



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“A Mind Is Not To Be Imprisoned”

© by the Reverend Alison W. Eskildsen

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Centering Thoughts

A closed mind is like a closed book, just a block of wood. Chinese proverb

*Without freedom of thought there can be no such thing as wisdom,
and no such thing as public liberty without freedom of speech. Benjamin Franklin*

*The moment you declare a set of ideas to be immune from criticism, satire, derision,
or contempt, freedom of thought becomes impossible. Salman Rushdie*

*I didn't want my future to be just sitting in a room and be imprisoned in my four walls and just
cooking, and giving birth to children. I didn't want to see my life in that way. Malala Yousafzai*

Sermon

Did you watch some of the news coverage of Pope Francis' visit? Thousands tried to greet him and receive his blessing. Broadcasters gushed about meeting him, as if they had fallen under a spell of holiness. The Pope charms us with his humility, his championing the poor, his rejection of papal wealth, his recognition of human-caused climate change, his loosening of some doctrine around divorce and homosexuality, as well as his warm grace. Unlike in Galileo's time, this Pope allows for greater use of one's mind without risking heresy.

Our world needs more of the tolerance Pope Francis displays. In my view, misguided understanding of religious doctrine has wrongly justified intolerance and acts of violent terrorism, which we're reminded of every September. The story of Malala and the Taliban's attempt to silence her for advocating a girls' right to an education serves as another example. When Malala accepted the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014, she indicated she would use her prize money to build schools for girls and boys. She pleaded with governments to stop buying weapons and start buying books. Her campaign, 'Books not Bullets,' advocates for peaceful change. She reminds her fellow Muslims that the first word and meaning of the Qur'an is read or recite, and that the Prophet Muhammad encouraged both girls and boys to learn.

Attempts to limit someone's right to read doesn't occur only in foreign lands. It happens here, too. That's why for 34 years the American Library Association has sponsored 'Banned Books Week' in public and school libraries. Beginning today, librarians will lift up the right to read and the dangers of censorship. Unfortunately, many books are challenged or banned in the name of religion in a misguided effort to protect readers from immoral, un-Christian influences. Fundamentalism under any religion is a danger to freedom of religion.

The most common reasons people cite for wanting to ban a book are its alleged inclusion of graphic sexuality or profanity, anti-capitalist or anti-religious messages (i.e. socialism or atheism), pro-homosexuality, pro-drug abuse, or pro-gang life, and extreme abuse and physical violence. Sex education texts that include contraception information and science texts that teach evolution often get targeted, too.

Statistically, authors of color or books with themes about issues concerning communities of color are challenged and banned at a higher frequency than white authors or books about white culture. The content of a minority-focused book may reflect a grittier, more dangerous life found in many inner-city, poor communities where drugs, gangs, joblessness, profanity, and early sexual experimentation may be prevalent. It's no surprise these concerns show up in books. Given the likelihood that it's a majority of white members on school or library board making decisions, it's no surprise they may wish to remove from circulation creative expressions of that unfortunate reality. I wonder if they think they make that gritty world go away by eliminating these books. And, do they think really think they're protecting the public by not allowing the more privileged to learn about the struggles some people face in marginalized communities?

Recently I went to see the movie "Straight Outta Compton." I recommend the movie despite its highly offensive language, drug culture, gun violence and objectification of women. I recommend it because the movie exposed me to the very grim life of the south Los Angeles neighborhood of Compton, a culture and community I might not otherwise have insight into. The movie portrays the early development of the hip hop music group NWA whose first studio album was titled "Straight Outta Compton". Although the movie is set in the 80s, the social problems it features vary little from today. The 'Black Lives Matter' movement directly responds to the legacy of police brutality and racism evident in the movie.

In the late 80s my adolescent son, Brian, bought an NWA album. Driving home from Tower Records, Paul allowed Brian to listen to it in the car. The CD or cassette didn't make it out of the car. We censored it because it seemed to promote values and attitudes we didn't approve of. But after seeing the movie, I understood the music better. I appreciated that the music gave voice to the social problems they were powerless to change. The music was their protest, their cry to be heard and to have their lives affirmed. The music was their Truth, with a capital T. If this movie had been a book I was prohibited from reading, I wouldn't have learned something I needed to learn. Frankly, what every white middle-class person like me needs to learn.

I asked our own current public librarian, Aleta Turner, about book challenges in the Athens-Clarke County libraries, she said they were rare. She showed me a book challenged last year. Sadly, it's a minority culture novel about the lives of Mexican-American migrant workers in the 40s and 50s, by Tomás Rivera, titled *...And the Earth Did Not Devour Him*.

Books, music, and movies open windows into lives we might not know first-hand. Censoring exposure to people whose lives and struggles may be different doesn't protect anyone and prevents people from having the knowledge they need to solve the problems.

Unitarian Universalism is a religious tradition that values knowledge, freedom, and justice. We need to be alert to censorship in our communities, especially when it is based on discrimination of a non-dominant culture or religion.

Even though we may not desire to ban books, we can be equally fundamentalist in our unwillingness to hear particular religious words or explore particular religious ideas. Some of you have told me you self-censor what you say because you worry how your beliefs may be received. If we are to be truly welcoming and respectful of all beliefs, it needs to begin here. Just as we need to be exposed to a multiple cultures, beliefs, and social concerns, we need to be exposed here to those same things. Censorship serves no one.

The image on the cover of your order of service this morning comes from a stained glass work that hangs in a window at my previous congregation in Reston, Virginia. The image symbolizes the free mind open to the use of reason in religion. The broken chains represent our freedom and the books represent knowledge. At one time this very humanistic representation of our faith was enough. But as we recognize that rational thought is not the only way of knowing or acknowledging one's personal religious beliefs, it cannot be all that we are. Let's be sure we don't close up those chains and bind our minds in ways that deny the freedom we proclaim.

In *Fahrenheit 451*, a frequently banned book about book banning and burning by Ray Bradbury, one character says, "A book is a loaded gun..." Indeed, reading, learning, and exposure to new ideas can be dangerous. The freedom to think for yourself, to make decisions for yourself, and to choose your own path in life threatens those who only want you to follow *their* proscribed path. Malala would not be a Taliban target if education was deemed harmless. For similar reasons the enslaved Africans in America were kept uneducated. For similar reasons, Roman Catholic Church leaders protested printing the Bible in the language of the people, knowing it would take power away from the clerics.

Books get banned because someone fears their content or fears the loss of power and control. Those who wish to ban a book might just as well stick their heads in the sand. Neither act eliminates the content or ideas. And censorship is a slippery slope, for if one group censors what they find offensive, another group may do the same thing. Before long, we'd have empty library shelves and an uninformed society.

I recognize keeping our libraries free from censorship may not measure up to some of the world's other problems. But though we may feel powerless to solve some of these larger problems, this one is within our direct sphere of influence. We who value intellectual and religious freedom shouldn't forget that others believe banning books and ideas is a right and proper behavior. Let's be sure we exercise our open minds by sharing all our ideas with each other here. Let us stay vigilant in protecting freedom from those who might take it away in the name of decency and appropriateness. And let us be sure we read and get exposed to ideas and realities we may not be comfortable with, lest the warning in *Fahrenheit 451* comes true, that burning or banning books is unnecessary because people stopped reading on their own.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Do you have an all-time favorite novel? What makes it special or meaningful to you?
2. Has a particular book affected your outlook on life or your religious/spiritual beliefs? Why was it so powerful and how did it change your views?
3. Have you ever been prevented from thinking for yourself or following your own path? Share.
4. Share your thoughts or feelings about UU freedom of belief and 4th Principle.