

Standing on the Side of Constraint
 Response to Thandeka's Paper, "Love Beyond Belief"
 Prairie Group 2009 - Dr. Brent A. Smith

I loved Thandeka's paper. I loved its form and mechanics, its symmetry and deft use of reason, and how it was a window into her mind. In part, I loved it because I love her and have since we first met. She is an alluring mystery who has become a cherished companion. I believe we love not by what we know but by what lures us towards discovery. "*I don't know. It's a mystery!*"¹ And surely it is the case with someone so different from me and about whom I really know very little in terms of her life experience. And lest you speculate I am walking away from my marriage vows, rest assured I am in love with my wife, but differently so. It's the limits of our language, only one kind of "love." Limits have a way of facilitating mistakes when we do not pay them their due.

But the role I have accepted is more than just to love. I was called to add something to affection that comes through the role of critique, thereby setting limits upon my affection through the constraint of consented to agreement, the "discipline," in order to liberate conversation's deeper spiritual prospects. Ahh, constraint. While my response may begin in unbounded affection, I am, after all, human, and thus deal in what momentary exuberance masks: Nothing I feel or say or do is "unbounded," without bounds, without limits. I am born into constraint, and am hunted and haunted by it. I'm not sure many would stand on the side of it. I don't want to, struggling even "*with the least restraint of the most just authority.*"² We dwell amidst a people of faith who in pursuing the spiritual life onward and upward forever have largely chosen to flee constraint and have established it too often as an adversary and an enemy of the people. At least it feels like a fight. Or, it feels like we consider it some past immaturity we grew out of on the path of growing up into wholeness, abundance, the love that fills my cup to overfloweth, and, dare I say, is limitless? Ahh, Brent, a little constraint.

I am a self-proclaimed "Recovering Romantic," you see. Ironically, I was not at Woodstock with my Boomer generation but can't imagine constraint having come up much there. If you can't be with the one you love, counseled a man, love the one you're with. Constraint was at most a caution against taking only the brown acid.

"Constraint," can be a legal term meaning to coerce, as in the constraints of the law, though in many instances these agreed upon bindings protect liberty, even extend it. It's ironic, then, that freedom is numbered as an antonym, though I think it is more in the way

¹ *Shakespeare in Love*, Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard, 1998

Philip Henslowe: Mr. Fennyman, allow me to explain about the theatre business. The natural condition is one of insurmountable obstacles on the road to imminent disaster.

Hugh Fennyman: So what do we do?

Philip Henslowe: Nothing. Strangely enough, it all turns out well.

Hugh Fennyman: How?

Philip Henslowe: I don't know. It's a mystery.

² John Winthrop, *History of New England, 1630-1649*, ed. Sam Savage (Boston, 1853), II, 279-282.

of freedom as “the quality of being unencumbered.” And, who lives unencumbered? Parents become personifications of constraint, involved as they are in the initial experiences of it often held deep in the unconscious. That gives it part of its coercive hue. But constraint also means to confine by explicit bonds, and therein is an irony in that both constraint and religion are from the Latin, with different roots in “binding” as in, “ties that bind.” “*The bonds of love keep open the gates of freedom,*” 20th century Unitarian minister Napoleon Lovely proclaimed, and I have meditated on this for nearly a decade. It launched me on my quest for a theology of covenant, how spiritual freedom might be the product of certain bonds willingly entered into. Yet, how can bonds set us free? “Isn’t that a contradiction?” counters the Recovering Romantic who, not fully in recovery, rebels against the distinction now emerging between license and freedom. Bonds, constraints, can aid freedom, extend it, even enhance and deepen it, maybe even make it a spiritual pursuit if we consider we can’t experience and hold “unencumbered” freedom any more than we can in actuality love all souls as our Universalist forbears revealed is God’s way not ours.

Unitarians rooted their theology in human nature’s “likeness to God,” but Universalists’ proffered a God whose differentiated nature judged human nature. Ballou’s thoughts on *theos*, arrived at through reasoned engagement with Scripture, have their genesis in his experience of and reflection upon sin, especially as it is placed into the context of the fundamental motivations of human being. Thus, he begins with our “Unlikeness to God” as finite, sinful creatures. “*All the religion in our world, founded on the partial principles of man’s inventions, point out particular modes of faith, and forms of worship, is from the carnal man.*”³ As a human being, then, one can’t even escape that “love beyond belief” is itself a belief, a concept forming a particular perspective on the universal, with a particular history. Ignoring the “constraints” of universalism that history reveals, anything can be a god. “*Monotheism and universalism go hand in hand*”⁴ reminds an historian. I almost came to blows with a fundamentalist after telling him Universalism’s God would have us side by side for all eternity. Frankly, I wasn’t sure which one of us would strike the first earthly blow!

