

A roominess within the soul

In the Bible, freedom is always more than a simple choice or the absence of coercion.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [March 1, 2017](#) issue

Most of us wouldn't survive 43 days in solitary confinement. Albert Woodfox endured 43 years of it. When he was released in 2016, Woodfox had to relearn the basics of everyday living. Getting more than a few hours of sleep each night posed a special challenge. "He sometimes jolted awake, overcome by the sensation that the atmosphere was pressing down on him," wrote Rachel Aviv in a *New Yorker* article on Woodfox. "All four walls appeared to be inches from his face. He felt so constricted that he removed all his clothes. He calmed himself by pacing—four steps forward, four steps back—a technique he'd been using for decades. After four or five minutes, the walls of the room would snap back into place."

To be released from prison is not the same thing as being free. To be free to swim requires more than permission to jump in the water. That view might confuse swimming with drowning, as Philip Gorski notes ("[Becoming America](#)"). To be able to walk out of one's house in a crime-ridden neighborhood only to be shot while going to the grocery store constitutes an incomplete or partial freedom as well.

American journalist Terry Anderson's journey to freedom began not on the day Shi'ite Hezbollah militants released him in 1991 but on the next day. That's when he thanked God, declared his absence of hatred for his captors, and forgave them for his nearly seven years of mistreatment.

True freedom in the biblical sense always involves more than a lack of coercion or restraint, and much more than a simple exercise of choice. It's about enjoying a roominess within one's soul. Jesus wasn't telling jailers to turn over their keys to prisoners when he proclaimed "liberty to the captives." He was speaking down the four walls that can appear to be only inches from the face of anyone suffocating from bondage.

Psalm 4 is a beautiful prayer of someone in need of a good night's sleep. "When I was in a tight spot, you gave me room," the psalmist prays. Breathing space, roominess, and larger horizons are behind that verse. The same concept of capaciousness is sewn into the Hebrew word for salvation—*yasha*—just as it's rooted in the very name and being of Jesus, *Yeshua*. His resurrection makes the world swell with room for hope. A good Christian funeral celebrates not just the breaking of the bonds of death but also the release from all that constricts, from clogged arteries to being tethered to an IV pole, from a troubled childhood to the four walls of a casket.

Gorski's article highlights the impoverished view of freedom that has emerged in our nation—freedom has been narrowed, Gorski argues, to little more than an *absence of restraint*, and increasingly to an absence of *governmental restraint*. Only by retrieving a fresh sense of civic virtue, in which freedom serves the common good, will we undo our corrupted sense of freedom.

Like Albert Woodfox pacing four steps forward and four steps back to avoid being crushed, we have our work cut out for us as citizens of this republic. If we are to grow beyond the morally undemanding freedom that suffocates our national imagination, then people of faith are going to have to breathe deeply of the One who is eager to make all kinds of room in our soul.

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