

Jordan Clark

Ms. Lattin

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The Tree of Liberty

Thomas Jefferson stated, “The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants” (Jefferson). Thomas Jefferson is undeniably one of the most consequential and profound Founding Fathers of our country. This blunt statement may seem jarring coming from such a figure. Whether or not he is really saying that resistance is the lifeblood of liberty — even violent resistance — is something we will examine later. However, the main point from this quote is that our liberty — our “tree of liberty” — is not self-sustained; it needs to be refreshed and supported. History shows that while governments can be founded on liberty, they can quickly stray towards tyranny or collapse. *Liberty endures only when we meet its demands: molding a society based on education and moral integrity, and possessing the civic courage to resist apathy and bring about change.*

The concept of freedom and liberty must be clearly defined to understand what we are supporting and sustaining. Freedom and liberty are often used interchangeably, however, they are not exactly the same. The simple Oxford Dictionary definition of freedom is, “the power or right to act, speak, or think as one wants without hindrance or restraint.” Whereas liberty is defined as “the state of being free within *society* from oppressive restrictions imposed by authority on one's way of life, behavior, or political views” (italics mine). These are extremely accessible definitions and yet their truth remains valid. A key distinction is that freedom is more general

and covers the dimensions of both internal and external, and liberty is more external or specifically within *society*. Within a society, in order to be free “from oppressive restrictions imposed” on us, it is absolutely vital to remember regulation on freedom.

In The Federalist Papers No. 51, James Madison said, “If men were angels, no government would be necessary.... You must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself” (Madison 320). For people who will abuse their freedom, society must have a structured rule of law and justice and from there a system of checks and balances. This provides a balance that is without tyranny or anarchy.

A similar idea comes from an essay entitled “Two Concepts of Liberty”. Isaiah Berlin, a British philosopher, describes liberty as a two-sided balancing act. He defines negative freedom as freedom *from* — one’s freedom *from* interference by others. The inverse is positive freedom, which is freedom *to* — one’s freedom *to* control one’s own destiny. Negative freedom focuses on the absence of meddling from others and government, while positive freedom focuses on the conditions and responsibilities to exercise and apply our freedom. Negative freedom is like trimming the tree of liberty to keep it from growing wild and chaotic. It serves as protection from outside threats, achieved through rights, laws, and the government’s enforcement of those laws. However, the hands that trim and protect the tree — symbolizing governmental power — must be restrained, divided into three branches that keep each other in check. This balance ensures that no one cuts too deep and turns caretaking into controlling. Positive freedom, on the other hand, is the growth and health of the tree itself. This is achieved through things like knowledge, virtue, and even courage. While this may sound more abstract, these elements are equally as important and often neglected or overshadowed by issues of government overreach or unjust laws. Yet they

are two sides of the same coin, and the importance of the positive side of liberty cannot be overstated.

For that reason, this essay focuses on the demands of positive freedom — the work of becoming a society of people capable of sustaining and growing the tree of liberty. This approach allows for a closer look at the character and responsibility required to ensure liberty endures and truly bears fruit. With this specific outlook, we examine the roots of what nourishes the tree of liberty: education, moral integrity, and civic courage.

Of these, education is foundational. The utmost expression of freedom is the ability to control one's own destiny — and education is a key that unlocks that power. The more we tap into education the better potential we have for exercising rights, enjoying civic life, and even standing up to oppression. Few examples demonstrate this more powerfully than the life of Frederick Douglass, whose story proves that education is essential and will grow liberty — even from nothing. Douglass's life is a story of brutality and corruption, but the turning point of his story comes when he learns to read. He eventually manages to escape slavery and becomes a powerful voice in the abolitionist movement. In his book, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, a specific story shows that one of his first masters, Sophia Auld, began to teach him to read. However, this ended promptly when her husband, Hugh Auld, discovered this and scolded her and said, among other things, "Learning would spoil the best n****r in the world." Frederick Douglass makes an important realization, "I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. . . From that moment on, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom" (Douglass 20).

In this story, Frederick Douglass made a critical realization: it is education that separates the slave from the free man — reading was his newfound means to education. He realized that

ignorance was the shackle keeping himself and others down. He learned that ignorance is a certain path to oppression and suppression. But he also realized the corollary, that education is the biggest key to freedom and liberty. He saw that once one learns to read, one will be forever free. This embodies the idea that education is a demand for liberation. The freedom of many people during his time was directly related to what education they could obtain.