And freedom, liberation, is one of the feelings of an experience of the Holy, and perhaps it is the quintessential feeling of being mysteriously grasped by God which liberals receive as faith, a trust beyond all fear. But still, freedom derived from bonds, from certain forms and aims of constraint? Surely not like the orthodox wherein the spiritual life flows from the constraints of correct belief conformed to. Maybe it is the individuality freedom can foster through deep and abiding relationship wherein the *imago dei* becomes known in an existence constrained as we are from engaging the Holy One directly and completely.

³ Hosea Ballou quoted in *Hosea Ballou: The Challenge to Orthodoxy*, Ernest Cassara, University Press of America, NYC, p 60

⁴ *The Birth of Monotheism: The Rise and Disappearance of Yahwism*, Andre Lemaire, Biblical Archaeology Society, Washington, D.C., 2007: “Monotheism and universalism go hand in hand, and the prophet quotes YHWH as commanding the entire universe to recognize him as the one and only God: ‘I am YHWH, and there is no other; besides me there is no god... [so let all the peoples] know, from the rising of the sun and from the West, that there is no one besides me.’ (Isaiah 45:5-6)”

We are born into the constraints of time and space. My body at best serves me three score years and ten, and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, it's soon cut off. A daughter has emergency surgery in New York City while a sister-in-law dies of cancer in Grand Rapids, and a couple cannot attend simultaneous urgencies. I walked with them and their experience of spatial constraint. We are finite, born into sin, missing the mark of the fully Divine, yet can imagine what that mark is, where its found, and the blessings of abiding with it. At its most basic and fundamental level, existentialists tell us, we possess freedom only in the courage of working through these constraints, or rebelling against them and taking our own life. In the midst of constraint we choose, we exercise consent, freedom flowing from the constraints we are born into, the Covenant of Being that JLA identified as characteristic of human existence, and freedom actively created through agreement, faithfulness, and forgiveness. Finitely drawn, I choose therefore I am, and am free, finitely.

The spiritual life we choose is different from our forbears whose experience of time and space were different. For them – Chauncey and Ballou, even Channing, Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Bartlett Crane, and Fannie Barrier Williams – the spiritual life was forged amidst salvation and existence after this life. In part, salvation in the next life bequeathed humanity in this one. “I will dwell in the House of the Lord forever” and, thus, my personhood and the spiritual life I choose to lead, have identity and integrity here. Metaphysical religion like this still holds sway in orthodox and creedal Christianity, and surprisingly its vestiges remain implicit in much of liberal religion. But this transition from our forbears to us may go a long way to account for the fact that one hundred years ago there were ten times the religious liberals in Grand Rapids as there are today, and that the largest single congregation was All Souls Universalist Church. Spiritual freedom evolved as a freedom from the constraint of debilitating doctrine, to a freedom towards Something More, alive in the world and dangerous to some. God's Love for all souls is the direct enemy of Calvinism's Doctrine of the Elite, where the Elect wear the garment of Eternity. To them still, a Unitarian is just a misguided Calvinist, an Elite with no fashion sense! But a Universalist is a horse of a different color in an Oz framed as a space not completely out of or beyond time.

Whereas our forbear's spiritual aim was primarily salvation, ours is salvaging, raising up meaning in this life given the constraints of human finitude and existence; like being in recovery, not to a previous state of being as Romantic Idealism would have, but one day at a time towards a Something More than just this moment. To them death delivered the reward faith assured by character's success, a faith that was a trust that God's Love built a mighty fortress larger than humanity's beliefs and creeds; a metaphysical “cathedral of the world” whose cornerstone was a love beyond belief. Liberation was in death and the final and complete freedom from the fear of everlasting punishment when one entered the gates. To us death is no less real, but it is not liberation. It is a mystery story. To us it is a reality no metaphysical construct assuages, or character's success overcomes. It is a confrontation and call to meaning, to finite freedom; not to solve the mystery as much as construct the narrative of living meaningfully inside it.

