

Free at Last: Challenges Facing Those Who Are “Liberated”

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During the early 1990s, I had the opportunity to work in the country of Estonia when the Soviet Union was collapsing. I continued to work in Estonia during the years when the citizens of this former-Soviet country found themselves faced with opportunities and challenges associated with new forms of freedom in their personal and collective lives. Along with my colleague, Berne Weiss (who was similarly spending time in the country of Hungary, as its citizens were similarly facing the opportunities and challenges of freedom), I wrote a book called *Freedom: Narratives of Change in Hungary and Estonia*. Published by Jossey-Bass, this book did not sell many copies—yet of the 50 plus books I have written, this is the one of which, in many ways, I am most proud.

In this essay, and several others I will be preparing under the auspices of the Freedom Project at The Professional School of Psychology, I re-engage observations I made about my work and life in Estonia and the narratives Estonians shared with me in preparation for the book. Throughout these essays, I am guided by and make extensive use of the wisdom provided by Erich Fromm regarding his own unique perspectives on freedom. He offered these perspectives in a series of books written over a period of more than 30 years. I have invited several of our doctoral students from around the world to offer their own insights about and experiences with Freedom. Their essays are being published in this library. The issue of freedom is certainly of great importance right now in our troubled and changing world. The insights gained from my Estonian colleagues still seem quite poignant and timely. It is in recognition of these insights that I offer this set of essays.

Freedom: An Existential Decision

This is our true state; which makes us incapable both of certain knowledge and of absolute ignorance, We sail on a vast expanse. always drifting in uncertainty, and carried hither and thither: If there is any point to which we think we can attach ourselves, to steady our position. it shifts and leaves us: if we pursue it. it escapes our grasp, slides past us, and vanishes on its eternal course. Nothing stays for us. This is our natural condition. and yet most contrary to our wishes: we burn with desire to find firm ground, and a final fixed foundation on which we can build a tower to rise to infinity. But our foundation cracks. and the earth opens upon abysses.

- Blaise Pascal. *Pensies*

How can we place the personal experiences of Estonians in the historical context in which people have tried to understand the nature and meaning of freedom? Human beings are remarkable (and quite flawed) creations. We are rooted in several critical biological constraints while also possessing important biological gifts (or, perhaps, burdens). The primary gift or burden is often defined as our capacity for transcendence—or existential awareness. We are born, we mature, and we die. All of us try to make sense of these several stages in the brief life we live because we have been given the capacity of transcendence: we can recognize and understand the implications of our own finite existence in a vast continuum of time and space. We are blessed with awareness and cursed with the angst that is associated with this awareness.

If we are fortunate, we have the opportunity to face and test these implications in a social/political context of freedom. We are allowed and often encouraged to explore freely our thoughts, our feelings, our values, and our aspirations. We can act freely upon those thoughts, feelings, values, and aspirations within the context of our social responsibility to the welfare of other people and the natural world. These are the optimal conditions of freedom—being both a source of great joy and gratification and a source of anxiety and disillusionment. The polarity that exists when we face freedom is quite remarkable and can readily lead to a swinging back and forth between joy and sorrow.

Since philosophers first began to articulate the significance of freedom, there has been an expressed recognition of its dual aspects: personal/internal and political/external. Prometheus inspires the philosophical dialogue:

Prometheus' external condition is the ultimate symbol of enslavement; he is nailed to the racks of hell in 'fetters unbreakable of adamantine chain' for ten thousand years, at the will of his angry master, Zeus. And yet, in spite of his horrible outward suffering and indignity, his will remains unbroken. He has inner freedom.... The nature of that inner freedom ... [is] strength of will to resist any enslavement of the soul, it is control over one's mind and a refusal to be ruled by the minds of others" (Patterson, 1991, p. 167).

The challenge in our time is not unlike that faced by Prometheus: finding freedom midst constraint.

The Experience of Freedom: Estonia

Many of the more reflective and thoughtful people I interviewed in Estonia acknowledged that they and their fellow citizens were frightened by the prospect of freedom—and were concerned about how they

should respond to this new-found freedom. I wonder if similar concerns would be found among those who celebrated the “Arab Spring” more than a decade later. We know now, quite sadly, that many participants in and those opposed to the Arab Spring did not comport themselves very well. There were not only riots and destruction of property, but also political reprisals (including imprisonment and executions).

