

“Bill of Rights for Liberals”

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In the United States, the *Bill of Rights* is the name by which the first ten amendments to the [United States Constitution](#) are known. They were introduced by [James Madison](#) to the [First United States Congress](#) in 1791 as a series of [constitutional amendments](#), and came into effect on [December 15, 1791](#), when they had been [ratified by three-fourths of the States](#). The Bill of Rights limits the powers of the [Federal government of the United States](#), protecting the rights of all citizens, residents and visitors on United States territory.

The Bill of Rights protects the [freedoms of speech, press, and religion](#); the [right to keep and bear arms](#); the [freedom of assembly](#); the [freedom to petition](#); and prohibits unreasonable [search and seizure](#); [cruel and unusual punishment](#); and compelled [self-incrimination](#). The Bill of Rights also prohibits [Congress](#) from making any law respecting [establishment of religion](#) and prohibits the Federal Government from depriving any person of life, [liberty](#), or [property](#), without [due process](#) of law.

For those of us who have lived with these rights all our lives it is hard to imagine the emotion, the relief and the almost utter amazement that comes over people from other countries who hear those words for the first time. Just take the freedoms for example; speech, press and religion. Now we all know that there have been gross injustices done to those rights since they were written and there is a need, a constant need for people to be watching out for those freedoms and making sure they stay in the powerful form that they were written and intended. These freedoms are of special consideration to those of us who call ourselves liberal. Because without them we would not have the chance to gather and be the religious people we wish ourselves to be and become. So, it is with great gratitude, appreciation and thankfulness that I feel as a church community we honor these rights and give them the proper place they deserve. And do something that is hard for those of us born under their protection, and that is—honor them as if we heard them for the first time.

Entitlement isn't always an honest way to live. Expecting things in life to come your way because you are deserving of them often leads to humiliation, disgrace and shame. But I believe there is also a good sense of entitlement that came with the writing of these rights. It doesn't take much reading of history to see that most people throughout the history of the world did not receive many rights. The fact that people like you and like I could even possess these rights and not be gentry, or royalty, or wealthy is utterly and completely amazing. Laborers and farmers, middle class people and slaves were all so much fodder to keep the world going for the rich. Lives used and abused for the benefit of the few and the wealthy. There has not been many places in this old world of ours where every person all across the board is given these rights simply because they are born.

I often feel would it follow, because we have been given so much as individuals by these freedoms, that we are then able to create a bill of rights for children, a bill of rights for animals, a bill of rights for the earth? And you and I know in our heart of hearts that all life deserves the treatment that shows that equality and honors the inherent worth and dignity. So why is it so hard for us to extend those rights to all life forms?

These freedoms are a gift. They are power, individual power. What would life be like without them? I cringe to think of such a world. And how many in our world live without these freedoms? And they are subjected to humiliations and torture and subjugations we only read about in the papers.

We have much to thank the Puritans for, don't laugh, we do need to thank them, not only for what they gave this country but also what they gave us in our church. They were the brave people who because of being betrayed by Oliver Cromwell came to this country seeking many

things. One, they would never, ever again live under a king or a monarchy of any kind. They saw firsthand how capricious, self-serving and selfish the English monarchy had been. They felt the Church of England had not gone far enough in its reforms, therefore when they had backed Cromwell in his takeover of the king and felt they were finally able to also be in power and enact their reforms, Cromwell imprisoned them. Many died there of despair and many took the opportunity to leave England for the new world.

Here they helped establish the many freedoms we enjoy today. One of the more generous freedoms that we enjoy in this church, unlike other churches is that we have no bishops, no cardinals, no layer of authority above the congregation. That means that you, the members of this congregation actually own and are able to operate your own franchise, without interference or control of outside forces. Each person a voice and a vote. The original meaning of the word liberal. Not such a fighting word. In fact it is a very descriptive word of all Americans. All Americans. Conservative and liberal alike would agree that one voice, one vote is due to all people.

So, our country was built on the frustrations and dreams of a people who knew life could be better and then out of those frustrations and dreams built a new world in the new world. In 1648 these Puritans put together a new set of truths by which they would now live in this new country. It was called the Cambridge Platform” and the first line of this platform said, “We are on this earth to walk together.” Indeed, as the Bill of Rights are remembered and honored and kept functioning in a world where there are many who would love to take those freedoms away, we need to say often to ourselves, we are indeed on this earth to walk together. And we will walk together well if each of us has the rights protected by our awesome, marvelous Bill of rights.

The following are some writings by some Americans who loved America.

