

Sermon – 2024 1-7 Choose the Freedom of Love by Joyce Ramay

Don't let the cage of society clip your freedom to live and to love completely.

Over the past few weeks, our minister, Alberita Johnson, has taken us on a delightful journey of the many ways in which our diverse holidays bring light into the darkness of the winter season.

When I walk my dog, the early mornings are dark.
Before I finish dinner, the daylight is gone.
We all experience the physical darkness of our planet Earth.
In the news, we are confronted with the darkness of wars,
a dysfunctional government, mass shootings,
and desperate migrants fleeing from poverty and persecution.
We cannot avoid seeing the hazards of climate change,
with its droughts, floods, fires and hurricanes.
At times, we are overcome by the misfortunes that we see on our TV screens.
Experiences from Ukraine, Israel and Gaza are raging inside us.
If we are empathetic, we share the pain of all the world's tragedies –
in our bodies and in our souls.
We cannot, and should not, block out those feelings of pain.
When we try, we are prevented from feeling much of anything else,
even love and joy.
We cannot deny reality, but we can control how much and what we observe.
We can **pay attention** to the beautiful things that enhance our lives.
I am in the last years of life, and sometimes it seems like our country and our species could also be nearing extinction – like flames being put out.
But moods like this could ruin us, if we did not know how to preserve the light.
And thus, we appreciate the benefits of all the rituals of light that we have celebrated together in December.
Know this! Whatever is happening in the world, whatever is happening in our personal lives, we **can** find light.
Particularly at this time of year, we are reminded that we must **look for it**.
Perhaps that is why we welcome the New Year with fireworks at midnight.
I started the New Year like every other day – arising early for sunrise.
In the evenings, I step outside to enjoy the beautiful sunsets.
At night, I watch the moon traverse the sky.
I absorb the light of stars and Orion shining brightly from afar.
In the daytime, I watch my soulmates, the birds, as they soar through the sky.
I hear them chirping to greet the early morning sun.
I see the Ibis visiting my yard for their dinners.
For other kinds of light, I welcome smiles and hugs from friends and family.
I am blessed to be surrounded in my neighborhood by young families with children who are hoping for a bright future.
Nothing feels more like sunlight than walking into a room like this,
full of people who warmly greet us.
Here we enjoy the light of young children who come to our services.
On Sundays, our rituals of spiritual life illuminate our lives.
My spirit is restored every time I hear messages from Alberita Johnson,
or our other members.
I am lifted up by the joyful and heartfelt music of Carlos Garcia and our singers.
And, at this time of year, we also solemnly reflect on the light of memory.
Deep inside us are the memories of all the people we've ever loved.
I recall happy times spent with my parents, grandparents, and my Aunty Muggs.

I can recall a favorite teacher, a best friend from high school,
or a beloved brother or sister who has passed.
The light of the love of my departed husbands is always with me,
because I know that true love never dies.
And when I think of them, I'm suffused with light that reminds me,
that I have had such fine people in my life, and that they are still with me now, coming back to help me
through hard times.
I am comforted by remembering that all over the world,
most people want peace – although they are seldom portrayed in the news.
People want a safe place for their families,
and they want to be good and do good.
The world is filled with helpers.
It is only the great darkness of these times that makes it hard to see them.
So, no matter how dark the days,
we **trust** that we can still find light in our own hearts,
and we can be one another's light.
We are each other's keepers.
We can beam the light of our love out to everyone we meet.
We can let others know we are here for them, that we will try to understand.
We cannot stop all the destruction, but we can light candles for one another,
as we do every Sunday here at All Faiths.
In December, a few of us joined the inspiring sessions **On Repentance and Repair**, led by our minister.
The book was recommended by the UUA for all of its members to read, study and discuss.
I wish that more of you had participated.
It emphasized our need to admit the harm that we have caused,
to change ourselves, and then to repair the damage.
So I was happy to find these comments by Mirabai Starr,
who writes of Judaism's affirmation of *tikkun olam*—
human participation in the world's restoration:
“Our task is to mend the broken world. How do we do this?
We do this through every act of loving kindness.
And we do this through every act of *zedakah*, which is generosity, hospitality.
It's an offering of ourselves, even when it's not convenient and not comfortable.
The nice thing about Judaism, and this is true in Islam as well,
is that our loving, kind **thoughts** count too.
The actions [count], certainly, of course,
but our loving **thoughts** make a difference.
They help mend the world.” End quote.
One of my favorite authors, Viktor Frankl, said,
“Between stimulus and response, there is a space.
In that space is **our power to choose our response.**
In our response, lies our growth and our freedom.”
Psychiatrist Viktor Frankl (1905—1997) developed this wisdom during his time as an inmate in
Auschwitz. He wrote:
“The experiences of camp life show that humanity **does have a choice of action.**
There were enough examples, often of a heroic nature,
which proved that apathy could be overcome, irritability suppressed.
Humanity can preserve a vestige of spiritual freedom,
of independence of mind,
even in such terrible conditions of psychic and physical stress.

We who lived in concentration camps can **remember** the people 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 person but one thing:**

The last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way. . . .” End quote.

I believe one of the greatest faults in our education system and our worldview is **our underestimation of our power to choose** – even under the worst possible circumstances.

So, as we start the New Year, I implore you –

don’t let the dark news of the world lead you to anxieties, apathy or despair.

We do have the power to choose our response.

We do have the power to choose the freedom of love.

By choosing love, we can free ourselves from the cage of society, that misleads us into paths of destruction.

By choosing love, we can free ourselves from the bondage of apathy and despair.

By choosing love, we can free ourselves from self-absorption and greed.

By choosing love, we can free ourselves to become compassionate servants.

By choosing love, we can cherish and nourish all living beings on Mother Earth.

By choosing love, we can **repair** the world.

The truth is, that by choosing love, we free ourselves from all those needless insecurities and anxieties about the future –

because we hold the future in our **own loving hands**.

We were born to be co-creators of our world.

We are empowered by sharing in the divine love that courses throughout this universe.

Pope Francis stated, “The transformed person finds **freedom** in the **service** of **Life and Love**. Your life is not about you. You are about Life!”

This is a special time of the year for me.

As I have told you before, my husband Haneef Ramay died on January 1st, 2006. That day, when I arrived home from the hospital,

I went to my room in Lahore,

where I spent some time in tears,

and remembrance of the wonderful years of love that we had shared together.

That is when I wrote the words that you see at the end of my emails.

To live is to love. To love is to live. Live and love completely.

So today, I invite you to exercise **your** powers of choice, and **choose** the **Freedom of Love**.

Choose the Freedom to Live your Life in service to others.

Have a blessed and fruitful New Year - with Liberation through Love.

May it be so.