

# Freeing the Mind

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There are so many colors in the rainbow  
So many colors in the morning sun  
So many colors in the flower and i see every one.

—Harry Chapin, Flower Are Red

How wildly do you color your spiritual world? Do you color as you wish or do you stay within the lines...because it's different for different people. A lot depends on who you are. Do you color the world like an artist? Do you paint it like a philosopher or a politician? Are you creative with your boundaries? Does your world flow and bleed like watercolors or have you learned to stay within the lines? There are times for both. The key is in not letting others make that decision for you. The key is in not letting external forces become our enslaver.

The Bible has a lot to say about color. In Exodus, the Lord speaks to Moses and asked that he take a contribution from the people of Israel. It was to be a contribution of gold, silver and bronze (Exodus, 25:1-3). In the Book of Isaiah, the Lord speak of growth and transformation (Isaiah, 1:18), saying,

Come now, let us reason together, though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.

And in Genesis, of course, Joseph had his coat of many colors. It was red and yellow and green and brown and scarlet and black and ocre and peach and ruby and on and on. There were 29 in all. Apparently, his tailor could not be tamed. So, the

question remains: How wildly do you color your spiritual world?

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. Today is Sunday, February the 6<sup>th</sup> and the title of this reflection Freeing the Mind. It explores the precondition of justice, equity and compassion.

The philosopher William James famously said, “A great many people think [that] they are thinking when they are merely rearranging their prejudices.” Sometimes, it can be hard to think freely and for ourselves. It is so easy to conform and stay in line but what breaks us free? What holds us back from being free?

I used to think of myself as a free thinker but many years ago, I realized that I am not. I’m a weird thinker, maybe but free? I don’t think so. This revelation came to me in my first year teaching at Duke University. It was 1999. The first of the Matrix movies had debuted that year and I received my first, laptop computer. It was a Mac...and yes, technically speaking, it wasn’t mine. It belonged to the university but I got to use it and take it home with me.

That computer taught me a lot about the meaning of freedom—the freedom of the mind, the freedom of the spirit, the infinite freedom of the soul. It all started with a little argument I had with my computer’s spellcheck feature. I wrote a little piece about. I rediscovered it the other day. It’s just two pages and it helps us this morning. So, I’d like to share it with you. It’s called Red Line Words. Warning: This passage is rated PG-13. It’s not too bad. It begins with an opening quote from Plato’s Apology.

...the life which is unexamined is not worth living...

—Plato, Apology [369 BC]

True. I may go into the bathroom marked “Men” without intentionally reading the sign and I may head off to meetings when my palm pilot says I should, but if you want to know what oppression *really* is, check this. I am at my computer. I am in Microsoft Word 98. I type “e-n-s-l-a-v-e-r” and a red line suddenly appears beneath the word. I must have misspelled something. I check but my spelling is fine. Hmm. So, I go into spell-check hoping to make the red line disappear. [...] Nope...and because this word is *Not in Dictionary*, my computer offers the possible alternatives. Apparently, I am to choose from among three, helpful *suggestions*. They are: “enslave,” “enslaves” and “enslaved.” I find it problematic that none of these words conveys my intention. Were I to interpret the signs received thus far, it would seem that I am not being permitted to mean what I am actually trying to say...at least, not without some *correction*, as it were.

There is a tension between what I can say and what I am allowed to mean...I mean, between what I can mean and what I am allowed to say. It’s really a bit of a drag, so I immediately start to look for someone to blame for having to deal with all of this in the first place. I could blame Larry Moneta (who effectively gave me this computer to use), but what good would that do? I could blame Bill Gates, but he would probably agree with me. Agreeing or not, I’m sure he wouldn’t want to deal with this any more than I do. He’d roll it downhill to some mid- or low-level programmer who would pass it on as well—maybe to the Oxford types or to the folks over at American Heritage or even to Noah Webster, himself—even though he’s dead and his estate would have to deal with it. I can imagine that the Websters would spin a fabulous story about language being perpetually in motion and about how the word *enslaver* was not commonly found

in English language usage at the time their dictionary was written. And, largely, they would be right. They would fail to mention, however, that the word *enslaver* was *uncommonly* found in English language usage at that time (for the Africans spoke no English), vaguely aware that we may soon have to take a long, hard look at the implications of that. [!]

Bizarrely consumed by the machinations of my Macintosh, I began conducting a series of tests on a host of nasty words. “How would the computer respond?” I tried ‘the *n* word’ out of sheer curiosity and the little, red line appeared beneath it right away. Then, I tried the more traditional profanity, if you will—words that I choose not to imply with first letters from the pulpit—and a crazy thing happened. For the host of nasty words, nary a red line was to be found. Hmm.

