

FREEDOM!

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Second Unitarian Church

Rev Rudra Dundzila

ME

I want to tell you about John. An athletic, slim 30-something, with blond hair and blue eyes. He was a successful music teacher, and choir leader. He met a boy friend, the guy he thought was the love of his life. Through him, he got infected with HIV, and also began using Crystal Meth. His life slowly spiraled out of control. He lost his teaching position, and his part time music gigs. The bank foreclosed on his house, and took away his convertible sports car. He was left penniless, and alone. And his BF left him when the money ran out.

John got himself back on his feet. He got a job managing a gay bar. Found a new BF. Got into recovery. He'd been clean and sober for a couple of years. He was paying off past debts. Everything was going great. Life was looking up.

Then the unthinkable happened. He was fired over a customer complaint. Now John seems to be a very outgoing people person. To me, it doesn't make sense that he ruffled a customer's feathers. And there are always dissatisfied customers.

John couldn't find another job. He couldn't make rent with his BF. His BF was working, but couldn't afford the rent by himself. They fell so far behind, they were getting evicted.

For John, the stress of life was so great. Both relapsed. Both started taking Crystal Meth again. It was the release valve on the pressure cooker of their lives. Then his BF got fired for not showing up for work. They were evicted soon after that, and found themselves couch surfing at friends' houses.

They felt trapped. They had no where to go, and no where to turn. They felt alone, and abandoned. There was no future for them.

Then John decided to go to group. He stopped using. It was a struggle. A big struggle. A huge struggle. It took all the energy that he had. But he did it.

John was very embarrassed about his situation. And he was looking for support. He needed to know that someone cared about him and his life. That his life had not been a failure.

Most of all, he wanted to be free. He was looking for freedom. He wanted to control his own destiny.

How did I meet John?

You need to know that strangers come to me and they bear their souls. And I listen. This happens occasionally each year. It happens to all ministers.

Why me? They've heard about 2U. We have a reputation in Boys town. A good one. People go to pastors they don't know, when there's a deep, and personal, and embarrassing issue. Issues that they just can't tell their own pastor. Or they don't have a minister to talk to.

Over the past several months, a string of people struggling with Crystal Meth addiction came to me.

Their need is simple. They want to be free. They feel stuck, and they are seeking freedom.

Talking to these men reminds me of my own issues. The years that I attended Adult Children of Alcoholics. And my own co-dependency. I want to be a people-pleaser, so setting

boundaries is hard for me. Talking to these guys gets me to face my inner demons. I have to fess up that I'm an overeater, and a work-a-holic. And sometimes an over-spender. Three issues I like to avoid.

These are my struggles. My proverbial crosses. The things that keep me from being free.

WE

We've all faced some sort of challenges in our lives. Some of you have talked to me about your alcoholism. Or your struggles with illness. Or the issues you have with your children.

I've got an example for you.

Mary told me about the struggles with her teen age son Leo. The names have been changed. He was a good kid, but started making questionable choices as a teen. Not coming home in time for bed. Getting poor grades in high school. Sleeping in late. Skipping meals. Staying up all night watching TV.

If you think about it, that describes a normal teen, doesn't it?

The issue was with Mary. She could not stop worrying about her son. She was always wondering, where's he at, what's he up to, who are his friends, is he safe? The list of worries went on, and on, and on. She was wracked with anxiety that something might happen to him. And guilt that she wasn't doing enough to protect him. It was really difficult for her. It took over her life. That's all she could think about.

It was dragging her down.

We all have something in our lives, that is holding us back. Something that snares us. Something that we don't like about ourselves.

For some of us, it's a bad habit. Like nail biting. Vegging out in front of the TV. Avoiding paying bills or balancing the checkbook. Or not the washing floors.

Sometimes it's an emotion that plagues us. Like anxiety, fear, worries. The ennui that something bad is about to happen.

These issues are a matter of freedom.

We want to be free. We want to be whole. We want to be fully human, and feel fully alive.

Some of us know what holds us back. Alcohol. Anxiety. Anger. Self-worth. Negative thoughts. Chocolate. We're coping as best we can. John knew it was Chrystal Meth.

For some of us, it's still a mystery. Something that drains us. We can't quite put our finger on it. One of those proverbial demons lurking in our shadows. Like Mazzy obsessing about her son.

All of us have these issues. It's part of being human.

The problem is listening to these voices. These voices get ingrained in us. We pay attention to them. We begin to believe them.

But we have to learn to recognize these voices and. We have to figure out if they're valid. Do they reflect reality or are they a night mare?