John Locke arrived at the same conclusion. He stated, “The freedom then of man, and liberty of acting according to his own will, is grounded on his having reason, which is able to instruct him in that law he is to govern himself by, and make him know how far he is left to the freedom of his own will” (Locke Sect. 63). Locke began to hit on a very important idea. Having reason, as Locke describes, is a foundation for liberty because the application of it reveals the law and shows the boundaries of one’s freedom, letting individuals act without infringing on liberty itself. Simply put, it is understanding the inner workings and consequences of one’s freedom. This education, or way of reasoning, is especially impactful to liberty because it shows an individual *how* he should engage in his liberty. It impacts how capable we are in planting or taking care of the tree of liberty.

Another profound thinker, Paulo Freire, connected education, reason, and liberty in his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. He argues that the truly liberating education does not lie in the passive transfer of facts but in “acts of cognition”, in other words, in being able to think and acquire knowledge (Freire 79). In Douglass’s case, learning to read was the factor that set him on his path to thinking independently and critically. Just as Locke describes having reason as the foundation of liberty, Freire expresses critical thinking as essential for becoming free. This specific kind of education is not just for the powerful people, according to Freire, but indeed a universal demand of liberty for all. He says, “Any situation in which some individuals prevent

others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence” (Freire 85). This shows that denying education is not just creating a disadvantage to liberty — it is the opposite: it is oppression itself. To preserve liberty, we must not only educate ourselves but build a society where no one is stripped of critical thinking and where everyone is empowered by reason. This keeps the fruits of liberty accessible to all.

While education empowers individuals towards liberty, moral integrity shows them how to use it and how to preserve it. Liberty without character doesn't last. This is shown by Lawrence W. Reed, author of *Are We Good Enough for Liberty*. “If you do not govern yourself, you will be governed” (Reed 13). It is a given that a free society relies on its people to have some level of moral responsibility in order to follow laws and contribute to society. If this level of self-control breaks down, more effort is necessary to support and make laws. If the government begins to compensate, liberty is taken away and society falls into chaos or authoritarian control. Therefore, moral decay logically leads away from liberty, and moral uplift, on the contrary, leads to liberty.

A tremendous example from history is the fall of the Roman Empire. Will Durant, a renowned historian, says in his book, *Caesar and Christ*, as part of his Pulitzer-winning *Story of Civilization* series, “A great civilization is not conquered from without until it has destroyed itself within. The essential causes of Rome’s decline lay in her people, her morals, her class struggle, her failing trade, her bureaucratic despotism, her stifling taxes, her consuming wars” (Durant 665). The quote is found in the epilogue titled “Why Rome Fell”. This identification of morality as directly connected with the fall of Rome is a strong historical diagnosis coming from Durant. The explicitly stated conclusion describes that a civilization is destroyed from the inside

first and in a sense from the inside of each individual's hearts. This morality is as important on an individual level as it is on a societal level.

In the famous book *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo, we see a powerful example of how liberty and justice require the presence of moral responsibility *individually*. The character Jean Valjean stands at the center of this story. During a pivotal moment in this character's life, Valjean is given a second chance through a profound act of mercy from a kind bishop. From then on, Valjean seeks a life of moral discipline and eventually finds real freedom due to his choices. However, his newfound freedom was not from the law, but instead from his personal self-governance. In a stark contrast to him is Inspector Javert. Javert held to the law strongly and left no room for mercy or any form of compassion. After being saved by Valjean — the very man he was pursuing in the name of justice — the conflict between his mercy and the duty of the law eventually kills him. Javert's downfall mirrors a society's downfall when it is void of virtues like those of Valjean's. Through this story, Hugo shows that when law and order in a society are without compassion and moral responsibility there is no real justice — it becomes oppression and is ultimately self destructive.

In a similar way, the book *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee illustrates the same point that justice and order of law fail to uphold liberty when it lacks moral courage. Atticus Finch is a principled and exemplary lawyer in the racially divided American South. His integrity and strength of character pushes him to defend an innocent black man, Tom Robinson, who is accused of rape. Atticus Finch stands virtually alone, receiving no public support during the trial for Tom Robinson, aside from his family and a couple quiet allies. Atticus Finch gains nothing from defending this innocent man, but his sense of true justice and rigid backbone of morality are what every free society demands. In the end, the majority in the town are too morally weak

— bound by fear and racism — and refuse to stand up for the truth. As a result, the system ultimately fails to protect Tom Robinson. Harper Lee shows that any society with free people is not a free society without the character to use that freedom justly and morally. Like Hugo, Lee's example affirms the truth that the tree of liberty is protected by moral integrity more than by the laws written to defend it.

The very man that presided over the 1787 Constitutional Convention and served as the first president described morality as indispensable. George Washington knew that the system he helped build was strong but not without morality. He says, "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports" (Washington 19). Washington goes on to claim that our politicians need to hold to these pillars as equally as the pious man. He claims that religion is an important support to morality as it fosters moral behavior. These 'indispensable supports' that Washington advocated for will foster a prosperous nation, especially one of liberty. Through the words of not only Washington but also Victor Hugo, Harper Lee, and many others, we see how vital moral responsibility is to justice and liberty.

