

Freedom River

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I was initially taught that freedom would come through “right belief.” As though, if I had the right ideas or answers or solutions to life’s existential struggles, everything else would fall into place. I thought freedom was foremost about intellectual ascent or confessional “correctness.” And oh how badly, I wanted to find out and live by “the truth.” I sought for solace in ideas, thoughts, perceptions, and perfect articulations of life’s mysteries. But not even my most neatly tied-together systematic thought could provide the experience of freedom I most deeply desired. At best, the intellectual growth brought a sense of confirmation to what I already had long known inside and at worst, rigidity and judgmentalism. I discovered that even the most beautiful of ideas mattered little if they cut us off from touching the tender and unintelligible aspects of our experience. The things we cannot fully understand or articulate (but can only be known through other avenues) are important too.

I then looked for freedom elsewhere. I wondered if perhaps freedom would come from “right practice.” If I could only learn to imitate those whom I revered as wise and sage-like. I did my best to copy their attitude, style, and way of being. I thought if I could just imitate someone else, if I could meditate long enough, or heal or change the things I thought were wrong, I would achieve ultimate transcendence and overcome all that I disdained about

myself or the world. I made intentions to make the world different. I fasted. I prayed. I organized. I protested.

However, even after years of devoted practice, the path of copying another led me nowhere. Freedom was not to be found in the roadmap left by another, manipulating the outer or inner world to my liking, and it certainly was not reducible to impacting external circumstances alone. Maybe freedom was not to be found, maybe instead freedom wanted to find me.



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And then I notice that all of me belongs, and there is that which I can trust – that is not solely dependent on my efforts, will, or preparation.

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A few moments before we are about to begin, I start to feel my heart beating, my hands a bit sweaty, noticing how often I take shorter breaths based on who I see starting to appear in the room. I have thoughts running through my mind, “damn, I forgot to put the clothes in the dryer” and “I forgot to reply to that email!” Other intrusive and self-debilitating thoughts appear, “What exactly am I doing here? Will this make any difference? And why me?”

I am slowly calmed by the image of a candle waiting to be lit residing at the center of the space.

And then I start to see the faces of those who stroll in. Few arrive early, still waiting on a few minutes after we were set to start. Some come through boxes on the digital interface, and some come embodied sitting next to or across from me in the room. Genuine smiles on the faces of those eager and ready to engage, others who do everything possible to make as little eye contact as they can. Each one grasping for something, anything – that seems familiar, a seat next to a friend, an outlet for their almost dead laptop, or a snack or warm drink to hold that soothes.

I imagine they all come with lives outside of this classroom, desires, unmet needs, hopes, dreams, and have thoughts and feelings that I cannot possibly imagine too.

The first day of the semester is here and our first session is just about to begin.



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During the last five years while full-time graduate teaching on spiritual formation and spiritual care, I have found myself reflecting more and more about the fullness that people bring with them to the classroom. Whether the class is virtual, in-person, or some mixture of both, there is an abundance that exists. Abundance

is not only to be associated with positive connotations but also speaks to the myriad of struggles and pitfalls of which our lives consist. Each and every class brings with it new opportunities, joys, traumas, losses, despair, and so much more. And this abundance is not only a multiplicity of experiences but is the very starting place where our greatest invitations for learning, growth, and re-creation begin.

It is out of this awareness of abundance in the classroom, that Spirit(s) draw/s us toward greater relationships. And depth of relationship does not come easy, it must be earned, and it begins with curiosity. A curiosity about how I can meet myself and others in the classroom through compassion, with courage, and with care. From my observations, compassionate teaching is less about a syllabus outline (although yes, they are important) and more about spaciousness – a way of holding self and others and the process – so that surprise can enter, we can breathe a bit deeper, and move with more flexibility. A spaciousness that is open and available for the sacred, for what is most important, most essential, and that our lives ultimately cannot do without. What does it mean then to create holding spaces of compassion so that the abundance of Spirit(s) can be expressed? What would it mean to reframe teaching as a process of mutual enrichment supporting us into the abundant and creative lives that are truly ours and that we long for the most?

There is no blueprint or algorithm for transformation. The greatness of Life is that it is not a problem to be solved, a to-do list to check off, nor a question with one final answer. Although we may find encouragement and insight from the stories and lives of those who inspire us (whether in the present or past), they can only help us go so far.

The journey toward abundant living and lifelong transformation is

something that we must each say yes to and confront personally. Gloria Anzaldúa calls forth the Aztec inspired myth and wisdom of the “Coyolxauhqui Imperative” posing to us that there is no predetermined path to follow but only the light of the moon – a journey in the darkness demanding that we trust the spontaneous energy of healing that is present moment to moment, alive in each of us, asking us to tell new stories and act with new generative practices that usher in new life.

