

“Is Free Will an Illusion?”

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August 12, 2007

For me, it began with Dear Abby.

A few months ago I was reading the newspaper over breakfast and I came to a letter that stopped me cold.

It read:

Dear Abby: At age 5, my friend’s son, “Gavin,” threatened to kill his mother and his brothers, and he meant it. After two horrible years, they finally found a pediatrician who said it wasn’t because they were bad parents. An MRI showed a portion of Gavin’s brain had no electrical activity. It’s the part that allows him to understand right from wrong and feel empathy.

Gavin is nearly 18 now, and soon to be out of a system that has been trying to train other parts of his brain to take over. My friends have never given up on their boy—they’re angels on Earth.

—Karen in Colorado Springs

Wow.

A five-year-old who literally cannot understand right from wrong, whose brain will not let him imagine himself in anyone else’s shoes. A little boy who might have killed his mother and his brothers and felt no remorse—
because the part of his brain that would have felt it just wasn’t there.

It made me stop and think.

How *do* we choose to do the right thing,
or at least refrain from the wrong thing?

What it is that keeps most of us from doing horrible things to each other, most of the time?

For most of us in this culture, the answer is free will. Free will is the idea that something in us has the power to choose—between everyday stuff like ketchup or mustard, and between the moral values of good and bad, right and wrong. I grew up believing I had free will. When no one is actively forcing me to do anything, I feel myself to be choosing freely. But when I heard the story of that little boy, Gavin, who had a brain that didn't work right, I wondered, am I really free? Or is my brain chemistry just running the show? In a world of brain cells and neurotransmitters, is it still meaningful to talk about free will? Is “Are we free or not?” even the right question any more?

To grapple with these questions, I think we need to start with some history, because throughout the history of religion, people's ideas about free will have been very closely tied to their ideas about the divine.

For many centuries, going all the way back to St. Augustine in the 4th century, many Christian theologians have taught that God has created humans and shown us how to live a moral life. If you live a good life, you will be rewarded in heaven. If not, you will be punished in hell. I'm oversimplifying a lot, but that's the basic idea. In this system, free will is absolutely necessary for everything to make sense.

Without free will, it wouldn't be right and just for God to damn people to hell. If you weren't free to choose good or evil, to *choose* to live in a moral or immoral way, how could it be right for God to hold you responsible for what you do? So if you believe in a God who damns people to hell, you had better believe in free will or God starts to look pretty scary.

As a matter of fact, that is the very problem that sparked the Protestant reformation. Martin Luther began life as a Catholic monk and struggled for many years with his fear of being damned. He was hyper-conscious of every sin he committed, and he was terrified that he would never be good enough to deserve salvation. His desperation finally pushed him to a breakthrough. In one life-changing moment, out of the blue, he experienced a sense of liberation from his struggles against sin. He felt loved and forgiven by the presence he called God. And he realized the teaching of his church didn't fit what he had experienced. So he founded a new church based on his experience of grace—a church that taught humans were powerless to *earn* their salvation through their own will—but salvation was a free gift from God.

This new image of a merciful, loving God was at the very heart of the Protestant Reformation. But it had a shadow side, against which our own religious ancestors rebelled. The Puritans who came to America were Calvinist Protestants who believed in predestination. They had taken Luther's idea of salvation as a free gift from God and worked it out to its logical conclusion. If you can't *earn* salvation, and not everybody is going to be saved,

then what?

The Calvinists believed God had already chosen long before any of them were born who would go to heaven and who would go to hell. In this system, people really don't have any freedom to shape the quality of their spiritual and moral life. Now this is a pretty hard idea for us to wrap our head around today. I've said before, and I'll say again, that it really came out of a sincere struggle to understand the difficulty of human life. It *is* one way of explaining why some people never get their lives together and never seem to catch a break. But the price the Calvinists paid for this explanation was a god who created people and set them up for failure in life and eternal punishment in death, with nothing they could do about it. This was the god our Universalist ancestors rebelled against.

