

Dada Maheshvarananda: It is my great pleasure and honor to introduce my good friend Bill Ayers he's a social justice organizer and activist and teacher he was one of the founders of the weather underground and when that epic protest against the Vietnam War concluded he then switched to becoming a radical teacher, a former distinguished professor of education at the University of Illinois in Chicago. He's the author or editor of more than 30 books about teaching social justice, urban school reform, and children in trouble with the law. Bill Ayers has published two memoirs, *Fugitive Days* and *Public Enemy*, that I recommend. His recent book *Demand the Impossible: A Radical Manifesto*, but he's done a lot more since then. So Bill, it's a great pleasure to have you lead us in a conversation.

Bill Ayers: Thank you so much, Dada, and thank you all for inviting me. It's an honor to be with you. I had said to Dada I would rather have a conversation. It's difficult to me in this media of talking through Zoom. It has great advantages but one of the disadvantages for me as a teacher and as a political organizer is that I need to feel the energy in the room. I need to feel my comrades. So let's do our best to overcome the limitations and have a conversation.

I want to just say two things in response to Dada's introduction. One is that I became a radical teacher in 1965 in the in the midst of the Black Freedom Movement in the United States and I became part of the Freedom School movement. I later was a leader of Students for a Democratic Society and the breakup of that and the breakoff into the Weather Underground. But I've never lost the the spirit and the energy of being a radical teacher. By radical I mean going to the root, trying to figure out what's at the bottom, what's not superficial but what's deeply at the bottom of what our enterprise is. I continue to do that. I retired from the University of Illinois at Chicago 14 years ago when I was 65 years old. When I was a full professor at UIC, I taught two classes a semester. You know full professors don't have real jobs they just have guaranteed income and hang out, but I did my best to to use the opportunity to really push things. I did retire 14 years ago and I now teach four classes a term. I teach oral history at the University of Chicago, I teach curriculum and teaching at Lake Forest Academy, I teach ethics at DePaul University, and I teach memoir writing at Stateville Prison and I may come back to that last teaching gig because that's the one that is has me the most focused these days.

I'm also going to talk mostly on the basis of a book I've been working on that is just going to come out in the spring and the book is called *When Freedom is the Question, Abolition is the Answer*. I'd like to invite you to interrupt me or and I don't know how to interrupt me because maybe Prakash or maybe Dada can jump in and stop me if you have questions or comments. I would love to have a back and forth conversation, but again this media makes that a bit more difficult than if I were in the room with you and I could see you agitatedly shaking your fist at me then I would definitely turn to you and we would go back and forth. but does that make sense Pros I can see you should we just go forward like this and I'll talk a bit and will you shake your fist at me when it's time for me to shut up I'm counting on you.

Let me begin by by offering a few provocations. I would first like to note which I tend to do not as a formality but as a as a critical reminder. I have come to really embrace the idea of a land acknowledgement and so I want to tell you that I'm speaking to you from the so-called Chicago land area of Illinois which I call a conundrum contained in a contradiction. I think of Chicago as both a confirmation and a crime scene and sometimes I imagine Chicago draped in that distinctive yellow crime scene tape: "Do not enter – criminal investigation underway." It's important for me to note that

these lands were stewarded for centuries, for millennia by many indigenous peoples and lineages including the Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi as well as the the Miami, Ho-Chunk, Menominee, Sac and Fox Nations. These beings raised their children here, created their communities, made sense and meaning of their lives together, experienced the flowing and the passing of time and planned for the future and buried their dead here. So I think we should acknowledge them and thank them and apologize for the actions of our settler colonial forebearers and join in solidarity in seeking truth, repair, and reconciliation. I read that whenever I speak and whenever an episode of my podcast is aired. I don't think that we should think of it just as a formality I think you should think of it as a heartfelt embrace of history and a reminder that history never is pasted it's with us today and we should we should learn from it and grow from it.

I start by asking the question what is freedom how do we get free what are the freedom dreams that encourage us and drive us forward. If we're blinded to the social reality we're swimming through, who benefits from that blindness? Where are we on the clock of the universe? What does the known demand of us now? I mentioned a book *Demand the Impossible*. I've admired that phrase for a long time it's a phrase that was used by James Baldwin, the great American essayist and writer. It is a phrase used by Che Guevarra. Why would we demand the possible when what we really need is to unleash our imaginations and demand the impossible? We might bind ourselves then together in a collective commitment to look at the world as if it could be otherwise, and then get busy in projects of resistance and repair and yes, of revolution.