It seems that the challenge of freedom in Estonia and in the Arab countries produced quite different results. Why was this the case? Are there cultural differences (which could easily lead us to stereotyping and racial/cultural biases)? Perhaps, there were major, underlying religious (Muslim) schisms in the Arab countries that we don’t find in Estonia. This is an unlikely reason for the differences in reactions to freedom—given that Estonians come from both Protestant and Eastern Orthodox backgrounds. There is a long history of major tension between these two Christian churches. What, therefore, might be the reasons for these different societal reactions?

Estonians in the early 1990s acknowledged that they often express skepticism and pessimism --because they cannot yet cope either individually or collectively with the challenges accompanying freedom. For many years (and frankly many centuries) the Estonians have been subject to invasion and control by other countries (most recently, the Soviet Union). One of the Estonians I interviewed put it this way: “we [Estonians] don’t really think about or plan for the future, for the future of our country has long been in the hands of those who invaded and took over control of our country!” Now, things were potentially changing, as Estonia gained its independence.

The old rules were abandoned and the old structures collapsed. If anything endured, it was ephemeral: the values of a collective well-being and the sense of a shared destiny. The void in structures and laws had not yet been filled. Many of the men and women I interviewed recognized that they must now assume responsibility for their own actions. They could no longer look to or blame the leaders or bureaucrats that in many instances had been imposed on them from outside their country. To offer a bit of psychology at this point, we can point to a very important shift from an external locus of control: “I don’t have much to say about my fate.” There was now an internal locus of control: “My fate is now in my own hands”. This shift requires a major cognitive and emotional shift in one’s psyche. This shift is often accompanied by retreat to an external control—an escape from freedom.

The shift to an internal locus of control exists at not only an individual level, but also a societal level. There was no longer an external enemy for the Estonians. The Soviet Union (which many Estonians

called “the Russian occupation”) no longer existed. The enemy, if there must be one, now existed inside the Estonian's own country, inside their own community, or even inside their own head and heart. One of our interviewees noted that the "problems are now inside the heads of the people, not outside." Another noted that "the favorite meal of Estonians has become fellow Estonians." Estonians looked for an enemy and, it was “us”! How long, we must now ask, did this absence of an external enemy last? The new Russia soon began posing a threat once again to Estonian independence. The external enemy had re-emerged and attention could once again be directed away from internal enemies to a very real external threat. This becomes a legitimate reason to return to an external locus of control

Under the “spring” of new independence during the 1990s, Estonians had to look to their inner voice to determine right and wrong; they could no longer rest comfortably in a collective truth. Estonians (and other Eastern Europeans) must at that point make many choices. Which choices would be meaningful, and which would be trivial? How does one recognize the personal values that should inform difficult choices? Freedom demands higher levels of personal accountability. One is now accountable for his or her own actions. There is individual responsibility in the public sector. The definitions of right and wrong are no longer mediated by the state—or by the church.

Was a similar experience of freedom’s challenge to be found among patriots of the Arab Spring? Were they also confronted with the requirements of personal guidance and responsibility? Did they turn to their own religious leaders for this guidance (a return to external control) or did they seek to identify and act upon their own sense of what is true (internal locus of control)? Was the burden too great for those coming out a powerful blending of church and state (theocracies) in many Arab countries? At least there was a secular state (the Soviet Union) in Estonia that held the truth – and not a dominant church (though some social observers have considered the Soviet version of communism to be something of a religion—even a religion that resembles Islam in many ways).

Much as the Catholic church mediated between God and humanity prior to the Protestant Reformation, the Soviet state spared its citizens the task of making free and informed choices. The Reformation left humanity to face God directly, without the church providing any guidance or interpretation. Similarly, dissolution of the Soviet state left its citizens to find their own personal direction in life. Carl Jung (1938) suggested that Protestants have periodically substituted the authoritarian state (Nazism) for the church because they couldn't face the awesome prospect of personal responsibility. The challenge might be even deeper. To what extent were Estonians or Arabs likely to substitute their own authoritarian

structure as a way of avoiding what Jung (borrowing from Rudolph Otto) described as the "awe-fulness" of unmediated responsibility?

The Choices of Freedom

How do men and women act when they face their own recent liberation and freedom, when they find themselves living on the uncomfortable and unfamiliar edge of a new society and a new reality? Facing opportunities and constraints, Estonians and Arabs, like all people, must choose one of three options: (1) escaping from freedom, (2) creating the illusion of freedom, or (3) authenticating their own sense of "true" freedom.