Or rather, those early Universalists did what Luther had done 300 years before them. They looked at their lives, they looked at the Bible; and they discovered that what they found there did not match what the church was teaching. The God they encountered was not a capricious, violent god, but a god of love, compassion, and infinite mercy. The Universalists pushed Luther's original insight even further. They believed God was so good that *no one* would go to hell. Everyone would go to heaven—salvation was *universal*. They said, no matter who you are or what you've done in your life, God is going to forgive you because the nature of God is love. And with this radically new idea, the question of free will becomes much less important. It's still an interesting question—are we free to choose what we do? But it's lost that terrifying, burning urgency, because your fate after death is no longer hanging in the balance.

The Universalists were much more interested in the reality that most people naturally choose to do good, most of the time. There's an old story about Hosea Ballou, the great Universalist minister of the 19th century. I understand Bob Green used to like to tell this story when he was minister here, and it's one of my favorites too. One day, they say, Ballou was riding through the hills of New Hampshire with a Baptist preacher. At one point, the Baptist looked at him and said, "Brother Ballou, if I were a Universalist like you, and believed as you did, and did not fear the flames of hell, I could pull out a gun and shoot you dead, and I'd still go to heaven." Ballou looked at him and replied, "If you were a Universalist, the idea would never enter your head!"¹

Now, for the 19th-century Unitarians, the heart of the matter was a little different. Although they, too, believed in a loving God, they were much more interested than the Universalists were in the power of human beings to improve themselves. Most Unitarians believed in free will. They were more or less agnostics on the question of whether anyone actually went to hell or not, but they absolutely believed in the freedom of individuals to choose the good and improve their character—freedom as possibility.

They believed there was hardly anything the human person could not accomplish eventually—that people were fundamentally free to transcend their circumstances and improve themselves. They called this idea "salvation by character." And it was a real double-edged sword for them. On the one hand, it's pretty inspiring to believe you can keep on developing and improving yourself.

¹ Told by Elizabeth Strong in David Reich, "Of Sand Bars and Circuit Riders: Voices from our Universalist Past," *UU World* July/August 1993, online at <http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/2745.shtml>.

On the other hand, this theory of salvation by character really blinded the early Unitarians to the real problems that poor people and immigrants faced.

How much freedom do you have to develop your character if you're struggling to feed yourself and keep a roof over your head?

This was not the reality

for the predominantly upper-middle-class Unitarians.

They were able to affirm the idea of free will

because it fit with their sense of themselves as basically competent, noble people who were strong enough to choose the right.

We're not perfect, but still, warts and all,

I have always been inspired by these two strands of our tradition,

the Universalist story of faith that we are all loved and cared for by the source of life,

the Unitarian story of boundless confidence in human potential.

And yet—

this week I find myself asking, what about Gavin?

What about that little five-year-old boy

who really did seriously contemplate killing his family?

Where does he fit into the liberal story of salvation by character and universal love?

Throughout Western history,

most people have experienced something we have called *inner freedom*.

Our greatest philosophers and theologians have reminded us

that our bodies may be restrained and controlled

by a myriad of outer forces,

but if we guard and protect our inner freedom,

we are truly free no matter what happens on the outside.

Now the very nature of that inner freedom is being called into question.

In the last hundred years, our sense of freedom has survived

Freud's discovery of the unconscious mind—
the turbulent, instinctual *id*
that controls much more of us than we realized—
and Skinner's behaviorist experiments
designed to prove that there's no *there* there inside us at all.²

Today we are living in a world where neuroscientists can point
with ever-increasing precision to the parts of our brain that control
empathy, compassion, logical thinking—
all the parts of us that we believe make us most human, most free.
We are learning that the mind is not really separate from the body.
Brain lobes can suffer damage and alter our whole personality.
A child can be born with a brain physically incapable of compassion.
In a world like this, where is our freedom?

