I especially want to thank Kindred Moon for working up “Bobby McGee” as part of the music for this service, and for doing so on less than two weeks notice. Didn’t they do a great job on it?

If you’re approximately my age, you may remember March, 1971, when Janis Joplin’s recording of Kris Kristofferson’s song “Me and Bobby McGee” topped the Billboard Hit List for two weeks. It was a song with one of those lines that slapped me in the face the first time I heard it. Do you know which line I mean?

That’s right – it was the line “Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose.” “Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose . . .” or is it?

Suppose we created “The Bobby McGee Manifesto,” a proclamation that “Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose.” Who do you think might sign on to that manifesto?

I have to say that it’s pretty hard for me to envision Sojourner Truth or Harriet Tubman or Frederick Douglass signing on to that statement. What about Martin Luther King, Jr., or Malcolm X, or Mahatma Gandhi? What about John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, or Benjamin Franklin? What about Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony?

The movements they led didn’t chant that freedom was just another word for nothing left to lose. These peoples’ lives were dedicated to working for freedoms that meant something far beyond “I’ve got nothing left to lose.” To them, I think that freedom meant essentially two things. First, freedom meant significant ability to make choices for oneself: the right of self-determination. Second, it meant meaningful participation in the democratic process: in short, the right to vote.

But if you insert that meaning of freedom – self-determination and the right to vote – back into the song “Bobby McGee,” it doesn’t make much sense. And when a line from a song slaps me in the face, there is something going on. It may not be the entirety of the truth, but it’s not just wrong or false, either. So maybe I’m asking the wrong question here. Maybe I should ask “When is freedom just another word for nothing left to lose?”

Whoever is singing the song, whether it’s Candy Davis or Christine Bauer or Janis Joplin or Kris Kristofferson – or all four of them in a dynamite quartet! – that person is singing about being on the road, about being “busted flat in Baton Rouge” and finally about losing the one relationship that gave meaning to life: “Somewhere near Salinas, Lord, I let [Bobby] slip away . . .” As the song puts it, the singer now has an “emotional freedom” that feels like “nothing left to lose.”

We human beings are social animals, meaning that we discover ourselves through relationships and interactions with others. Now some relationships are dysfunctional, but let’s leave those aside for a moment, and focus on relationships and groups that are healthy and constructive. When we enter a relationship, we give up some freedom, in that most relationships come with certain limits – for example, when I was a teenager, if you were “going steady” with someone, you weren’t supposed to be dating anyone else. Belonging to groups worked in a similar fashion: if you were a Scout, you accepted
the Scout code. You wore uniforms and went to meetings. You sold cookies or Christmas wreaths or whatever your Scout troop sold. And in these interactions and relationships, at least sometimes, you discovered something about who you were, and what you liked and disliked, and what you were capable of doing and enjoying. And people, I hope, supported you and encouraged you in this learning process. And I hope that you supported and encouraged others in their own learning.

But on the other hand, when I’m on the road and busted flat, and then you lose the one relationship that’s holding your life together, that loss may give me freedom but it doesn’t feel like anything to celebrate. Some amount of emotional freedom may be a good thing, but complete emotional freedom is isolation, perhaps even desolation. And that’s how I understand the offer to “trade all my tomorrows for a single yesterday.” Now that I have lost Bobby, I realize how important that Bobby was to me. In Joni Mitchell’s words from another song of that period, also about valuing relationship: “. . . you don’t know what you’ve got ‘till it’s gone.”

*Complete and Relative Freedoms*

I find it necessary to think of freedom as a relative concept. That is, whatever type or dimension of freedom I’m thinking about, there can be more of it or less of it. It’s not binary, where there’s either complete freedom or no freedom at all. I’m not even sure that there could be complete or perfect freedom, a human life lived with no constraints other than those imposed by the physical universe. My freedom, as I understand it, ends at the point where it interferes with your freedom. If there were such a thing as complete freedom, those who enjoyed it would have to live in a vacuum, isolated from others as the cost of that freedom. Nobody else around means no constraints on my freedom, right? But while there would be fewer constraints on my freedom, there would also be far fewer opportunities to use it. Yes, I would have complete freedom of speech when there is no one else around. But what meaning does freedom of speech have when nobody hears what I have to say?

And my living in isolation would still be limited by the laws of physics. The only way that I could “soar to the sun and look down on the sea” would be in an airplane, but I would have to know how to maintain and fuel and operate the airplane myself.

One the other hand, thinking about freedom as a relative concept, helps us see that we do indeed possess significant (if not perfect) freedom of speech here in the United States. There are some limitations: we can’t shout “fire” in a crowded theater (unless there actually is a fire) and we can be sued for slander or libel. We don’t have perfect or complete freedom of speech, but we do have relative freedom of speech.