We often choose escape or illusion because of the profound fear and anxiety associated with our transcendent awareness of our being. We are not alone in the universe—but often feel isolated and without guidance and support. These conditions have always been present; they are unique neither to our postmodern era nor to post-Soviet Eastern Europe (or the Arab world). This is essentially the biological or, some would say, existential or spiritual dilemma that humankind has faced since it first emerged or was created as a sentient being. This is the message of Genesis and, in particular, the story of Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden. We have tasted the forbidden fruit of transcendent knowledge and must now live in freedom and fear—dwelling alone outside the comfortable confines of the divine Eden in which we were born.

The real problem for Adam and Eve, as Gerald May (1988, p. 12) noted many years ago:

.... was not rebelliousness but foolishness. Their lack of wisdom made them exceedingly vulnerable to temptation. Once they gave in to that temptation, their freedom was invaded by attachment. They experienced the need for more. God knew that then they would not (could not) stop with just the one tree. 'They must not be allowed to stretch out their hands and pick from the tree of life also.' So, God made a set of clothes for each of them and sent them out of the garden."

Thus is told a story that contains all the basic elements of humankind's confrontation with freedom. We readily become addicted to illusory freedom: the creation of gods or technology, savoring of wealth and possessions, mind-altering drugs. Yet, in seeking out this illusory freedom, we soon confront the awesome responsibility that true freedom entails. We soon discover that there is wisdom beyond us and freedom's shadow is doubt. We feel alone, struggling to survive outside Eden.

At this point, we seek to escape the responsibility and the frightening characteristics of true freedom. We construct and then worship religious and secular idols. We also identify or create satanic enemies. As many of us are now painfully aware, other races or ethnic groups may be used to justify the totalitarian state. In this way, we are able to escape responsibility and existential anxiety through our dependence and reliance on the state and its leaders.

The conversation about freedom during the early years of the modern era was about the emergence of the individual. Each of us was to stand nobly in distinction from (even in opposition to) society. We are often encouraged to stand in opposition to the environment in which we live: we are here on Earth to subdue and transcend "Mother Nature". Richard Sennett (1976) documented the decline of what he called "public man" during the seventeenth century in Europe. Public man was fully connected to and even embedded in his society. He entered public life without facade or pretense, believing that his society was stable and supportive of his role. During the seventeenth century, a new "private man" emerged, one who no longer felt connected to society. Private man dressed up, used makeup, and established a distinctive, individual identity when leaving the confines of home and venturing out into public. One can add the decline of monolithic (Catholic) religion, its replacement by highly individualized private (Protestant) relationships between man and God, and the related emergence of individualistic capitalism (Weber, 1958). With these additional societal forces at play, potential for the isolation of Western man became even greater (Jung, 1938).

Today, the sense of anxiety and alienation experienced by each human living alone in a complex, unpredictable and turbulent world may be even greater. Anxiety and alienation abound regardless of whether we live in the West, in the liberated countries of Eastern Europe, or elsewhere in the world. Christopher Lasch offered a still-insightful observation thirty years ago that we have entered an era of the *minimal self*. This is a self that is "uncertain of its own outlines, longing either to remake the world in its own image or to merge into its environment in blissful union" (Lasch, 1984, p. 19). "The minimal self," according to Lasch, "is not just a defensive response to danger but arises out of a more fundamental social transformation: the replacement of a reliable world of durable objects by a world of flickering images that make it harder and harder to distinguish reality from fantasy." (p. 19).

In *Freedom* (Bergquist and Weiss, 1993), Weiss and I similarly described the edginess of men and women in an emerging postmodern world. We observed that late 20th Century societies had become fragmented, ambiguous, and demanding of new skills and attitudes. Humans were living in a postmodern world that could be characterized by the collapse of two prominent "cultural fictions"—

namely, the truth and pragmatic value inherent in science and the pretense or ability to discover universal principles and truths (Rundell, 1992, p. 14).

In our observation of post-Soviet life in Estonia and Hungary, Weiss and I could add a third cultural fiction to this list: the infallibility of Marxist doctrine. Some social critics would also add traditional notions of free market capitalism to this growing list. People's ability to distinguish between reality and fictions is diminished and "a fictionalization of reality takes place"(Rundell, 1992, p. 140). This sets the stage for an escape from freedom and, in particular, creation of an illusion that true freedom exists in one's life. One of the foremost postmodernists, Lyotard (1984), joined with many of his postmodernist colleagues in identifying this postmodern condition as the end of the grand narrative. One can readily see how such a condition could be perceived and felt by postmodern man and woman as a state of living on the edge of an abyss that cannot even be clearly seen, let alone comprehended or bridged.