Liberty is dependent on our responsibility towards morality as well as our education as a society. In fact, George Bernard Shaw, a great dramatist and playwright, said, "Liberty means responsibility. That is why most men dread it" (Shaw 229). When we look carefully, we see that liberty is sustained by our responsibility; its demands can be seen as intellectual responsibility, moral responsibility, and now civic responsibility. Civic responsibility is the duty to participate in democracy to benefit and improve society. Engaging as a citizen in America looks like civic duties of voting and serving on a jury, or it looks like being informed or educated and respecting the rights of others. However, liberty in our democracy requires a deeper level of civic

engagement — one that is empowered and bold but avoids rebellion or violence and uses the system to strengthen the system and the liberty of the people.

A very clear and powerful modern example of this is found within President Franklin D. Roosevelt. President Roosevelt was elected four times, breaking the unwritten rule of two terms that President Washington exemplified. After Roosevelt died in 1945, people realized that allowing the possibility for infinite terms was dangerous and threatened the system's balance and potentially the future of liberty for the people. Many Americans, through the congress and the states, acted together to pass the 22nd Amendment to the Constitution which was ultimately ratified in 1951 by the states (FDR's). This Amendment limited the number of terms to two. This act showed that Americans were not passive and could peacefully and lawfully protect the future of our liberty. Liberty needs the standard vigilance of empowered citizens.

An instance where vigilance and empowerment towards protecting liberty was very strong was Shays' Rebellion. This rebellion began in late 1786 and ended early 1787; it was a major reason the Constitutional Convention was called later that same year of 1787. "The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants," is from a letter Thomas Jefferson wrote to William Stephens Smith on November 13, 1787, where he briefly addresses Shays' Rebellion. From this address, we see that Jefferson was not glorifying regular violent rebellion; rather, he was promoting educated and principled resistance as a check on tyranny to secure liberty. He wrote in this letter,

They were founded in ignorance, not wickedness. God forbid we should ever be 20 years without such a rebellion. The people can not be all, and always, well informed. The part which is wrong will be discontented in proportion to the importance of the facts they

misconceive. If they remain quiet under such misconceptions it is a lethargy, the forerunner of death to the public liberty.

Jefferson recognises the ignorance behind this rebellion; he is quick to note the importance of the passion that drove it. Although the rebellion did cause several deaths, the initiative of the people was commended by Jefferson. He said that lethargy is the forerunner of death to liberty. Truly, the tree of liberty demands bold, impassioned engagement and wilts as the people become apathetic. This level of action must be paired with knowledge and even moral standards in order to be effective. Shays' Rebellion was not a good example of civil means to bring change; however, it was still a powerful message to the leaders of the new country and contributed to the making of a Constitution where liberty can be protected through lawful means. This rebellion highlights three things to shape our understanding of civic engagement: it is bold and empowered, it must be educated and principled, and it is lawful.

President George Washington gave us a very powerful warning, again from his farewell address on this very principle of civic engagement. He states that to preserve "your government and the permanency of your present happy state, it is requisite...that you resist with care the spirit of innovation upon its principles, however specious the pretexts" (Washington 20). This means we must be ready for opposition that may try to alter or undermine the liberty we have made, regardless of how they frame their arguments. He warns that there will be threats to our Constitution, and we must be vigilant in defending both the Constitution and our system of government. The tree of liberty needs to be watched carefully for parasites like those threats.

Liberty truly demands that the people themselves keep the government in check and defend the constitution. The Declaration of Independence, which Jefferson wrote, states that the purpose of the government is to secure life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. It goes on to say

that whenever the government begins to fail at this task it is “the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government” (Declaration). It is not simply a right to fix the government if it goes wrong; it is a duty.

As a prerequisite to this duty we must be truly moral. From Hugo’s *Les Misérables* and Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, we see examples that show that liberty is not merely about the system of laws — it depends on the moral responsibility of the citizens. Without those roots of liberty, George Washington warned that we would be losing indispensable supports.

But morality alone is not enough. It is also critical that we comprehend and know how to engage with our liberty. Thinkers like Douglass, Locke, and Freire proved that without education we will be subject to oppression and lack the ability to see threats to our liberty. By resisting the slow killer of liberty — lethargy or civic apathy — and confronting threats with the same passion shown in Shays’ Rebellion, we preserve freedom through informed and lawful engagement.

America needs fewer bystanders and more caretakers of the tree of liberty. A free society can only endure if its people are moral and educated and brave enough to perform their civic duty. Only a society like this will ensure the tree of liberty continues to bear fruit for generations to come.

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