

## At What Point - Freedom?

There is no doubt whatever the most prevalent thought on my mind is freedom. Not a day goes by that I don't long for the chance to use my skills to give back where I once took so much. There are even times when I still cry from the karmic pain of the life I lost for the life I took. All my mistakes led me to the root of my folly: I did not understand the meaning of freedom.

Certainly, I had a rudimentary knowledge of the concept of freedom from a young age, but it took two decades in prison for me to grasp the true meaning of freedom: a man is only free when that which is within him human forms the determining compass of his actions and when he, through those actions and embracing his inherent creative abilities, contributes to the broadening and enrichment of his environment. This free man is not only free from figurative and literal chains, but free to make the development of all his potential his life goal: a man who owes his very existence to his own evolution and progressive efforts.

Freedom is a frame of being specifically unique to man. It could be argued that birds are the most free of nature's creatures, having to answer to nothing but their natural instincts. Birds are free to fly wherever they will to find food wherever it may be and to nest in whichever high place they find. Yet, for all that freedom, they are only birds from this season to the next leaving no lasting impression upon their environment, nor having more than an instinctual awareness. Does a sparrow know it is a sparrow,

or has man simply labeled it as such to define his own awareness?

How many times did I wish to be a bird just to fly away from all this madness? But freedom without creativity is only existence, and existence without freedom is merely slavery with no goal. A man who will not develop his potential for the creation of something new is therefore no more than a sparrow, passing from this life with no more than a gathering of straw to mark his passage, and a slave to his own lack of personal awareness. I stopped wishing to be a bird many years ago.

As it is, I came to realize that there is no freedom without humanity and no action can be free unless it is an action whose very nature positively changes my world and myself. Any fool can act in a way that negatively affects himself and his world, but those actions invariably fail to consider that which is human in the actor as much as the one(s) acted upon; and, are therefore not free actions. I have often found myself in situations where there seemed to be no other choice but to act in whatever way the situation dictated. I would tell myself, "I have to fight," and think I was acting of my own free will. In reality, I was little more than a slave to my pride and my own base desires, which did not recognize that which makes me human.

Soon after this realization, I began to think freedom was the ability to exercise control over those base desires and personality flaws. I believed that by establishing dominance over who I am, I could be free of those

parts of me I thought to be negative and holding me back from who I ought to be. The pride that made me want to fight was pushed down only to resurface as an unrelated argument or outburst. There was a flawed logic at work that failed to realize that domination is the denial of freedom.

I was torn between the part of me that had to be controlled and the part of me that had to be the controller. The ensuing war with myself was as most wars are these days: long-fought with no clear outcome. The most important thing I learned through those battles, though, was that no matter where a man is - prison or otherwise - he is neither absolutely free nor is he absolutely unfree. No man is completely integrated just as no man is completely isolated.

From this point, I began to contemplate my role in an unfree society. This prison is, by very design, erected to limit and control free human activity. If a free human action is, by definition, one driven by compassion for the betterment of a man's environment, is it not irony that prison is perhaps the most suitable environment to exercise true freedom? This realization has led me to believe that even though I may be locked in a tiny cell with heavy iron locks to hold me at bay, I am still more free than many of the persons holding the keys to open those locks.

Prison, as an unfree society, strives to extinguish and abolish free personality in the name of the security and good order of the institution. There is nothing we can build that the staff cannot arbitrarily destroy. The struggle

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as I came to understand freedom was to retain my sense of who I am within the rigors of my confinement. Along the way, many other personalities - both staff and fellow prisoners - came to revile me for my stance and tendency toward free action. Their actions derived from their implacable ideas and ambitions that drove them to actions that were, in themselves, the destruction of freedom. In this way, such a personality was a slave to their belief system, much as I was a slave to my pride. The essence of freedom is not in the subjection of that over which I have control, but the unfolding of my entire potential.

The culmination of realizations that led to my understanding of freedom as a reality and not a concept cannot be fully appreciated without an internalization of freedom's asymmetry: a free society cannot exist without free persons, but a free person can exist within an unfree society. An unwavering libertarian activist is more free than the jailer who guards him or the tormentor who vainly tries to break him.

Of course, once I internalized this knowledge, I had the proverbial tiger by the tail. This asymmetry, by its nature, is coupled with the compulsion toward personal responsibility and for social action. Failure to grow on a personal level negates my freedom, and failure to help others be free places me right back in the shackles I just shook free.

I can no longer pretend that because I am behind a fence my actions have no meaning. I can no longer say that because I am in prison I am not free. My belief

that I am a free man, even in shackles, requires me to fully develop the man I am to my maximum potential and by default to present that development to others who remain unfree. Freedom, as a reality and not a concept, cannot be given to or forced upon anyone: an individual becomes free only through that self-determined activity in which that individual acts as a multi-faceted personality utilizing all his creative potential for the advancement of those around him. I had to choose to make my actions reflect the best of my personality before I could understand my role as a free person in an unfree society.

I became free when I embraced my captivity and steadfastly refused to capitulate to that captivity. I am a free man now; when I'm released, I will only become unencumbered.

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