

Freedom and Liberty

by Gordon W. Brown

Liberty is what society can give or take away. Freedom is the inner power of intention and will.

I have given these concepts a great deal of thought through the years, especially after I began to understand the prison experience, to the extent possible as a facilitator of Exodus meetings. In those meetings I did not use liberty and freedom synonymously, they have distinctively different meanings. Let's get into it.

I do not recall where I first heard, "A person is sent to prison *as* punishment, not *for* punishment." While I respect the harsh realities of incarceration and other contradictions of this assertion, let's take it to mean that the punishment for their transgressions is indeed loss of liberty. One is no longer able to come and go as one pleases. The jailor holds sway over us, making decisions about our lives that exacerbate our oppression. Activity is restricted by means of shackles, cells, schedules, movement in the facility, controlling visitation, restricting correspondence, attire, etc. This certainly applies to the incarcerated, but also to the returning citizen who must satisfy numerous restrictions while on parole. The initial loss of liberty is only the beginning of the captivity experience. Release from captivity may, or may not, grant unabridged liberty.

Nevertheless, some freedoms cannot be taken away. Our thoughts, imagination, and motivations remain our own. How we think, what we imagine, and what motivates can change. This has been borne out by the astounding successes of many of the men I have known who have

been, or are still incarcerated. These men decided to own their freedoms: freedom to choose how they react to any given situation; freedom to enroll in, or disenroll from, a program; freedom to follow the rules or challenge them; freedom to engage with the authorities or ignore them, regardless of the consequences; and so on.

We have had many conversations when someone would claim, “I had to (fill in the blank), I had no choice.” And in almost every instance the feedback would be, “Oh, yes, you did!” The regret so many of us experience comes when we realize we *did* have the freedom to choose differently, and now we struggle with the consequences. “The past is approved, the present is received, the future is open.”

In other words, after our liberty is taken, individual freedoms certainly remain. Decisions to quit smoking, get sober, read a particular book, write a book, eat a vegan diet, stop fighting, go to school, make a phone call, send a letter, become the “new man” are made freely. Certainly, there may be significant challenges achieving a particular goal—but we get there! “Out of the struggle of the now, we will create the human world of the future.”

“I wasn’t arrested; I was rescued.” This was not an uncommon phrase to be uttered in an Exodus meeting. *The loss of liberty has frequently led to the discovery of freedom.* Once the chaos of the streets dissipates, and we learn to think for ourselves, we begin to make life-giving choices.