

YEARNING FOR FREEDOM

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A mature concept of freedom does not imply not having limits.

I'm writing this month in the context of two events prompting many memories of discussions with clients throughout my career about wanting to be "free". (Often meaning free of me!) Tomorrow we will celebrate the 4th of July holiday, a celebration of freedom for our Country from being under the thumb of another. I'm also writing from a Nursing Home/Rehabilitation Center following ankle surgery. I am currently under the "thumb" of Doctors, Nurses, Nurses' Aides, Physical and Occupational Therapists, etc. Like our clients, I have little to say about anything, and I'm dreaming of going home and being "free" again. While so occupied with "getting out of here" (sound familiar?), I find it necessary to give myself the same words of wisdom we try to share with our kids, reminding myself of both the benefits and limitations of freedom. While I find my current lack of choices, and having all of my choices monitored annoying (not even being able to go the bathroom by myself), it is because I will probably not be safe doing things the way I want to do them and without supervision. The coaching and constant feedback is meant to teach me how to do things when I'm on my own in a way that keeps me safe. This is exactly why, in our work, enforcing limits on behavior, and providing consequences for unacceptable behavior, although equally annoying to clients, is motivated by the wish to provide safety for them until they are mature enough to appreciate the complexities of living "free".

I found our youth preferring simplicity over complexity, and being overly focused on the perceived **benefits** of being "free" (I'll be able to do whatever I want) but not necessarily appreciating hearing about **costs** of freedom. My frequent "lecturets" on this issue were rarely accepted with gratitude. I believe it is a very important part of our work to be sure that as clients test living in "freedom" – either by running away or aging out of care

– we owe it to them to help them to develop internalized cautions and not be too naïve about the joys of being able to do “whatever they want”.

It seems to me that wanting to be “free” is an instinctive part of the make-up of living things. Wild animals do not like being captured. Even house pets enjoy “getting out” and I have chased many a dog and cat. But like our kids, our pets have a naïve view of being free and frequently get run over by cars or have unpleasant encounters with predators. So we don’t want to get angry when kids fantasize about being out from under our thumbs, it’s a natural inclination. We do want to try to instill a healthy respect for freedom by teaching some basic lessons about living free: life lessons, we often call them.

The most basic lesson to be learned: **While it’s true that in a free society we are always free to choose our behavior, it is also true that we are not free to choose the consequences of our behavior.**

While I am “free” to drive my car as fast as I want, I cannot control how others will respond to my choice of speed. There’s a reason auto insurance is so high for young drivers: they are not good at predicting the consequences of their behavior and rack up tickets and accidents. In this regard, let me suggest that we stop our habit of “giving” consequences. **Consequences are not “given”, they are “chosen”.** The police do not randomly stop cars and issue speeding tickets; speeding tickets are given to drivers who choose to speed. I suggest that rather than saying “as a consequence of your negative behavior you will not be going on the outing” it would be much more instructive to say “I see that you have chosen to not go on the outing”. The inevitable subsequent discussion about what you are doing to them can then be constructively steered toward an examination of the behavior the young person **chose** to demonstrate that they knew would result in loss of a privilege. Thinking that staff are doing things to them reinforces feelings of powerlessness most of our clients already experience. Realizing that they can decide how to behave in order to get the consequence they want begins to reinforce what freedom really means. Freedom does not mean you can talk to me any way you want,

using curses and rude remarks, and then turn around and ask for a favor. Freedom means you can decide how you want to talk to me, but I will decide how I respond, and that may well mean I am not inclined to do you a favor. I will then suggest you use your freedom next time to act in a way that results in getting what you want.

If by the end of treatment our clients do not understand that consequences are not meant to punish unacceptable behavior but rather to teach how to handle “freedom” safely and effectively we have squandered opportunities that may not come again. The beauty of freedom of choice is that it allows us to think ahead and **plan** our behavior, anticipating what the consequences of our actions will be. Mature use of freedom means that we impose our own “limits” on behavior and no longer need others to do it for us.

Freedom, without the ability to handle it well, may as well be prison.

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