This is a good time in my mind to reflect once more on the question of freedom, to explore its history to illuminate its dimensions. The word freedom is practically applicaéd onto our American minds. We're born free in the freest country on Earth we're told repeatedly. It seems that individuals and corporations alike, people from the far Left and the reactionary Right embrace freedom as a positive force and a trumpeted value. We have the rightwing Freedom Caucus in Congress, we have the Freedom Unlimited credit card from Chase Bank, we have Freedom sanitary napkins, and *The Courage to be Free* book by Ron DiSantis. But we also have the Black Freedom Movement, we have Gay Liberation, we have Women's Freedom. So what does anyone mean by freedom in particular? The answer is difficult to pin down because we seem to be talking past and over each other and I should situate us also a bit.

I think many of us feel that this moment can absolutely feel like the worst of times: a new and escalating war with China, a hot and destructive proxy war in Europe, racialized police violence, and unchecked environmental collapse are on full display. Fragile and often anemic democratic institutions are seemingly on life support. Religious authoritarianism is on the rise. Women's bodily integrity is under sustained assault. The overlapping crises starting to overwhelm us.

But on a different day or from a different angle, these days can feel like the best of times: 26 million people took to the streets in 2020 in response to the police murder of George Floyd, the largest public outpouring of racial justice in history. Women across a wide political spectrum have refused to accept the medieval definition of their rights. Broad forces are on the march worldwide to resist plunder and extraction and to preserve life on Earth. I wake up every day and glance at this sign behind me. It's by the poet Mary Oliver and her words speak to me every morning capturing a sense of the universal

contradiction. “It is a serious thing just to be alive on this fresh morning in the broken world.” That's how I feel every day, and I feel it right now.

I also think Charles Dickens would recognize our contemporary predicament at once: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.” Dickens understood that life is never one thing in isolation from every other thing. I want to really push that idea. Life is never one thing. What you're enthralled with is not the only thing going on. You may see exploitation, you surely do, but there's also resistance to exploitation. We can see progress, yes, and also backlash, but more than one thing is happening at once. I get up living this contradiction. I don't want to run from it, I want to dive into that contradiction. The worst of times, the best of times.

If you don't know the writer Viet Thanh Nguyen, he's one of my favorites. He wrote *The Committed* and *The Sympathizer*. In *The Committed* he has this line early in the book. It's a novel but this is his line: “Ah contradiction! The perpetual body odor of humanity!” I love that phrase. I think we should not run from contradiction, which is kind of the typical American and Western response, but we should dive into contradiction and hold on to it.

Let me make five or six small points about the problem or the question of freedom and then urge you to talk back to me. Number one: freedom is a living thing and a vital aspiration. It is partially revealed when we look unblinkingly into the face of unfreedom and so we we feel the unfreedom but we should look at it clearly and understand that freedom is understood best when we see unfreedom. So if unfreedom includes being prevented from voting, then freedom must involve the act of voting. It might not be the whole answer, but it must involve that. If unfreedom is in part being forced to attend underfunded segregated miseducative schools, freedom embraces integrating into the privileged schools and fighting for an honest curriculum. If unfreedom is policies and politics of caging and cruelty, exclusion and dehumanization, then freedom must unlock the cages and abolish those heartless practices. Talking with Prakash earlier, if unfreedom means astronomical rates of infant mortality among African-American people and people of color, then freedom must involve fighting for the right of humanity to exist, to live. So freedom in my mind is always freedom in opposition and it's naming that what we're opposed to that's so important. If I identify unfreedom, then of course it must carry with it a moral imperative, the responsibility to act.

I'm thinking of Nina Simone talking from the stage at Summer of Soul Concert in Harlem in 1969. In the middle of one of her classic tyraids about white supremacy, she shouted, “Don't just sit there! For God's sake, do something!” Freedom is an achievement to be won, not a gift to be bestowed. It has no direct link to charity. It's not a grant from a philanthropic foundation, nor the largess of some lady bountiful, some ostentatious benefactor. Freedom must be seized rather than received. That's as true now as it ever was.

“Freedom now!” was the call to arms of the Black Freedom Movement in the 1950s and 1960s. The massive social justice movement generated real social change as well as a language, a philosophy, and a vast soundtrack that can contingently define and then continually redefined the meaning of freedom.

We all know songs like “We Shall Overcome” and “Oh Freedom” and “Woke Up this Morning with My Mind on Freedom.”

