

Choosing Freedom

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In my prayer group last week I asked for support in knowing complete, divine Freedom in my life. As the week went by, I realized I didn't really know what freedom means. I looked it up in the dictionary, and from the myriad descriptions, the one that felt the most meaningful to me was "a condition of no restraint." What if I lived my life under conditions of no restraint? What if I expressed freely the divine essence of who I am, unconcerned with the judgments and limitations of others or even of myself?

Emma Curtis Hopkins wrote, "[I]t is as much bondage to be tied to an idea as to a stake."

The image that instantly came to mind when I read this: I am hobbled to a stake in the ground. I busily circle the stake with an appearance of great purpose and intention as the rope gets shorter and shorter and I experience less and less freedom. I am bound to the stake by my ideas of lack and limitation, my imaginings that God or others are judging me, my fears of my own success.

What kinds of ideas do we tie ourselves to? A couple of personal examples:

When I was very young, I staked myself to the idea that if I just found the right man, all my problems would be solved. Ideally, this man would have a secure job with a good and growing income, he would be handsome so we could be sure to have good looking children, and he would hopefully not be too tied to his family so that we could spend all holidays with my family. This seemed like the perfect situation for producing freedom in my life.

When I was 21, I met this perfect man. He made excellent money and was on a promising career path. He was handsome, his family was relatively wealthy and his parents and siblings, to whom he was not close, lived in distant state. Although I am sure now that I did not love *him*, I loved the idea of him as the perfect fulfillment of "perfect man" and the source of my freedom. I became staked to the idea that he was going to solve all my problems and we would be the perfect couple, that his money would make life good, that this is what love looked like.

I somehow thought that these "ideal" qualities would ensure my freedom, the condition of no restraint my soul was seeking. And I was so sure, so staked to this idea, that I didn't even notice

when the rope got shorter and shorter and my freedoms began to slip away. I began to use drugs we could afford because of his abundant income. At his urging, I chose to sell my car and quit my job to stay home to take care of him and the house. By the time he became verbally abusive, I barely noticed, and the first time he hit me, I blamed myself.

I was so staked to the idea that the right man, this man, was going to ensure my freedom that I stayed for almost four years. Then I did it again with another man, a shorter trip this time of only about a year. I was learning.

Yet there's another layer beneath the idea of "right man" that I was also staked to. That idea was: I'm not good enough to be my own provider, to take care of myself; I am helpless; something outside of me will make me complete, make me free. Hobbled by these ideas, I circled until the rope got tighter and tighter and there was no freedom in my life. It has taken me almost thirty years to unwind that cord, and even still I sometimes get tangled in it.

Another idea I staked myself to:

When I was about 13, my best friend asked me what I want to be when I grew up. We were active in our Lutheran church youth group and attended Confirmation classes together. We both adored the Pastor of our church and the youth leader, as well. In immediate response to her question, I spoke the desire of my heart without thinking about it: "I want to be a Pastor."

She looked at me as though I had lost my mind and responded, "Girls can't be pastors!" I instantly realized she was right; I'd never seen a "girl" pastor. In that brief moment, I staked myself to that idea—that restraint—that I could never be a pastor because I was a girl. I felt a sense of loss and disappointment, but resigned myself to the situation. I did not know that the first women were attending and graduating from Lutheran seminary about that time. I simply accepted what was made obvious by my friend's opinion and my own observation.

Many years later, when I was in my early 30s, I was having lunch with a friend, discussing my lack of career direction. I had returned to college after a lengthy absence, but felt like I was wasting my time and money because I didn't know what I wanted. My friend asked me, "What do you really want to do?" In a shining moment of divine inspiration, I reconnected to that 12-year-old's dream. It welled up from the core of my being and I said, "I want to be a minister," and I burst into tears.

That moment of realization is so tangible to me. In an instant, I began to loosen the tether to

the idea “girls can’t be ministers,” which, of course, I already knew in a surface sort of way because I attended a church that had a woman minister. It was another 10 years, though, for me to fully pull up the stake, to attend ministerial school and begin to fulfill God’s idea for my career and work.

Sometimes we stake ourselves to ideas about other people, their worthiness or intelligence or some other quality or characteristic. Are you staked to any ideas about anyone in your life? Our ideas about others not only limit us; they also limit the person we are labeling because they then have to show up that way around us. Are we allowing others to be all that God would have them be or are we holding them to the tyranny of our ideas about them?

I remember a time when I staked myself to the idea that someone I know is controlling and manipulative. As I began to unravel the tether—to become aware of and release my judgments of him—I began to see that his controlling behaviors were based in his fears of judgment and that the subtle violence of my judgment of him were triggering his controlling behaviors; I was engaging in the exact behavior—judgment—that most triggered the controlling behavior in him that I was judging. Over time I was able to replace my judgment with compassion and although this person and I will never be close, we have found a certain peace in our relationship. This is only possible because I was willing to loosen my attachment to my ideas about him and set him free to be more of who he is.

What ideas of who you are or who you should be are you staked to? We can’t free ourselves from that which we don’t know. For 20 years I didn’t know that I hadn’t followed my calling to become a minister because of my false idea that girls can’t be ministers. Instead, I just let that unconscious idea dictate my choices and limit my divine expression. I chose that, not consciously, but I chose it. It was only when I became aware of the limiting idea that I was able to begin to untie the knot that held me to it. We must bring into our awareness that from which we wish to be free.

Take a moment to consider how much of what you are staked to is the source of your suffering in life. I stayed in an abusive and unhealthy relationship for the sake of an idea. I forfeited years of career bliss because of what I thought I knew. Is there a link between the ideas that bind you and some suffering, some pain, some need you are experiencing? Begin to loosen the tether by first acknowledging the gifts of being staked to an idea. I am a better minister

because of my years of work in other fields; I am a more compassionate, powerful woman because of my experience of the misuse of power in relationships.

Then, acknowledge that you chose the current situation and you can choose out of it. Get support from others: your spiritual community, your practitioner, a counselor or mentor. Cry a little, or a lot, and pray and meditate daily. Envision right now, pulling up the stake of any false ideas you have about yourself, your work, your friends, your family, the planet, the political or economic situation. Pull it up and release it for there is nothing outside the spirit of God.

Tether yourself only to the idea of God, of love of freedom, for there lies the very heart of God, the place where you can know with no doubt that you are free of all restraint.