The first step is awareness. We need to recognize the wayward thoughts and emotions we are having.

The second step is discernment. Are the thoughts and emotions accurate or fantastic?

The two steps of awareness and discernment will give us the freedom to choose, our reactions.

GOD

The freedom to choose is a basic religious notion.

In Deuteronomy, we have the famous choice: “I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live...” I understand that verse not literally, but in the emotional-psychological sense, in terms of the Spirit of Life.

Viktor Frankl has a great example of this. Frankl was a psychiatrist who survived the Nazi death camps, and wrote the book Man’s Search for Meaning.” It’s an international best seller, published in the US by the UU Beacon Press.

He tells the story of Jewish prisoners, who were recently liberated from the Nazi death camps at the end of World War II.

The gates to the camps were opened, and they were set free.

Some were afraid to leave. They thought it was a trap. They believed they would be shot if they went out the gates. They had been so beaten down, that they could not face their freedom, their liberation.

Other’s left, and headed straight to the local train station. Straight across the fields. Some would cross freshly planted fields. They would trample the young plants, the baby crops.

Their reasoning was, “hasn’t enough been taken from us? My wife and child had been gassed. Who dares forbid me to tread on a few stalks of oats?”

Now, remember there was a shortage of food, since the war machine had been using up all the natural resources. Food was scarce. Ruining crops would only contribute to next year’s shortages. And endanger the livelihood of the farmer.

Other liberated prisoners would carefully walk around the fields, even though it took extra effort. They were already exhausted, and famished. They were bags of skin stretched over bones. Any shortcut would get them home quicker. But they left the fields alone. They felt a responsibility to protect the crops and the farmers’ livelihood.

Frankl says freedom made the difference for the prisoners. Some were wracked by fear, others had lost their sense of moral responsibility, while others still remembered right, and wrong.

It’s a matter of choice. Freedom gives us those choices. Physical freedom. Moral freedom. Spiritual freedom.

And freedom depends on choice. We can always choose how we respond.

Yes, we always have a choice.

That is freedom.

YOU

So what does it mean to you, to be free?

You are your own source of freedom.

This’s what Frankl meant.

I talked about the negative thoughts and emotions we all experience.

You have the choice to give into those notions. Or you can resist them.

I’ve a got a story for you. It explains how one person overcame them.

I have a friend, my spiritual teacher Arwind. Now you would think a spiritual teacher had it all together.

His issue was smoking. Every time he left the house, he smoked a cigarette. And he had to have a cigarette when he came back in. Every single time.

And, he would sometimes smoke at home. He wanted cigarettes. He craved them.

Well, he eventually realized that it was a real habit, a bad one. He was smoking blindly.

He recognized his cravings were getting the better of him.

So he took some action.

It began with awareness. The first step.

Every time he went for a cigarette, he stopped himself. He noted, “Ah, I am wanting a cigarette now.”

He paused. He hesitated. He gave himself a chance. He let himself choose.

Then he took the second step, discernment. He asked himself, “Do I really need this cigarette?”

At first, the answer was always YES.

But more and more times, the answer became NO.

Sometimes he took the cigarette. Sometimes he didn't.

Then, most of the time, the answer was NO.

Eventually, he wasn't smoking. He had gotten over his habit. He got rid of his cigarettes.

He was free. He found his freedom.

That's the same choice you have. Become aware of those things that you don't like about yourselves. And then choose to do something about it.

You alone have the freedom. No one else could do it for you. That would be coercion.

WE

We're all in this together.

Such soul work doesn't happen individually. We do it together, with our spiritual friends. With our fellow congregants. This is our religious home, where we delve into those spiritual practices that set us free.

The Buddhists have the story of beautiful lotus flowers growing from the depths of a muddy, murky lake.

We don't have lotus flowers around here. Except if we go to the Botanic Gardens in the northern suburbs.

The lotus flowers represent the beauty of the individual. But they come out of muddy, murky lake water.

The Buddhists explain spiritual practice as dredging the lake. Spiritual practice means cleaning the muddy lake that is our minds and emotions. We have to become aware of the murky stuff we have floating around inside. First, awareness.

Second, we have a choice. That is discernment. We can choose to do something about it. If we do something, eventually, we'll get rid of it.

We'll become like clear water in the lake, with beautiful lotus flowers floating on it. The beautiful lotus flowers that we are, and the crystal clear lake that we are.

Today's independence day. Pick an issue you want to change. Use awareness and discernment to examine it. It will take time. It doesn't happen overnight. You will eventually experience freedom.

Find your freedom. Be free. Live a free and full and happy life.