Or consider freedom as the opportunity for self-determination. I would say that we are influenced by our context of development, in terms of the dynamics of our family of origin, economic status, and educational resources, but I know that some individuals have overcome severe obstacles and to achieve their dreams, at least in part.

*Religious Community and Freedom*

How does freedom connect with religious community?
Well, the concept of “free will” – the notion that we can freely make choices to do good or to do evil, is a critical concept in Christianity. And the concept of religious freedom, the ability to choose a religion (or no religion) for ourselves is another important connection between freedom and religious community. And like other groups, participation in religious communities often comes with “strings attached.” Some of those strings can reduce our freedom, and others may challenge it to grow. In terms of reduced freedom, many of us have had experiences where religious community limited our freedom. If we have participated in a dogma-based religious institution, such as the Catholic Church in which I grew up, religious doctrines provided standard, correct answers and behavioral expectations – like the Ten Commandments – limited some aspects of our lives. In Wilmette, Illinois, where I grew up, businesses were closed on Sunday; only a few gas stations and restaurants were open. Does that make it a contradiction in terms to ask a religious community what it means to be a people of freedom? Well, it depends on the religious community, doesn’t it? Is it a contradiction here in this Fellowship?

I don’t think so, and I hope that you don’t think so, either. To begin with, our tradition affirms freedom at a very basic level. In its conclusion, Earl Morse Wilbur’s magisterial two-volume History of Unitarianism – a work familiar to everyone preparing for the Unitarian Universalist ministry – highlights freedom as one of our movement’s most consistent values across the ages and continents. The UU principles call us to engage acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth; the free and responsible search for truth and meaning; the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process; and peace, liberty, and justice for all people.

So four of our seven principles explicitly relate to freedom, with terms such as acceptance, encouragement, free, right of conscience, democratic process, and liberty. And it seems to me that freedom is implicitly related to our first principle, affirming the worth and dignity of every person.

Let me give you an example. Over the twenty-five years since I signed the membership book at 2nd Unitarian in Chicago, the challenge to think freely and responsibly has been one of the greatest blessings that I have found as a UU. The fact that some things cannot be known in a definitive, scientific sense doesn’t mean that I can’t think about them, and encourage others to think about them, and to feel okay when someone else’s thinking doesn’t come out in the same place that mine does. When I hear a question like “What is the purpose of my life?” memories of my Catholic upbringing mapped it into the catechism question “Why did God create me?” and the official answer . . . “to know, love, and serve Him.” But as a UU, I can both honor that memory from the past as part of my story, and at the same time develop with my own answer. I believe that the purpose of my life is to live fully and well, and to nurture life around me as best I can. That’s an answer that I find meaningful and helpful, but it may not resonate with you. Now if you answer that same question, and I encourage you to do so, your response may not match my answer or resonate with me, and that’s okay. What’s important is that you and I have considered that question, and we have learned something about what we, as individuals, want our lives to mean. And we can try to live in ways that fulfill and honor those meanings.

Within this Fellowship, we work to make freedom more present in our own individual lives, and we also work to make it more present in the shared life of this community. We determine our intentions and make our decisions in an open, democratic process. Of course, this Fellowship is a human creation, and it isn’t perfect. We may sometimes feel dissatisfied, but even then, we have the opportunity to suggest improvements to the process itself. And as a congregation, as a community, we have devoted time and energy to the question “What does it mean to be a people of freedom?”
In April, 2017, many of us participated in the creation of our Fellowship’s Affirmational Covenant, which is printed on the back of your order of service. Some of the work happened at Touch of Nature, and some of it here, and several weeks later we voted to endorse this Covenant. I think of this as our collective answer to the question “What does it mean to be a people of freedom?” At the very least, it’s part of the answer to that question. So to close, I’d like to read our Covenant, and I invite you to join me. And as we read together, I invite you to think about how this Covenant responds to the question “What does it mean to be a people of freedom?”

Carbondale Unitarian Fellowship
Affirmational Covenant  April 26, 2016

- We are the Carbondale Unitarian Fellowship.
- With compassion we honor our whole selves, each other and our beloved community.
- With intention, we choose to walk together in fellowship.
- We seek truth and growth together, nurturing each other’s spirit and sense of reverence.
- We respect all individuals and strive to create a world where all are treated with love and dignity.
- We believe all people have strengths and wisdom, and are able to contribute to our faith community. We give action to our faith through service and the pursuit of justice in the wider world. Every act of service, lovingly performed, matters.
- We value diversity in its many forms and welcome with open minds and hearts, all those who come among us.