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The Last of the Human Freedoms

Commencement Address, Lawrence University, Appleton, WI

By Martin E. Marty, The University of Chicago, June 12, 1977

Uneasy without a text, I remind myself that this is a commencement address and not a baccalaureate sermon by choosing one not from a sacred scripture but from the modern canon of the most serious sort, the literature of the Holocaust. It has to do with an observation made by the death-camp psychiatrist Viktor Frankl about "the last of the human freedoms":

We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms--to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's way. (Man's Search for Meaning, Simon and Schuster, 1962, p.65)

That text speaks to your class, the survivor of the middle years of the 1970s, because most analysts see your generation less sure of the "sets of circumstances" you will face than were many before you, and therefore in more need than they of the "freedom to choose your attitude" in every such circumstance. The generation of the mid-forties was full of post-war Utopian projects, but saw instead the Cold War. The people of the mid-fifties were full of Utopian hopes for the Affluent Society and organized their dreams around these, to see them turn sour in the late sixties. And the mid-sixties people still for a moment carried Utopian prospects about Great Societies and New Frontiers minutes before these were dimmed by the visions of Vietnam and burning cities.

Nowadays Utopians are hard to come by, ceilings seem low, corners are more cramping. Your--and our--current generations are accused of celebrating escapism and narcissism in the "Me Decade." Still I have no doubt that almost all of you have some sense that your own life and career are on some sort of trajectory, that even if you might "bum a year to think things through," some shape of vocation, graduate work, or personal philosophy is discernible, that most of you could include some hint of social purpose in answers to our question, "What's next for you?" This feeling for projection and trajectory keeps us from being ready for interruptions and surprises and makes it difficult to know we need the "last of the human freedoms" that Frankl describes.

And you will be interrupted and surprised, for you have chosen to live in a century in which changed circumstances unnerve or enoble the lives of many. Frankl knew about that, as did Albert, Einstein, Enrico Fermi, Paul Tillich, and other geniuses who fled European terror at mid-career, or as do those who are uprooted on more domestic scales by loss of a job in the middle of life, or the loss of a spouse, a philosophical certainty, a religious belief, a security. Just as likely you will be surprised by positive signals and find yourself doing and thinking other things than you planned within the limits and under the low ceilings the world around you chose for you.

When interruption and surprise come, we can greet them with bemusement, stunned by circumstance. It is possible that you may misunderstand the memory of your academic disciplines and

specialties, acting as if they were to set boundaries to life instead of to provide clarity to definition. You will go on trying to be neutral, value-free, objective, "pure thinkers." You are free to choose a different attitude, one typified by another of the uprooted, the German-turned-American, Jew and Christian, academic and maverick, specialist and generalist Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, who blurted for many of us:

I am an impure thinker. I am hurt, swayed, shaken, elated, disillusioned, shocked, comforted, and I have to transmit my mental experiences lest I die. And although I may die. (I Am an Impure Thinker. Argo, 1970, p.2)

This devourer of libraries also located the person in the fields of learning, as a step toward finding freedom for a choice of attitudes:

. . . the presence of one living soul among the three million volumes of a great library offers sufficient proof against the notion that the secret of this soul is to be found by reading those three million books. (p. 4).

If you are to be interrupted and surprised by changing circumstances, "the last of the human freedoms" will be available to you, in varying measures and to different degrees. It comes both as a gift and an art or science. As a gift you recognize it as an offering of Being itself, just as genius may be, just as other "gifts" certainly are. In the pluralism of your modern university we must seek diverse means of explaining the origins of this gift. For some it is, quite properly, a matter of the roll of the dice, or the result of biological mutations, or a puzzle that best remains a mystery. The prophet has a different explanation, though he has today no privileged position from

which to offer it. As Saul Bellow once said, being a prophet is nice work if you can get it, but sooner or later you have to talk about God. For the prophet thinks of the call to changed circumstances and the freedom to greet them with a choice of attitudes as a call from God. "Brace yourself, Jeremiah. . . do not let your spirit break. . . They . . . shall not overcome you," he was told as he was sent "to pull down and uproot, to build and to plant," until he announced that "there is in my heart a burning fire shut up in my bones." The Christian majority in our society takes heart from Jesus of Nazareth's choice of attitude in the face of his famed temptations or the call of his cross. In our own time, a Pope John reported on how dependent he had always been on the structures of church security, the hierarchies above him, on the Pope, until it occurred to him, "My God, I am the Pope," and had only the Holy Spirit to speak to--until he found peace and sleep.