So, what is the lesson here? Let’s review. On one hand, if we are verbally aggressive in our treatment of issues of race and social difference, the red lines appear quite promptly. The red lines do not appear because words like ‘the *n* word’ have been incorrectly spelled (for we have been careful). The red lines do not appear because the words are considered offensive or the more traditional profanity would have likewise triggered a corrective response. It follows, then, logically, that the only reason that words like ‘the *n* word’ are flagged by the system is that they cannot be correctly spelled. On the other hand, if we are profoundly vulgar, violently abusive or genuinely profane in our language, we remain securely *in Dictionary* and there is no *suggestion* offered at all. Apparently, the host of nasty words requires not a single, red-line *corrective*. Try as they may, they are simply not red line words.

In the end, who really cares about examining all of this? It’s not as though one’s life depends on it. Spell-check is just

correcting our words. It's not guiding our thoughts or anything, right? But a thorny question does remain: If we were to leave unexamined the meanings of the signs that we receive (and those we create), who among us would not soon come to occupy the role of the enslaver? And who, just as inescapably, in the role of the enslaved?

It's subtle how this process happens, how we are hemmed in by the ways of the world...and it begins at a very young age...at fifty-five or so...and it begins so early on, when we are children. Sometimes, in our first years in school, we're taught to color in the lines. It makes me think about that song by Harry Chapin.

Harry Chapin loved to talk about children—how we row and how we learn. His best song on the subject, though, was much less famous. Chapin's best song about children is called *Flowers Are Red*. It's about a kid who tried to free his mind. Here's the story:

The little boy went first day of school  
He got some crayons and started to draw  
He put colors all over the paper  
'cause colors was what he saw  
And the teacher said, "What you doin' young man?"  
"I'm paintin' flowers!" he said  
"This is not the time for art, young man  
And anyway, flowers are green and red.  
There's a time for everything, young man  
And a way it should be done  
You've got to show concern for everyone else  
You're not the only one"

And she said, "Flowers are red, young man  
Green leaves are green  
There's no need to see flowers any other way  
Than the way they always have been seen"  
But the little boy said, "There are so many colors in the rainbow

So many colors in the morning sun  
So many colors in the flower and i see every one.

But the teacher really wasn't into it. She chided him. She put him in his place. When Chapin told the story of this song—which is mostly true, by the way—he said,

I just wrote it about a week and a half ago. And, you know, my kids are going to school for the first time. They are five- and six-year-old and a friend of our recently had dinner with us and her child came home with the following report card:

Your son marches to the beat of a different drummer but don't worry. We will have him joining the parade by the end of the term.

Think about that. That's what a teacher is saying.

My heart grows heavy at the thought of it. Mind and my soul are enchained.

So, the song progresses and the teacher finds various means of keeping the kid in line. The teacher tries to drum out the 'different drummer' but the kid resists...until the teacher puts the kind in the corner...like a dunce. The young boy was ridiculed for being true himself. How many times does that have to happen before we star getting it right?

In the corner, the kid got lonely and that feeling broke him down. So, we traded his individuality for safe passage back into the group. Clearly, the cost was conformity and the little boy paid. He went up to the teacher and he said,

Flowers are red  
Green leaves are green  
There's no need to see flowers any other way  
Than the way they always have been seen

Next we hear of him, the little boy has moved away. He goes to another town. He enrolls in another school.

The teacher there was smilin'  
She said, "Painting should be fun

And there are so many colors in a flower  
So let's use every one

But that little boy had already learned his lesson. He already knew the right way of painting flowers. He only needed to crayons—red and green.

This song is a lesson in conformity. It breaks my heart every time I sing it. It breaks my heart every time we try to put creativity in a tiny cage. We don't have to do this. We can resist...and when we do, we should expect some conflict like that time when Tip O'Neill got so upset.

Do you remember Tip O'Neill? Thomas Phillip O'Neilj, Jr. He's been out of the news for a while. Tip O'Neill was born in 1912—110 years ago, a century and a decade more—on December the 9<sup>th</sup>. According to the laws that govern the stars, he was Sagittarius. He was an archer. He was a centaur—half man, half horse. And, if my surmise of him is correct, Tip O'Neill wasn't into the zodiac. He was a skillful pragmatist. He couldn't have cared less about astrology. The laws that governed his spirit were those that he helped to created right down here on Earth...in the halls of Congress.

Tip O'Neill was a career politician. He served in Congress with courage, with great integrity and with honor. He represented the city of Boston from 1953 to 1987. In 1977, he became the 47<sup>th</sup> Speaker of the House of Representatives and he served faithfully in that capacity for a decade.

On Monday, March 17<sup>th</sup> in 1986, Tip O'Neill sat proudly at a dinner that was held in his honor at Boston College. At that dinner, then-President Ronald Reagan rose to share a few kind words, a few play words. After being introduced and welcomed with applause, President Reagan began his remarks in this way. He said,

Reverend Clergy, Mr. Prime Minister, Mr. Speaker, ladies and gentlemen... I want to begin tonight by saying how touched I am

to know that Tip wanted me here this evening. Why, he even called me himself last week and said, “Mr. President, make sure that you don’t miss the dinner on Tuesday night!”

Once again, March 17<sup>th</sup> of 1986 was a Monday. President Reagan continued. He said,

To be honest, I’ve always known that Tip was behind me, even if it was only at the State of the Union Address. As I made each proposal, I could hear Tip whispering to George Bush, “Forget it!” “No way!” “Fat chance!”

