Horton-Ludwig, Minister
First Unitarian Universalist Church of Stockton
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About 35 years ago, a neuroscientist named Benjamin Libet hooked volunteers up to a machine that measured brain activity. He attached electrodes to their wrist and their scalp. He gave them simple instructions: look at a clock. Watch the time scroll by. Whenever you feel like it, flick your wrist. Then write down the moment you first had the intention to move. Dr. Libet compared their responses with the information from the electrodes. What he found was, the brain signals that went along with the wrist movements happened consistently about half a second *before* the subjects reported their *conscious intentions* to move their wrists. By the time the subjects became aware of their intention to move, their brains had already started to get ready to move. The subjects thought they were making conscious decisions about when to move their wrists. Completely up to them, completely free choice. But in fact, some part of their brain they were not aware of had already made the decision to move, completely *unbeknownst* to their conscious mind.¹ Free will? Not in this case, it would seem.

I want to thank Art Cofod, our worship associate today, for telling me about this study. He asked me to preach on this thing called free will. Is it just a myth?

¹ See Michael Brooks, *13 Things That Don't Make Sense* (Doubleday, 2008), p. 153; Dennis Overbye, "Free Will: Now You Have It, Now You Don't," *New York Times*, January 2, 2007.

We *feel* like we make our own decisions,
but are we kidding ourselves?
Are we all prisoners of fate,
controlled by biology, history, and a million accidents of chance?
Or are we free, free to choose how we will be,
what we will make of our lives,
free in ways that really matter?

Are we controlled by biology, or are we free?
Well, as usual, the answer is *yes*. And *yes*.
It's a paradox and a mystery:
We're not 100% free. We are limited.
But, ironically, the more we're aware of the limits on our freedom,
the more we set ourselves free.
The more we understand the limits of our freedom,
the more we are free.

Let me explain.
And let me start by telling you what I mean by "free."
In the context of "free will," I'm not talking about freedom
as in, do whatever you want and no one's going to care. No.
Free will doesn't mean permission to do anything and everything,
no matter what.
That kind of freedom is reckless.
It hurts other people. We hurt *ourselves*.
No, the kind of freedom I mean when I talk about free will
is the kind of freedom we celebrated in the responsive reading.
You remember William Ellery Channing's words:

I call that mind free...:
Which refuses to be the slave or tool
of the many or of the few,
and guards its empire over itself
as nobler than the empire of the world.

I call that mind free which resists the bondage of habit,
which does not mechanically copy the past:
But which listens for new and higher monitions of conscience,
and rejoices to pour itself forth in fresh and higher exertions.²

Now, Channing's coming out of the Kantian tradition
of moral philosophy that talks about freedom
as the capacity to choose what is right.
This is the kind of freedom I'm talking about:
the freedom to act thoughtfully, responsibly, bravely.
Freedom from the fear of what other people will think.
Freedom to challenge the way things have always been done.
Freedom to do what is right because it is right.

This is the kind of freedom we have to work for.
We win that freedom for ourselves over a lifetime.
It may mean challenging our parents, our friends, our society.
And this is why I say,
the more we understand the real limitations on our freedom,
the more we *are* free.

We all start out with limits on our freedom.
We're limited by our circumstances.
Our perceptions, our ways of thinking
can't help but be shaped and constrained
by when and where we were born,
our society, its customs, its history,
the families we grew up in.
We get trained to think in certain ways,
to see some things and not others.
It's a mix of good and bad.
We learn prejudice and violence
just as we learn kindness and courage—
from our family, from our society.

² From William Ellery Channing, *Singing the Living Tradition* #592.

We all get trained to *be* in certain ways.
Unconscious limits are put on us little by little as we grow.
And if we want to be free,
if we want to claim that free mind
that Channing challenges us to claim,
we have to come to understand those limits
that we absorbed unconsciously.

You might remember
last fall our congregation organized a film series on anti-racism.
The whole point of those films we showed
was to help *ourselves* become aware of our own prejudices,
our habits of mind that, largely unconsciously,
keep us from doing the work of justice
that we so fervently want to do.
As long as we stay unaware of our prejudices
and false habits of mind,
we are a prisoner to them. We are not free.
But *awareness* of those habits of mind frees us from them.
The more we understand, the more we free ourselves to do justice
and be the people we want to be.
This is why I say:
the more we understand the real limitations on our freedom,
the more we *are* free.

Now, the limits on our freedom
don't just come from society, from our families.
Our free will is also limited by the very structure of our minds.
We're limited because our brains are built one way and not another.

We are physical beings, and that includes our brains.
We can't know everything,
we can't control everything with our conscious mind.
Ever since Freud we've known there's a whole lot going on
in our brains that we are not even aware of:

our instincts, the unconscious mind—
rich and complicated layers of perception and experience
moving and shaping us under the surface.
Neurologists tell us
a huge percentage of our actions, our choices, our decisions
are shaped by unconscious forces that we don't understand—
forces within us that we're not even *aware* of.
Our brain biology is shaping us at every moment,
constraining our choices,
limiting our actions.

And if that is so,
can we really call ourselves free?
Is free will even possible?
But even here, the more we understand about our limits,
the freer we are. Here's Channing again:

I call that mind free which masters the senses,...
Which passes life, not in asking what it shall eat or drink,
but in hungering, thirsting, and seeking after righteousness.

I hear Channing saying, if we're controlled by our instincts,
we are not free.
Now, we all *have* instincts.
Those instincts have evolved over millions of years,
embedded in the physical structures of our brains.
But here again, the more we understand
the way those instincts, rooted in our physical bodies,
limit our moral freedom,
the more we claim the space to make *conscious* choices.
We claim our freedom.