It is in the cave of the heart, in the darkness beyond any final explanations, where everything belongs and is invited to be remade.



I wonder if the freedom I have longed for can even be known in such times of cruelty? Is it possible to even taste when there is so much suffering? Incessant wars. Widespread hatred. A loneliness epidemic. Accelerating tendencies inherited from technologies. And then there are the disconnections we exacerbate from our own fears. The fear can be from institutional, financial (consciously or less consciously), and even spiritual forces that perpetuate destructive monocultural supremacies glorifying anthropocentrism, anti-blackness and anti-indigeneity, patriarchy, militarism, xenophobia, anti-LGBTQIA sentiment, and many other death-dealing ways of structuring our lives – all of which separate us from one another and from the earth who is alive and is our extended body.

And then there is the separation we experience within ourselves. Unaware of the divine and unaware of the immense preciousness of each and every aspect of our lives, vulnerability and all. We live in a time of distractions where the latest solutions promise to ease our pain and remove our confrontation with death. Yet, we must not mistake liberation for avoidance, denial, or dismissal.

Counter to what late capitalism may promise, freedom cannot be outsourced or bought. Freedom certainly is not won through victory over anything, much less anyone, including death. Freedom has no winners or losers and is not available only to those with resources,

theological degrees, or particular embodiments. Freedom is our spiritual birthright and is to be realized when we co-participate in the creative flow of life and death for no other purpose than all of life’s enrichment.

But what about our classrooms? Can they become bridges towards harmonizing with this creative (and maybe dangerous) flow where life is brought into deepening relationships?

Beverly Lanzetta offers us a four-dimensional spirituality, the *via feminina*, which can assist us. She writes, “As a distinct spirituality, *via feminina* is attentive to the multiple wisdoms of body, psyche, soul, placing primary importance on healing those social factors – whether of gender, culture, race, sexual orientation, religious belief, etc. – that stigmatize persons, rob them of dignity, wound their souls, and betray the highest aspirations of religious life.”¹

Through the *via feminina*, we make room for the multiple wisdoms of awareness present in the classroom and learn to trust that this creative flow can be touched, sensed, perceived, and engaged in many ways. While affirming the many, Lanzetta urges us to discern the fruit of this work as particular gifts such as an awakening to dignity, compassionately witnessing that which is most tender, and aligning ourselves with our greatest and most life-affirming visions for ourselves and the world.

Freedom is not to be found in isolation but can only begin to be tasted through genuine communion with the whole of life. And that sense of communion with life is one of the greatest gifts the classroom can give us, if we are open to that possibility and surprise.



I sat there for a full day. And it was not my choice or idea to go there but it was where my best friend brought me. There we were together, side by side at the river. The sun was rising to the east and the water was moving calmly, effortlessly, and flowing with a stillness. At first, I felt awkward about being there. How could I sit there while so many were hurting? Was I turning my back on a

world in need?

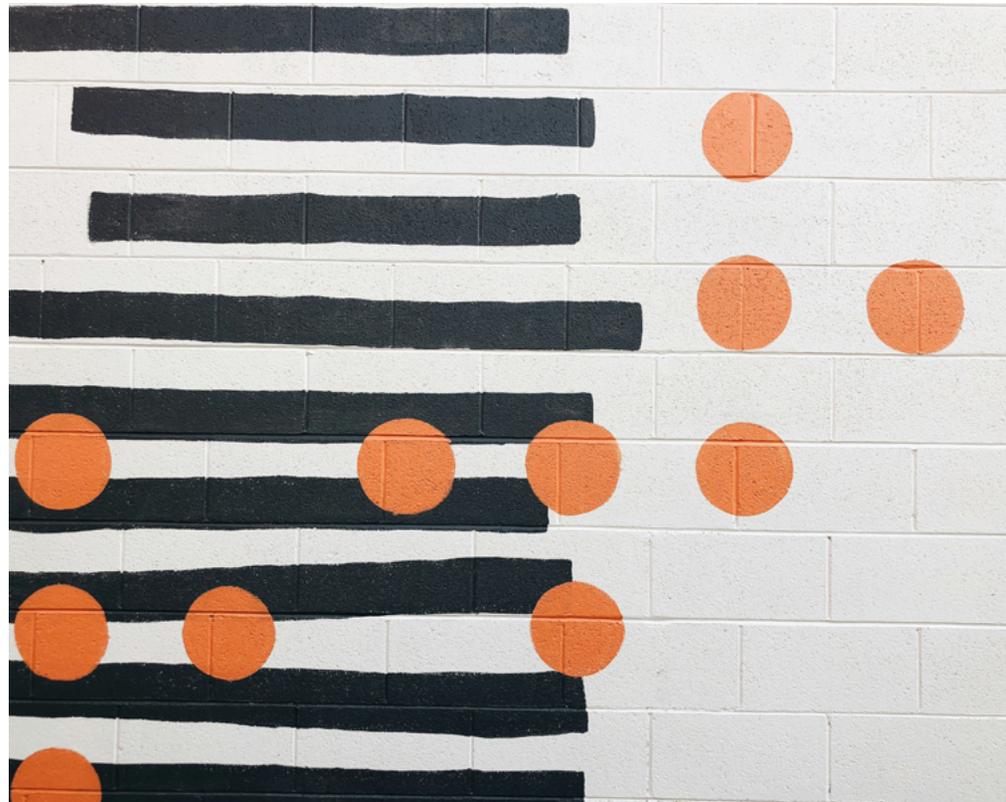
Because I trusted my best friend as a well-known social change leader and spiritual teacher, I figured it best to trust the process. Ever so slowly, I found myself immersed in experience. As if I was disappearing into Life, disappearing not as an erasure or as an absence but as a presence, as an experience of coming back home. Nothing about my life was rejected. There was no more posturing or hiding or attempts to change things. I was at once in communion with myself and the whole of the world. I was at rest, listening to the ever subtle and delicate rhythms of reality as they were present and unfolding within me, around me, and in all things.