The Nature of Freedom: Erich Fromm

A precise, extended, and compelling analysis of the impact of freedom was offered more than seventy years ago by Erich Fromm in *Escape from Freedom* (1941). In this analysis, Fromm focused on the experience of freedom in Germany immediately prior to and during the Third Reich. In trying to make sense of the rise of fascism in Germany, Fromm contrasted external limitations (freedom from) and internal restrictions (freedom to). He noted that the simple fact of being given several options in life and being given the opportunity to make choices does not automatically mean that we have either the willingness or the capacity to make full use of this freedom in making informed, personally congruent choices. Fromm (p. 32) suggested that "human existence and freedom are from the beginning inseparable." Freedom is always a bit frightening for us, and, as I have noted throughout this essay, we tend to flee from it, typically through a return to primitive reliance on authority and a submission to powerful forces that reside outside ourselves—a process that psychoanalysts call "regression."

About fifteen years after publishing *Escape from Freedom*, Fromm (1955) once again addressed the issue of freedom in *The Sane Society* (1955). In this second book, Fromm addresses the issue primarily from the perspective of a country that had grown much more powerful as a result of the defeat of Nazi Germany; this country, of course, is the United States. Fromm proposed that freedom was frightening to Americans because of a much deeper and more enduring form of insecurity than fear of economic uncertainty (like that experienced in Germany during the 1930s). This was instead the fear that arises (as I noted at the start of this essay) from human beings' transcendent ability to see themselves limited on a

time and space continuum. From this existential perspective, Fromm suggested that 1950s Americans, and most others in the West, were just as frightened of freedom as the Germans were during the 1930s.

According to Fromm, five psychic needs are central to any human enterprise: (1) relatedness, (2) transcendence, (3) rootedness, (4) identity, and (5) frame of orientation and devotion. In one way or another, the experience of freedom challenges each of these needs, especially as they are experienced in contemporary life. Freedom usually implies, for instance, that one has a choice of people with whom one wants to affiliate and a choice of the community in which to live. In contemporary America, this has been lived out to an extreme, in what Bennis and Slater (1968) call a "temporary society." One relates to other people on a temporary and often superficial level and therefore seems to exchange a sense of deep relatedness for the freedom of affiliation.

One's capacity to transcend one's own limited existence in time and space (one's spiritual essence) is also a source of doubt. In addition, the rootedness that one seeks may arise from faith. As I have already noted, it may instead take the form of nationalism, regionalism, or racism to be gratified by a totalitarian state. With political freedom comes a demand that one assume responsibility for one's own personal actions (individual responsibilities) and abandon one's deeply embedded and usually unconsciously held roots in a traditional social structure. Once again, freedom and the preservation of personal rights come at great cost: the psychic needs for identity and a frame of orientation and devotion are abandoned, at least initially, when one is offered freedom. A legitimate and enduring frame and object of devotion must be identified deliberately and consciously, rather than through the much easier route of collective propaganda and historical precedence. The freedom of personal identity takes the place of a collectively given and sustained identity, while the freedom of personal commitment takes the place of a more easily acquired collective orientation and devotion.

While Americans, according to Fromm, generally have not escaped to traditional forms of authoritarian rule, we still manifest many characteristics of authoritarianism. Fromm may have been prophetic regarding the conditions now operating in American life—and elsewhere in the world (whether it be Europe or the Mideast) We still are inclined to submit readily (and often unconsciously) to external influences: they may now be the media rather than a despot. We still try to escape from the ultimate responsibility for our own personal actions by settling comfortably into a large, bureaucratized organization or a massive, centralized government. These new forms of authoritarianism may seem to be much more benign—what the social critic, Bertram Gross (1980), called "friendly fascism". They still rob us of our capacity to make choices rooted in personal convictions. We do not acknowledge our

interdependence. We continue to make extensive use of other escape routes, including obsessive consumption of goods and services and the abuse of alcohol and other mind-altering substances.

Going It Alone

Clearly, Fromm is defining the arena in which humanity seeks the meaning of life. This arena is not the regional, national, or world stage of politics and economics, as was the case for many of Fromm's Marxist colleagues. Rather, it is the very personal and intimate stage where we each confront doubt and faith.