Ahh, death, the Ultimate symbol of our finitude, the constraints of time and place into which we are born, because it participates in what it points to: Non-Being. It occasions the spiritual journey in us as it did our forbears, though we tote different questions. To them it was something like, “Is there an Eternal and Universal Love upon which the life beyond is built, for all souls to enjoy?”, for that changes how we consider the blueprint of this life. To us, the spiritual question is not metaphysical but ontological and pragmatic, not about the architecture of heaven and earth, but networks woven into existence as we experience and shape it: How do I live a meaningful life knowing it will end? And knowing I give consent to exist thus constrained, how can I enjoy a measure of freedom created through the fabric of relationship, patterned upon a Love that is Something More? And, limited in meaning by the cradle and the grave as we are, how can we through Love become an active influence in the quality of a universe scientists tell us is expanding, after the solid ground takes possession of us? “Help us learn what his life meant,” asked a family after they had told me all the facts of the deceased’s life in preparation for his Memorial Service..

The 21st century spiritual life is primarily about meaning and when, as liberal religionists, we begin with personal experience and give it a primacy over tradition and church theological doctrines, we need note an important, hidden distinction: There is experience and then there is interpretation of experience, two different things, distinct though related. Experience is privately felt and known. Interpretation is public proclamation and knowledge, felt variously and open to critique. Both curiously conjoin in the preacher constrained as she is by her life but called to tell a story whose meaning is large enough for others. Experience gives no “false report,” in and of itself, and resists interpretation’s attempts to reduce it, either to a common denominator or absolute idea. You have your experience and I have mine. No truth or falsity yet declared, and no wider or more narrow passage for meaning to traverse, no inappropriate or more appropriate hermeneutic. Were it not for the conditions of existence, the constraints of time and space, experience would be “buzzing and blooming confusion,” wrote William James, the secretary of experience.

But, interpretation is another matter, and it begins immediately on the heels of experience, with body first and then the brain, and continues, thought James, in a responsive reading shared amongst mind and heart. What is a man that Thou art mindful of him? A human being is an experiencer in the self and humanity an interpreter in community and history. One challenge in a faith tradition rooted in the primacy of individual experience is keeping a proper distance between experience and interpretation. Self-proclamation is seldom the most nourishing soil for a freedom rooted in Love because it may be much less an accurate interpretation of the meaning of the proclaimer’s experience, and more a desire yet to be experienced. I think that’s why Jesus declined the invitation. Forrest was a self-proclaimed “Universalist evangelist” though I find few who would interpret the meaning of his life in that way and history will surely see him through the title the congregational community bestowed: Public Theologian. And this self-proclaimed “Recovering Romantic”? Few would see me either as experiencing successful recovery or as a Romantic. The challenge in a faith tradition rooted in the primacy of individual experience is the same as the orthodox and credal though we

traverse different paths. In my life idolatry awaits at every turn, in the guise of my eagerness to clothe my finite experiences in my interpretation of the Infinite. Romantic, recover thyself!

That's one of the problems of giving critique to someone else's interpretation of their experience. If you love them, the love gets in the way of the critique, unless there is constraint. I don't know that Thandeka's use of Forrest's interpretation of his dream/fantasy accurately portrays the point she wants to make. I don't know that his dream/fantasy is about the universal Love of God at all, though he may have desired and needed that Universal Love. I know I do. But the 19th century Unitarian qualities of Forrest's life seem an impediment to this interpretation. I see a modern Emerson fleeing into the absolute embrace of death as modern Romantics since Woodstock are want to do, critiqued so astutely in Paul Berman's *Terror and Liberalism*. It is the resting place of the pain of an aborted Idealism. Ironically, Forrest's dream/fantasy stands in contrast to Max's in *Where the Wild Things Are*, which I find to be more about the liberating qualities of the imagination and the universal Love of God experienced in the Covenant of Being. Max returns of his own choice and his meal is there, still hot, with no Mother's confession.