It was then that I learned to let go of my pursuit of freedom in one place, or amongst one thing; it was there that Freedom found me.



I return to the space which is full, yet does not feel crowded and never imposes. The quiet hum of settling bodies, the shuffle of books and bags being placed down, the soft clicking of laptop keys – these sounds exist together, making the moment what it really is. There is an energy here, though not static and not one-dimensional. I can feel it but only when I allow myself to pause, settle, and renew my fidelity to being here right now.

I take my seat at the front and look out to see the beauty of



each face. Who knows what this is all about, how we all came to be here now. Some of the faces before me are familiar, some are brand new, but somehow it seems that I am meeting each of them for the first time – a mixture of grounding and hesitance stirs within me, curiosity and weariness, hope and guardedness. What happens next is up to us.

Yet as we begin another session, I do not just see faces – I see rivers. Rivers winding through their own landscapes of experience, some flowing freely, some held back by stones of uncertainty. Some merely in a stillness, waiting to be stirred into movement.

A deep breath. A pause. And an invitation to each of us to fully arrive – not just physically or intellectually, but wholly.

I take another breath, remembering the river and how it held me – how it taught me something about the freedom we cannot find but somehow calls each of us home. I remember the way the river held me, the way it spoke without words. The way it did not ask me to do anything but be. And so, that is how I begin.

I glance around the room, seeing more now than I did before. The readiness, the resistance, the moments of understanding that flicker in between. But mostly, I see an invitation to the deepening of Life.

Photo by Katie McNabb on Unsplash

Here, in this space of transformation, learning is not accumulation of knowledge but a path to fullness of Life. It is not a task we take alone though each has a unique contribution. In this class, movement is honored. Who we are, who we have come from, and who we will be are not fully determined and yet we can confidently go together because life has brought us here.

I can feel the pulse of life again and invite the class to do the same. Let's see where freedom river leads us to, today.



It was the experience of freedom that led me to an ever-expanding experience and understanding of wholeness. It was not an experience of perfection or a sort of transcendence that lifts us up and away from the very mundane realities we live. Instead this freedom, this wholeness, is only a gift which can be received when our hearts are sincere, our minds are open, and our bodies are tended with care. It is a gift that only emerges when we move closer to our lives rather than away from them. What a sacred treasure to find ourselves among others who are willing to slowly, lovingly, move closer to the center of ourselves where freedom has been waiting for us all along.

Maybe that is why now the most important preparation I do for each class is not a preparation of content but a preparation of posture, a deeper dive into the spaciousness which holds us all. An experience that I know deep in my bones was granted to me at the river. I wonder how that might be revealed to me once again with these strangers and friends. I cannot come to this by my own will or due to my own skill or expertise (without minimizing all that I bring into it): I humbly request the divine, ancestral spirits and the earth herself to once more show us the way to slowing down, bringing that which is fragmented back into relationship, and teaching us to soak in and savor the moments we have sitting next to one another at the banks of freedom river. And so it is.

Notes & Bibliography

¹ Beverly Lanzetta, *The Monk Within: Embracing a Sacred Way of Life* (Blue Sapphire Books, 2018), 79.



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