Rosenstock-Huessy put the sense of the call as a gift in almost poetic words for our day:

We do not exist because we think. Man is the son of God and not brought into being by thinking. We are called into society by a mighty entreaty, 'Who art thou, man, that I should care for thee?' And long before our intelligence can help us, the new-born individual survives this tremendous question by his naive faith in the love of his elders. We grow into society on faith, listening to all kinds of human imperatives. Later we stammer and stutter, nations and individuals alike, in the effort to justify our existence by responding to the call. We try to distinguish between the many tempting offers made to our senses and appetites by the world. We wish to follow the deepest question, the central call which goes to the heart, and promises our soul /a/lasting certainty. . . (p. 10).

In such a version more of us can live with this sense of

a call into sets of circumstances, a gift of the last freedom, the one that allows us a choice of attitudes. Otherwise, we do not tend to trust those who claim such a divine call directly. At our university we tend to send them to the clinics--after all, Idi Amin and terrorists and fools claim such a call and a gift--or in our social life we find such claimants to be bores or manipulators of the holy. "They're all right, but would you want your daughter to marry one of them?"

For all those reasons, I prefer to speak of this freedom not only as a gift but also as an art and a science. For most of us the call comes not as a bolt out of the blue, but through billions of particulars, millions of signs, thousands of gestures and nuances and appeals from nature, from loved ones and hated ones, from professors and students, alumni and prospects, roommates and spouses and employers. In the face of them we are given the opportunity to develop a "core" of personality and philosophy, one that makes us ready for interruption and surprise.

My remarks are not unframed by this year's fresh discussions of those who chose dissidence and dissent in the face of any number of regimes. We hear again their witness, and learn that the spirit of Frankl's death camp heroes lives on. Thus Valdimir Bukovsky, asked why he did not recant and give up this freedom in the Soviet camp gave two kinds of accounting for resistance. For some, personality, integrity, instincts of self-preservation "consist of feeling, of an animal." "Just to be alive, not to lose the strength" as their achievement. But for him, "the integrity of the personality, the self-preserving instinct is

consistent, an attempt to be oneself--not to lose self-respect, dignity, and all the traits and all the inclinations and beliefs a person has. . . A person who once arrived at the notion of inner freedom cannot change it. It is impossible as if, as if self-destruction. It's more easy to commit suicide than to change his beliefs."

Not for many of us will the test of this last human freedom come so forcibly and forcefully. Yet the wise know that ahead of them are interruptions and surprises, positive and often negative, that turn people from their trajectories and offer startling tests of freedom. That some changed sets of circumstances are impending seems clear in the book titles of serious writers in "your" years, the mid-seventies: The Twilight of Authority, The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalims, Business Civilization in Decline, The Fall of Public Man; the changes are also visible in the portents labeled "energy crisis," "South African racial war," "genetic tampering," and the like.

For such tests your liberal arts, humanities, and arts and sciences background is supposed to be of great help. if you let it be. Such background to intelligence no more assures proper use of the last of the human freedoms than does a religious call assure that the respondent will not be a hateful fanatic or a hopeless sloth. But it offers the instruments. My late colleague Louis Gottschalk, speaking at Cornell University in 1961 reminded us of this: "The end product of the humanities is humanity, a humane mankind, a breed of men and women ennobled by the human heritage of beauty and wisdom." Fearful of falling

into cliché and platitude we commencement speakers sometimes understress the ways in which we are shaped by and in which we celebrate that heritage, but a grasp of its elements is the greatest gift of this University to you or your finest achievement as you have been plundering its intellectual riches.

I cannot close without confirming something of Frankl's and Bukovsky's sense of divisions within humanity and offering of choice about its terms by reference to the thought of someone who is far from literal death camps. It is only proper that I pay some respects to him, since I understand he was nominated for my current role by more graduates than nominated me. I refer to Woody Allen, who lost out, among other reasons, because his honorarium would have been outlandish, his availability in question, and he had no son or daughter in the class. But he, too, speaks to this point in your place, in your time:

Life is a concentration camp. You're stuck here, and there's no way out, and you can only rage impotently against your persecutors. The concentration camp is the real test: There are those who choose to make terrible moral decisions and betray their best friends and do horrible things, and there are others who behave with unbelievable courage. That's exactly what happens in life-- some respond terribly and some beautifully. . . People have to stop and think what their priorities are. (Esquire, May, 1977, pp. 75f).

The art and science of making proper choice comes out of our ability to respond out of our "core" to every kind of change. Rosenstock-Huessy, to remind himself that "Truth is vital and must be socially represented" even developed a life motto to stress the ways the calls of the world around, the neighbor near, the sacred itself evoke an answer from us: respondeo etsi

mutabor, "I respond although I will be changed."

Fear of being changed by response holds some back. I prefer to call as witness John Henry Newman: "In a higher world it is otherwise, but here below to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often." They can take from you the idea of an unchanged trajectory for career, along with physical security and freedom or all the props and blankets you hugged and cherished. No one can take from you that "last of the human freedoms--to choose /your/ attitude in any given set of circumstances." All of us who gather here today count on you not only to cherish that gift but to develop and nurture the art and science that goes with it.