In our first reading, we heard from Peter Steinke
about the evolutionary layers of our brain
and how those layers affect our thoughts and our behavior.

At the base of the brain is the amygdala.
We share that part of the brain with reptiles—snakes and lizards.
Something startles us,
we're thrown into danger:
that's when the amygdala fires up.
It takes over and suddenly we are in the grip
of unconscious processes.
We *need* to get out of danger.
Nothing else matters.
Go!

Now, in a moment of real physical danger,
we need this. Get away. Get safe.
The problem is, acute physical danger isn't the only thing
that triggers the reptilian part of the brain.
We can get triggered by just about *anything* that makes us anxious.
Peter Steinke says, in congregational life,
all sorts of things can trigger the amygdala to kick in:
money troubles,
staff turnover,
congregational conflict,
all sorts of things that can happen in the life of any church.³

And here's the thing: when the amygdala gets triggered,
it's very hard to act rationally.
We feel locked down and rigid.
We get jumpy. We feel paranoid.
We feel stuck. It's very hard to think creatively.⁴
In that state of consciousness, are we free? Not really.

But, ironically, the more we learn
about this very natural and predictable way that our brain works,
the easier it is to snap out of it

³ Peter Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times* (Alban Institute, 2006), pp. 15–17.

⁴ Steinke, p. 53.

and get ourselves back into our cortex,
the part of our brain that can think clearly and rationally.
When we're functioning in our cortex,

we can be intentional rather than instinctive,
responsive instead of reflexive,
adaptive rather than defensive,
proactive instead of reactive...⁵

That sounds like freedom to me,
the freedom to *choose* how we will be,
rather than be controlled by our instincts.
And here's the thing:
simply learning to predict what situations
are going to trigger our anxiety
and hook us into the reptilian brain—
just learning what triggers us
makes it vastly easier for us to snap ourselves out of it
and get back to the thinking brain,
that place of freedom where we can choose wisely.

So once again, I put it to you
that the more we understand the limits on our freedom,
including and up to the physical limits of our brains themselves:
the more we understand these limits,
the more we have free will. That is,
the more we are free to act thoughtfully, responsively, bravely,
free to do what is right, in spite of fear.

Now let me push farther
and invite you into a place of wonder
that this should be how human life is at all.
Because sometimes I wonder why our lives are this way
and not some other way?

⁵ Steinke, p. 56.

Sometimes I wonder why we were born into these bodies, these lives.
What does it mean?

So many of us work so hard to free ourselves
from everything that keeps us from doing what's right.

Why do we have to struggle so much?

Is it the nature of the universe,
or just a quirk of our human selves?

In the Story for All Ages today,
you remember the young girl, Meg, travels to another planet
and meets the creatures who live there.

They have no eyes. They don't know what it is to see.

But they seem to *know* things in a way that is deep and profound.

Somehow they know the stars—

not just know *of* them, but *know* them.

They feel sorry for Meg because she, in her human body,
can't access that way of knowing and connecting to the world.⁶

And when I think of that story, I wonder...

I wonder what we're missing out on,
we with our wonderful but limited brains.

Over the years I've often shared with you
my own wonderings and speculations
about what it might be like after we die.

Of course none of us knows for sure.

But I wonder, I *hope*, actually, that maybe after we die
we'll get to experience another mode of being entirely,
that would just bypass all these struggles
to free ourselves from the limits of our brains and our bodies.

Of course, a lot of us human beings
have wondered about such things over the years.
1500 years ago, a man named Boethius, a philosopher,

⁶ Madeleine L'Engle, *A Wrinkle in Time* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1962), pp. 173–4, 180–2.

was thrown into prison.
They said he'd committed treason. He denied it.
But there he was.
Trapped in prison, he fought against despair.
He wrote a book called *The Consolation of Philosophy*—
today we know it as one of the great classics.
And in this book he wrote himself out of despair.
He reminded himself of what really matters in this life:
wisdom, knowledge, compassion, courage.
At the very end, he wrote about free will.
Boethius believed in a God that knew everything,
everything that had happened
and everything that ever would happen.
And he asked, if that's true—
if God knows everything that's going to happen—
are we really free?
How can we have free will
if God already knows what we're going to do?

He answered,
it's all because within the consciousness of God, the divine,
time has no meaning.
This is complicated, so stay with me.
Boethius said, look, we human beings are built in such a way
that we can only experience one thing at a time.
We experience life moment to moment,
we experience time, and we *think* time is an absolute.
We think time is a fundamental part of reality.
But, he said, that's where we're wrong.
Long before science fiction taught us to imagine
what alien minds might be like,
Boethius said, the divine consciousness is so vast,
it sees and knows and understands
past-present-future all at once:

“the whole of...life in one simultaneous present.”⁷

Can you imagine—

can you imagine what that would be like?

For divine consciousness, time doesn't exist

because it doesn't *need* to.

We humans experience time

because our limited minds can't hold everything at once.

Our way of knowing the world is not the only way.

Boethius concluded,

yes, God, the divine, knows what we're going to do,

but that's because the nature of divine consciousness

is to see and understand everything all at once,

in one infinite present moment.

But we, while we live as human beings—*we* experience life in time.

For us, the future hasn't happened yet.

So we are still free. Our choices are ours.

And once again we circle back to where we started from.

Reading Boethius, we discover the limits of our own consciousness.

We struggle to glimpse a kind of consciousness

which is beyond us, almost unfathomable—

and yet, even in the struggle,

do we not taste a strange freedom that—who knows?—

might be out there somewhere?

So, friends, go boldly.

The more we understand the limits to our freedom,

the more we free our mind

to choose wisdom and courage.

Claim your freedom.

Use it well.

Amen.

⁷ Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. Victor Watts (Penguin, 1999), p. 133.