Living under the basic human conditions of helplessness and doubt, humanity prior to the twentieth century turned to a personalized God and gratefully submitted to this God's authority. "Luther's 'faith,'" according to Fromm (1941, p. 81), "was the conviction of being loved upon the condition of surrender, a solution which has much in common with the principle of complete submission of the individual to the state and the 'leader.'" For Luther, relationships between members of society and their leaders were always ambivalent. Luther defied the authority of the church, yet discouraged the peasants' revolt against their secular leaders. He fought against the authority of the (Catholic) church, yet created a theology that led to people's sense of isolation from other people and themselves and in turn to their unquestioning submission to the internally originating authority of God.

In shifting attention from religion to the political sphere, Fromm (1941, p. 5) quotes a pragmatic American philosopher, John Dewey (1939): "The serious threat to our democracy is not the existence of foreign totalitarian states. It is the existence within our own personal attitudes and within our own institutions of conditions which have given a victory to external authority, discipline, uniformity, and dependence upon The Leader in foreign countries. The battlefield is also accordingly here within ourselves and our institutions."

While Fromm tended to regard the importance of individuation in humanity's search for political and economic freedom, he suggested that this is neither a metaphysical quest nor a biological given. Rather, it is a hard-won battle that people must fight on their own humanistic terms, without benefit of either divine guidance or biological inevitability. According to Fromm (1941, pp. 238-239): "The history of mankind is the history of growing individuation, but it is also the history of growing freedom. The quest for freedom is not a metaphysical force and cannot be explained by natural law; it is the necessary result of the process of individuation and of the growth of culture. The authoritarian systems cannot do away

with the basic conditions that make for the quest for freedom; neither can they exterminate the quest for freedom that springs from these conditions."

We must each ultimately be the measure of our own worth. In returning to our metaphoric Eden, we find that "reason, man's blessing, is also his curse" (Fromm, 1955, p. 24). Reason differentiates us from all other species, yet also alienates us from the world in which other species seem to live with greater contentment and less intraspecies hostility:

Human existence is different in this respect from that of all other organisms; it is in a state of constant and unavoidable disequilibrium. Man's life cannot be lived by repeating the pattern of his species; he must live. Man is the only animal that can be bored, that can feel evicted from paradise. Man is the only animal who finds his own existence a problem which he has to solve and from which he cannot escape. He cannot go back to the pre-human state of harmony with nature; he must proceed to develop his reason" (Fromm, 1955, p. 24).

Like his famous intellectual predecessor, Sigmund Freud, Fromm believes that traditional religion offers only the illusion of meaning, and other institutions of economic and political origins are even less well equipped in modern times to provide meaning. When we rely on these institutions and give them our unswerving allegiance, we create conditions for the fascism that Fromm witnessed in 1941 Germany and the alienation that he observed in the American (and Western European) culture of the 1950s.

Freedom in Eastern Europe

As Weiss and I looked specifically to our interviews with men and women of Hungary and Estonia, we wondered about the choices they have made given the rich, and abrupt, opportunities for freedom in their newly liberated countries. To what extent did they tend to escape from freedom? Were their strategies for escape like those found in the United States: friendly fascism, consumption, and/or substance abuse? Had they constructed their own illusion(s) of freedom? If so, what was the nature of their illusion regarding forms of leadership, patterns of consumption, and the management of personal emotions?

Beginning with the work of Erich Fromm, and perhaps that of many less visible social observers before him, the assumption has usually been made that freedom tends to induce anxiety. This may be a modern-day equation. Anxiety is induced when there is an ambiguous source of threat. With freedom come many new threats, whereas with authoritarianism there are fewer (but usually very clear) threats.

When we become free, then, there is freedom from the specific authoritarian threat; however, we are now vulnerable to the new and unknown. Thus, we experience anxiety.

There is the sense that our colleagues in Hungary and Estonia had already experienced freedom from and now confront the challenge of freely deciding what they would do with their new freedom, the freedom to be and do something of their own choosing. They faced life on the edge, in limbo, at the threshold, while creating a new image of the future (Polak, 1972). As all of us approach the mid- twenty-first century, we create images of the future—whether we live in the United States, Estonian or Iran. As we accomplish or achieve each one, then that image of the future is "confiscated" and we must create a new image. In this sense, freedom is more a process than an end state.

I turn in the next set of essays to a much fuller exploration of these various issues regarding the nature of freedom, including the paths of escape and the illusions that shield us. I look at the ways in which Estonians have confronted their own challenge of freedom and have in turn begun to find routes to their own distinctive and ongoing sense of true freedom. I also turn again to the issue of freedom and the escape from freedom to be found elsewhere in the world—be it Israel, Libya, China or the United States.

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