Tip O’Neill was whole-heartedly laughing on the podium, to Reagan’s left. Still further, President Reagan said,

I think it was inevitable, though, that there would be a stand-off between us. Imagine one Irishman trying to corner another Irishman in the Oval Office. But despite all of this, Tip wanted me here. He said that since it was March 17<sup>th</sup>, it was only fitting that someone drop by who had actually known St. Patrick.

I enjoy watch them rib each other about their age. Ronald Reagan was one year older than Tip O’Neill. Reagan was born on February 6<sup>th</sup> in 1911. Aquarius. And, of course, St. Patrick’s Day is March 17<sup>th</sup>. And lastly, he said, so kindly, I thought,

Ladies and gentlemen, I think you know that Tip and I have been kidding each other for some time now. And I hope you also know how much I hope this continues for many years to come. A little kidding is, after all, a sign of affection, the sort of thing that friends do to each other.

Mr. Speaker, I am grateful that you have permitted me in the past and I hope in the future that singular honor—the honor of calling you my friend. I think the fact of our friendship is testimony to the political system that we are a part of and the country that we live in, a country that permits two not-so-shy and not-so-retiring Irishmen have it out on the issues rather than on each other or their countrymen.



One wonders what those two not-so-shy and not-so-retiring Irishmen would have thought thirty-five years later, when the Capital was stormed last January.

Beyond their local oppositions on the issues of their days, there seems to have been, between them, a deeper loyalty. Their laughter was the sacred text of this—co-created and demonstrative of something that is much deeper than one's loyalty to a party. It suggested to them and suggests to us the still-strong meaning of fellowship...and the sense we have of family, deep as blood.

From the other side of the isle, despite what they held in common politically, Nancy Pelosi also recognized this depth in the American tradition of democracy. Honoring the end of his time as Speaker in a different ceremony, Pelosi said,

Tip carried the torch for all who believe that the purpose of politics is to improve the lives of others. Tip carried the torch for the underdog, for the person on the street, for the families struggling to pay the bills. He carried the torch of opportunity and equality into every budget negotiation, every legislative battle, every bipartisan agreement. Tip was the personal manifestation of the American dream and he carried the torch for everyone else who strived to achieve it.

So many loved Tip O'Neill. Love came from both sides of the aisle...but not so much from Gingrich. I don't think they ever reconciled...not after what transpired in May of 1984.

O'Neill was still Speaker back then. He was in the middle of his term...in the seventh of the ten years that he served. As Peter Boyer explained for a FRONTLINE documentary on PBS, At the end of one day's House session, Newt [Gingrich] delivered an ideological broadside, a long list of accusations against House Democrats for being soft on communism. No Democrat replied because the chamber was empty, a shot the C-Span cameras never showed.

The Gingrich strategy was somewhat reminiscent of McCarthyism and so, of course, the Democrats were enraged. First among them at the time was Tip O'Neill. He got really angry. In fact, I'd never seen him more upset. He spoke out himself. He made his feelings clear. Absolutely no one had to guess. Addressing Newt Gingrich directly, Speaker O'Neill said, My personal opinion is this. You deliberately stood in that well before an empty House and challenged these people and you challenged their Americanism and it's the lowest thing that I've ever seen in my 32 years in Congress!

Speaker O'Neill thought that his colleague was putting democracy in a tiny cage. Whether he was or not is a question that I will leave up to you but what a moment that was! To his credit, Newt Gingrich responded brilliantly. His rhetoric was precise. He was well prepared. He asked,

Is it wrong for those of us who have grown up as historians, who believe in looking at history, to raise questions of history? Is it wrong for us to go back and do the research and lay it out?

And Tip O'Neill engaged. He probably felt compelled to do so. I would have felt that way.

Tip O'Neill threw down in street fight politics in Gingrich's neighborhood. He played a game according to rules that were disadvantageous to him. Fought on a battlefield that was unknown to him...and, arguably, he won...but it was a pyrrhic victory. The costs of winning were so great that the claim of victory was meaningless. The costs of winning were the losses of justice, equity and compassion. The cost was the deep American friendship that we used to enjoy in politics...the kind of complex friendship that depends on a mind that is free. This kind of freedom depends on three things. It depends on justice, equity and compassion.

In this, the second month of our exploration of the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism, we are exploring the second principle and that principle is as follows:

WE, THE MEMBER CONGREGATIONS OF THE UNITARIAN  
UNIVERSALIST ASSOCIATION, COVENANT TO AFFIRM AND  
PROMOTE:

Justice, equity and compassion in human relations.

Justice, equity and compassion. Each of these begins with a mind that's free. And how does one free the mind? I suggest we start with crayons and I suggest that we find real cause to use each one...because we've learned our lesson, right?

[That] there are so many colors in the rainbow  
So many colors in the morning sun  
So many colors in the flower and i see every one.

How wildly do you color your spiritual world? May it be as wildly as we wish.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.