I want to inject here that at the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom where Martin Luther King Jr gave his iconic “I Have a Dream” speech, the young leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, John Lewis, 23 years old at the time, also spoke. He later became a legendary congressman from Georgia. He said, “We do not want our freedom gradually, we want it now! We're tired of being beaten by police! We're tired of seeing our people go to jail again and again! Wake up, America, wake up!” I wanted to read John's short quote in this context because we're in a place where people are saying go to sleep, don't pay attention, don't wake up. John Lewis said this in 1963 and we can echo it today. We can't be free if we don't wake up.

The second point is that in the wake of the Black Freedom Movement a liberating spirit was loosed on the land. Freedom's energy was unleashed and a new world heaved into view. Everything felt like music and the music felt like freedom. Abolishing all forms of subjugation became the agenda and kept pushing forward. In the wake of the Black Freedom Movement we find the next wave of Women's Liberation, a surge of grassroots truth-telling. We saw the rise of Puerto Rican Independence. It seemed suddenly possible. The American Indian Movement were warriors organized and stood tall for their people's freedom. Gay Liberation, Chicano Liberation, disability rights, all of that was suddenly on the move and in the mix. The reason I believe is because freedom dreams are contagious. In today's terms, freedom dreams were going viral. Freedom is tied to protest and resistance to community building and solidarity to collectively identify the barriers to one's or one's neighbors humanity and then struggling arm-in-arm, shoulder-to-shoulder, heart-to-heart to overcome those obstacles. Freedom is neither a passive state of being nor a stable state of being but an active state of engagement. Freedom was something to be accomplished in dialogue and in struggle with others. Freedom pointed toward perpetual personal fulfillment, yes, but always in the dynamic ongoing development of sisterhood and brotherhood, community action, collective liberation.

A third point about freedom is that there is a paradox that lies at the heart of freedom. We are perhaps most free when we're standing in front of an imposing wall, naming a roadblock to our own or our neighbor's full humanity and then throwing ourselves against that obstacle. It's just not true that freedom is someone sitting on their couch watching TV and smoking a joint. I'm not against that, I'm just saying that's not where freedom lives. Freedom pitches into view precisely when the wall of unfreedom is identified. Enslavement, subjugation, abuse, cruelty, persecution, extraction, oppression, and then we reach for a sledgehammer to break through that wall. Fred Moten, the great cultural theorist, has said that freedom dreams at their best were born in the dark and deadly hold of a slave ship. It's precisely when we see that we're not free and act against it that we become free.

The fourth point I want to make gets to the question of individual freedom and community liberation. Each one of us is the one. There will never be anyone like you ever again. We each have a unique and important role and it's why we should treat other people with absolute awe and honor. Because each of us is the one and only who will ever walk this Earth. At the same time we're each one of the many, we are each born, we each suffer, we will each die, and that makes us exactly like everybody else on some important dimensions. Once again a contradiction. But I'm drawn to the poem that's at the base of the

Statue of Liberty by Emma Lazarus, the Socialist poet from Europe. Everyone knows the part of the poem that says

"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Now Lazarus called that statue "Mother of Exiles", and of course there's an irony there. Rita Dove, the Poet Laureate of the United States, was visiting Lower Manhattan at a time when the statue was shrouded in construction rigging. As she was in Battery Park looking out at the Statue of Liberty in the harbor, right in front of her was a homeless woman wearing a cap sitting heavily. Rita Dove writes a brilliant poem called "Lady Freedom Among Us". What Dove does is she describes the woman and she describes the statue in contrast to each other. This lady, the homeless woman, is unhoused, unfed, unfree. She's in front of our eyes and she makes a mockery of the statue's aspirational legend. Dove's poem really is an attempt to say this lady in front of us you cannot deny her with her old-fashioned sandals, her leaden skirts, she is one of us, she is each of us. Here the poet illuminates that fundamental contradiction that I started with. Each is fully the one of one, full stop. And we are each merely one of the many. Again full stop.

The fifth point I'd like to make is that we are each of us and all of us also stricken with a certain fear of freedom. We are actually more comfortable with orthodoxy, with rules, than we are with the reality of freedom. In Dostoevsky's story, "The Grand Inquisitor", Jesus has come back. He's immediately arrested and imprisoned by the church. The grand inquisitor comes to his cell and says to him we had to arrest you and we're going to have to kill you again because people don't want freedom. They don't want to be free and you're offering them freedom. You should allow us, the Church, to let people live comfortably with their received wisdom, with their dogma, with their orthodoxy. Don't confuse them with the idea that freedom is a possibility for them.