But, again, this is part of the problems of rooting theology in personal experience. Experience and interpretation are distinct, in both experiencer and critiquer. Take Bill Shultz's story of the dog he befriended as a child. It's clear to me from its context, and from my personal affection for Bill, that he meant to use it to portray his knowledge of himself and of human nature's capacity for evil in the form of torture. Yet, I'm not sure the story didn't reveal something his self-proclamation hadn't intended. I didn't find the address in which the story appears to support proclaiming the Good News of God's Love for All Souls, and because I read it from home instead of hearing it at GA, my affection for him was more easily constrained. I interpreted the meaning of the address, and hence the context for the story, to be hidden not in Bill's faith, his trust in a Something More, but in his despair in not finding it. If even our best nations torture, and our most sophisticated religions murder, how can one invest Ultimate Trust in the agency of human opinion?

Constraint cautions about the irony that lurks inside of interpretation. I can become the hero of my own story. Without acknowledging the ontology of constraints, I can proclaim I have conquered my sin and have ascended to the throne of Humility! Constraint rebukes and stings.

And so what is the Good News one brings, not to rout constraint but to exist inside of it and, yet, see Something More? Perhaps the greatest challenge of theology rooted in personal experience consists in the problems inherent in experience itself. You have yours, I mine. What binds us together? A philosophy of experience, maybe, but as "*the discipline that involves creating concepts*"⁵ it removes us a distance from experience instead of back into it, standing at the side of Love. Yet, there is a mystery story uprising again and again, speaking of Love, God's Love maybe, in the midst of constraint. Father

⁵ *What is Philosophy?*, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Columbia University Press, NYC, p 5.

Andrew Greely, in discussing the work of David Tracy, argued that “*Catholic theologians and artists tend to emphasize the presence of God in the world, while the classic works of Protestant theologians tend to emphasize the absence of God from the world.*”⁶ Their idolatry is in thinking they have found the full presence of God in the world, while ours is thinking we haven’t found much of it if any at all!

And that brings us almost back to Love and Freedom, but not purged of the irony that gives finitude to both. Last June at General Assembly we launched a wonderful program with a catchy, clever title I adore, *Standing on the Side of Love*, while the Governor of a southern state wasn’t just standing on the side but actively walking towards what he is convinced is a larger Love, fleeing down the Appalachian Trail all the way to South America, and away from his wife and children and promises he had consented to keep. He had walked so far past the gates of freedom that he thought he was in a Love that knew no bounds, or bonds, or the ole ball and chain back home. There was something brutalizing in his proclamation that he had found his soul mate. I think he found self-delusion. It’s not unfamiliar to me. I’m not too successful in recovery. Too many times, mistakenly, I haven’t love God and my neighbor as myself, but one absolutely and at the expense of the others.

Which brings me full circle back to Love. Not standing on the side of it, which I’m never sure I am, but standing in the need of it like prayer. I love Thandeka and I love her paper. But, ironically, in a paper arguing for the primacy of personal experience as the foundation of theological reflection and faith – a position I enthusiastically share – I could not easily find hers. And then I remembered love is a mystery, an allure which makes her, because of her hiding here, now even more alluring. Theology rooted in personal experience is all about how we conceal and disclose our experience to ourselves and others, a human game of hide and go seek where God sees into all our hearts. We do not and often not all that well into our own. So, still, my heart longs for her even though, ironically, I cannot ever know her fully, like possessing a love beyond belief which I cannot ever have either unto death.

But, I also have in addition to my experience, and my relationships with her and others, the call and protest and challenge God brings to me, against my worship of the finite as if it were the Infinite, against my devotion to my self-interest as if it were God’s. I exist inside this Covenant of Being, and the way that covenant moves through my covenant with you and others. The aim is freedom in the midst of the acknowledgement of the conditions and constraints of human existence. But its foundation is a Love that obeys not my narrow preferences and desires, nor listens all that much to my opinions about who is deserving and why. At my best I seek it in my prayer life and seek to see it at work in the world. It enlivens me, chastises me, and beckons me to live in and through it in my activities and deeds. It seems at times unconstrained, but only in its demand which pursues me that, in return for the gift of life I’ve been given, I am to declare and live towards God’s Love as the burn victim’s hand I hold goes limp and lifeless, the deep voice I hear breaks in the static of confession, and the eyes I look deep into plead, “Is

⁶ *How Do Stories Save Us?*, Scott Holland, WB Eerdmans, 2006, P 4.

there a Love that endures all things and abides forever?" It's painful and a blessing, and as you can tell by my Romantic prose I'm not all that successful at recovery.