

The Free Loser

Robert W. Bertram

[Panel discussion on "The Pursuit of Freedom", Danforth National Associates' Conference, Estes Park, Colorado; 21. August 1974]

The topic assigned to this panel is "The Pursuit of Freedom." Freedom for what? Well, as you have been hearing, freedom for several things and, may I add, freedom for one thing more. And what is that? The freedom to lose. The freedom to lose what? The freedom to lose your job, for example—not just the income from the job or its retirement plan or its fringe benefits but your teaching career itself, your professorship or deanship, your very life vocation to teach, tenure or no tenure. Or the freedom to lose your students, not by their graduating or by a decline in new admissions but by your being administratively cut off from those students and, beyond them, from every other audience, every teachable public you ever had. Or the freedom to lose your reputation—your good name, as we used to say—the respect of men and women you hold dear and whose trust you depend on for your very identity.

Now I hasten to add, I myself have not lost all these things, not nearly, though I have lost enough of them to begin to imagine what the loss of them all might entail. Perhaps you can, too. In any case I am not necessarily talking about my own case. The question had been: the freedom to lose—to lose what? And I wanted to raise the ante as high as I possibly could, at least in the imagination, so as to make a point. The point is: the freedom I am talking about is the freedom to lose virtually everything, if necessary, virtually everything that is precious and joyous and otherwise indispensable. Within that movement to

which I for one am trying to belong, and many of you are too, namely the Christian Church, one of the favorite pot-boilers in our hymnody exclaims:

And take they our life, goods, fame, child and wife,
Let these all be gone, they yet have nothing won.

It is those fond things whose loss I am talking about—in short, the best that life has to offer, including, as the Mover of our movement did, life itself. Freedom for what? The freedom to lose, to lose all that.

To put it negatively, the losses I am speaking of are not of things which we might just as well do without anyway. I am not speaking of losses which are good riddance and which hence are not really losses at all. True, it is a manner of speaking to say, with a sigh of achievement, I have “lost” five pounds. But who in my condition needs those five pounds? That kind of loss is hardly a deprivation. Most of the moral life and most of higher education is devoted to losing just such encumbrances, such obviously undesirable ballast: for instance, ignorance, bad taste, prejudice. But who needs them? The loss of them is no loss at all. But it is not to such obviously dispensable things as that that I am referring when I speak of the freedom to lose. Last evening Parker Palmer reminded us— and how desperately we need that reminder!—that the monopoly which we have enjoyed as educators-for-scarcity is a monopoly we can well afford to lose. But then, as he made clear, that loss would scarcely be a deficit but rather a productive asset for ourselves as well as society. Such a loss, in other words, is freedom obviously enough. To lose our self-protectionism is to be free of it, clearly and simply. However, the sort of freedom I am adding to the list is, I admit, a far more problematic freedom. If it is freedom, it is freedom not nearly so obviously. To lose not what is good riddance to lose but what is hell to lose—one’s

vocation, one's community, one's identity, perhaps one's life—how in God's name could that be freedom? Yet it can be.

Maybe it would be more accurate if, rather than saying “the freedom to lose,” we said instead “the power to lose freely”—to lose liberally, to lose as liberated men and women rather than as slaves—or paradoxical as it may sound, to lose as winners. The earlier phrase, the freedom to lose, could easily mislead. It could give the misimpression that losing is a thing to be desired and pursued. As if surrendering, as if anything short of a last-ditch stand against bigotry and fear, as if withdrawing from the good fight into the privatism of doing one's own thing (which is the ultimate ghetto), as if losing for losing's sake or for convenience's sake or for survival's sake, could be justified on any grounds. No, that kind of sadomasochism—and it is all around us not only in our clinics but in the most revered institutions of our society, including our campuses—is the very opposite of the freedom-to-lose which I am here trying to represent. Remembering the kinds of disastrous losses we are here talking about—the loss of one's calling, one's very location within humanity and history—a person or a society would have to be mad or perverse deliberately to court such losses. What I am assuming rather is that losses like that are to be accepted only when there is no longer any decent or merciful alternative. Ah, but then—only then, when losing becomes morally inevitable—comes the severest challenge. Then the trick is to sustain the loss as freedom rather than as slavery, as a way of winning and ultimately not as losing after all.

To be free to lose—to be free, if need be, to give everything away—hardly comes easily. For all I know, it is humanly impossible, though that need not mean that it is impossible altogether. At any rate, to relinquish all or even nearly all without counting the cost does encounter the most formidable kinds of resistance. The most stubborn resistance, no doubt,

comes from within the loser himself. But the more massive resistance comes from outside of him, from the people and peers around him, from the most compelling values of his tradition, from the innermost structures of his social order, including the moral and religious orders. Together this vast environment conspires to insist to him, not that he may not give his all away but that under no circumstance dare he do so and still be free.

The counter-pressures against his losing winningly are all very plausible and most often highly ethical. For example, suppose the tyrannizing of his own and his colleagues' teaching and his students' learning had become so hopelessly oppressive that their only recourse finally, their only remaining way to make a witness against this creeping legalism in high places, was to up and leave in a body. Is that fair to their spouses and children, who are quite as directly dependent upon these careers as the teachers and students themselves are? And the school which they closed down, even if their reasons for doing so were unimpeachable—after all, whose school was it? Only theirs? Is it for them to give it away? How about the constituents whose school it also is at least as much? How about the future students yet to come but now deprived of a school to come to?

Or look at the free loser from the viewpoint of his opponents, those who feel compelled to dissuade or defeat him. There must be something left which they can threaten to take away from him, something of value he will fear to lose—perhaps his reputation or his sanity or his longevity or his optimism—some good which he dare not be free to relinquish. For if he is allowed to feel free to give it all away, then these opponents are helpless. Then what toehold is left within the loser's own person by which he can be intimidated or bought or flattered. Can we possibly imagine to what lengths zealous adversaries will go to to preserve within the loser some absolutely indispensable treasure

which he so fears to lose that he too finally capitulates? That was no idle threat which Vinie Burrows, quoted to us last night; "America can kill you too."

But the greatest outside impediment to the loser's losing freely, to his losing winningly, comes not from those dear ones who depend on him—his hostages to fortune—nor even from those enemies who wish his losses to diminish rather than enrich him, but from those strong friends rather who with all good will support him by the encouragements of religion and morality, and religion and morality at their human best. For if the loser were to believe them, and every bone of his body inclines him to, then he would still be choked by the subtlest slavery of all: namely, to give everything away all right, yet to do so not really freely but under the subtlest of all compulsions—the compulsion to do what is right so as to be right, for the prospect of being heroic, worthy, good.

The freedom I speak of is a freedom from all these seductions. It expresses itself not in cautious detachment from all the lovable things of life, lest they be taken away and we be bereaved of them, but rather in loving them to the point of recklessness and fighting for them, losable as they are, simply because we are free to do so, not because our survival or our value depends on them. And my experience, at least my faith is that—strange to say—there is no surer way of preventing their loss.

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