Today, intellectually, our culture is increasingly skeptical
of the concept of inner freedom.
We are afraid it might just be an illusion
generated by the chemicals in our brain.
And yet, knowing all that I know,
when I examine my own experience, I still *feel* free.
From the most trivial choice, like what to have for breakfast,
to the most profound, like the shape my religious life has taken,
I *feel* able to look inside myself and arrive at a preference,
a choice, a decision, a revelation even,
that I experience as mine—
not superimposed from the outside,
but emerging naturally from all the things that make me *me*.
And that, I believe, is what we have understood for a very long time
to be *freedom*.

But there's something *new* happening right now, too,
in how we understand our world and our freedom.
I was drawn to the story of the Star Maiden, which we heard earlier,

² See Rollo May, *Freedom and Destiny* (New York: Norton, 1981), pp. 84, 137.

because it has something important to tell us about freedom.
The people in the story of the Star Maiden
told her she was free to choose the form she would take on earth.
They told her,
“Your home will be where you find a peaceful resting-place.”
So she began to search.
She tried to be a rose, but she was lonely.
She tried to be a prairie flower, but she was frightened by the buffalo.
When she finally found her true form as a water lily,
it was not so much a “free choice” as we are wont to use the phrase,
but rather a sense of rightness and relief,
of discovering her place in the world
and relaxing into the only choice that gave her peace.

I wonder if we are coming to understand freedom in the same way—
as a response to the experience
of being invited to discover our place in the dance of life.
Today we are beginning to understand our world, and ourselves,
and the source of all things
as a sacred whole.
We are coming to understand that we are part of the whole;
we are not separate from it.
We are coming to understand ourselves
not only as independent individuals,
but as members of the community of life,
dependent on our world for food and companionship and love
and the very air we breathe.

If this is how life is,
I wonder if “Are we free?” is even the right question to ask.
Free from what?
The image of a heroic individual
striving to be free from the bonds of the world—
that may not be the image we need to sustain ourselves today.
If we know ourselves to be connected to everything that is,

maybe a better question is “Have we found our place?
Do we trust in the place the world has given us?
Are we at peace with our destiny?”³

Of course there will always be space for mystery here.
We will always have that *creative* freedom
that allows us both to accept the world as it is
and to transform it with all that we bring to share.

Are we free?

No, in the sense that much of life is what we are given,
what we inherit that can never be changed.

Our nature and our talents, our gifts, our vulnerabilities,
cannot be other than what they are.

We have a place in the universe which has been given to us,
which we did not choose.

Are we free?

Absolutely we are,
when we discover that freedom is another name for peace,
for relaxation,
for the magical sense of rightness that comes
when we creatively accept our place in the world
and dance with the destiny that belongs to us.

You know, I would love to be able to end here;
I would love to say Amen and have it feel good,
because I do believe this with my whole self.
But there’s something we’re not done with yet,
because I keep asking,
what about Gavin?
What about that little boy
whose brain is different from yours and from mine?

³ Rollo May writes eloquently about this in *Freedom and Destiny*, pp. 93–94.

What is his destiny, where is his place in the world?
I can't answer that.
It may be that he will always be a danger to other people.
Maybe he will never learn to love.
This is a mystery that frightens me,
that a little child should experience a freedom within himself
to hurt and kill without remorse.
Why should the world have such things in it?
What have we not understood about the world?
Maybe we will never understand.

But this child is still part of us;
he is part of the community of all life.
We cannot make him disappear and deny him a place in the world.
We don't know what will unfold from his life.
We aren't yet wise enough to imagine all that might be.
So let me close with a prayer:

May there be a place in the dance for this child,
a place that will bring forth the best that he is.
May the earth that holds us all
hold this child.
May the gifts he has been given be enough.
May he use them well,
in the freedom of the spirit
which hungers and thirsts after goodness,
which listens for the voice of truth,
which trusts that a healing way will be found.

May it be so for us all.
Amen and blessed be.