Emma Lazarus (inscribed on the Statue of Liberty)

“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore, send these the homeless, the tempest-tossed to me. Because I lift my lamp beside the golden door.”

“The meaning of the word America flows from one pure source. Within the soul of America is the freedom of mind and spirit of humans. Here alone are the open windows through which pours the sunlight of all the human spirit. Here alone human dignity is not a dream but a major accomplishment.” Herbert Hoover

“The Four Freedoms” by Franklin D. Roosevelt

In the future days, which we seek to make secure, we look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms.

The first is freedom of speech and expression everywhere in the world.

The second is freedom of every person to worship God in their own way-everywhere in the world.

The third is freedom from want-which, is translated into world terms, means economic understanding which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants-everywhere in the world.

The fourth is freedom from fear-which, translated into world terms, means a worldwide reduction of armaments to such a point and in such a fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor-anywhere in the world.”

“When an American says that they love their country, they mean not only that they love the New England hills, the prairies glistening in the sun, the wide and rising plains, the great mountains,

and the sea. They mean that they love an inner air, an inner light in which freedom lives and in which a person can draw the breath of self-respect.” Adlai Stevenson

“What is the spirit of liberty? I cannot define it. I can only tell you my own faith. The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right. The spirit of liberty is the spirit which seeks to understand the minds of other men and women. The spirit of liberty is the spirit which weights their interests alongside its own without bias. The spirit of liberty remembers that not even a sparrow falls to the earth unheeded.” Anonymous

I believe we need a bill of rights for liberals. Especially this group of people who trying as the Pilgrims did to reestablish a place in the world and in our hearts that is free from oppression, free from creeds, free from outward control, free from religious tyranny of any kind. We don't need it, we don't want, nor do we wish to be tied to negative thoughts of our own. So, these 16 statements are suggestions of a new bill of rights for religious liberals. And of course you are more than encouraged to write some of your own.

1. You may stop complaining and blaming other people for the things they did to you or didn't do for you and you learn that the only thing you can really count on is the unexpected.
2. You learn that people don't always say what they mean or mean what they say and that not everyone will always be there for you and that it's their issue not yours. You learn to stand on your own and to take care of yourself and in the process a sense of safety and security is born of self-reliance.
3. You stop judging and pointing fingers and you begin to accept people as they are and to overlook their shortcomings and human frailties and in the process a sense of peace and contentment is born as you learn to forgive. You realize that much of the way you view yourself and the world around you is as a result of all the messages and opinions that have been ingrained into your psyche.
4. You begin to sift through all the junk you've been fed about how you should behave, how you should look, how much you weigh, what you should wear, what you should do for a living, how much money you should make, and what you owe your parents, family and friends.
5. You learn to open up to new worlds and different points of view. You begin reassessing redefining who you are and what you really stand for.
6. You learn the difference between wanting and needing and you begin to discard the doctrines and values you've outgrown or should have never bought into in the first place, and in this process you learn to go with your instincts.
7. You learn that is truly in giving that we receive. And that there is power and glory in creating contributing and you stop maneuvering through life merely as a consumer, looking for your next fix.
8. You learn that the principles such as honesty and integrity are not outdated ideals of a bygone era, but the mortar that holds together the foundation upon which you must build a life.
9. You learn that you don't know everything, and that there is joy in learning new things.
10. You begin to truly believe don't have to save the world.
11. You learn to distinguish between guilt and responsibility and the importance of setting boundaries and learning to say no. You learn that only cross to bear is the one you choose to carry.

12. Then you learn about love. How to love, how much to give in love, when to stop giving and when to walk away. You learn to look at relationships as they really are and not as you would have them be.

13. You stop trying to control people, situation and outcomes. And you learn that alone does not mean lonely. You also stop working so hard at putting your feelings aside, smoothing things over and ignoring your needs.

14. You learn sometimes it is necessary to make demands. You come to the realization that you deserve to be treated with love and respect and you won't settle for less.

15. You learn your body is truly a temple. And you begin to care for it and treat it with respect. You begin to eat a balanced diet, drink more water, take more time to exercise. You learn being tired fuels doubt, fear and uncertainty and so you take more time to rest.

16. You laugh often and hard and long. You are no longer afraid to ask for help, because you know your heart is in a holy place.

We have a right to be happy, secure and peaceful. We have a responsibility to use those rights for ourselves and also to keep them available and live for others. We must remind ourselves often of these rights and remember to use them in our daily life. Besides being the center and the core for us as Americans, they are also the center and the core for us as Unitarian Universalists. Cherish them, keep them safe. Our future as free people depends upon their being taken out and dusted off once in a while, admired but most of all lived.