This theme is echoed everywhere. I'm thinking of Ray Bradbury's short story "Fahrenheit 451". It's about a fire department whose job it is to burn books. When the fire captain is asked why do you do this nasty work, he says the people want us to. Adjectives and adverbs are just too confusing. What we want is rules to live by, we don't want to be free. I think that it's important to look that in the face.

You know I often think of the great French philosopher Sartre who tells an amazing iconic story about being visited by a student during World War II when the Nazis were occupying France. The graduate student comes to Sartre and says I need your help because I have a horrible dilemma. My mother is dying of cancer and I have to stay home and take care of her, but my father has collaborated with the Nazis, and I feel I must join the resistance in order to save the family name and in order to stand up for what's morally right. What should I do? Sartre spends several long hours talking to the young student and then says, Well, you should choose. The student says I know I have to choose that's why I came to you because I want you to help me choose. You're the great philosopher. Sartre says the problem with freedom is that there are no guarantees and your choice belongs to you. It's your responsibility. The student gets angry and says, well then, to hell with you, I'm going to go visit a priest. Sartre says, very well, what priest will you choose?

I often tell that story when I'm asked advice by anyone. My niece 30 years ago asked me if she should move in with her boyfriend and I told her the story of Sartre. I said why am I your priest? She said, oh so it is okay. I said wait, you could have chosen your mother as your priest, you could have chosen your grandmother my mother as your priest, but you chose me because you think I'll agree with what you want to do. Be free, make a choice, and take responsibility. So freedom is a horrible responsibility.

Point six is freedom takes courage. Authentic courage is at the heart of moral reflection and the moral instinct leading to ethical action. Moral courage is not picking the box marked good and rejecting the box marked bad in a clean and decontextualized social field of obvious alternatives. That's a myth. Those happy labels could as easily be called conventional and unconventional, because most of us most of the time act conventionally and assume that we're being good people. The reality is most Spartans act like Spartans, most Athenians act like Athenians, and most Americans act like Americans. Claiming to be a good person because you acted conventionally is crazy. I often ask my students, could a slave owner who was also a brilliant philosopher and never beat his wife and always paid his bills on time be considered a moral person, or even a free person? My students wrestle with that question, but it's the same question we should ask of ourselves today. We're all against slavery today, we're all abolitionists, but what are we not seeing today that is a conventional way of living that is also oppressive, cruel, exploitative? What do we need to demand of ourselves in order to make real moral choices and to really be free?

Opening our eyes is part of it. We have to open our eyes and see the world as it is not once but every day anew. Then we have to be astonished at both the beauty and the ecstasy of humanity in every direction, and be astonished as well at all the cruelty and unnecessary suffering that we visit upon one another. Then we have to do something else. As I said earlier, we have to act. Once we act, we have to doubt. That's the circle that to me is the circle of a moral person or a good activist or an organizer or a good teacher. We open our eyes and pay attention. We wake up not once but continually. We are astonished at both the good and the bad, we act and we doubt and we repeat. That to me is what it means to be free. That's a form of self-suffering, but it's essential.

Finally freedom is linked to abolition. When freedom is the question, abolition is the answer. When I say abolition, I'm not talking about freeing the slaves particularly or opening the prison gates, although I'd love to talk about that. I'm talking about a politics that says when freedom is on the agenda there's really only one answer and the answer is abolition.

A friend of mine told me about reading a book to her four-year-old son, *We Are Water Protectors*, about the grandmothers in Canada who are fighting to save the water from oil companies that plan to drill and extract from the earth. It's a beautiful story of courage of these old women. At the end of the story the four-year-old said to his mother, I want to join the grandmothers, I want to go on the picket line. She said, if you went on the picket line what would your sign say? He said it would say "No pipelines". He wasn't saying an alternative route for pipelines, he wasn't saying carbon tradeoffs. Four-year-olds understand instinctively that when freedom is the question, abolition is the answer.

The brilliant and intrepid geographer abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore argues that the abolitionist of today stands on the shoulders of the abolitionists who preceded us. We are required to change just one

thing, and that one thing is everything. Abolition is not best understood as a deletion or an eraser or an unlocking of doors, but rather as a collection of creative and complex acts of world building. What would it be in 1850 to imagine a world without slavery? What kind of world would we need to build in order to have no slavery? What kind of world could we begin to create today that would render prisons and police and militarism and war obsolete? Predation and exploitation relics of a cruel past? Sometimes I like to think about a 100 years from now visiting the Museum of Capitalism or the Museum of Mass Incarceration, because those things are relics from some Dark Age. To do that, everything would have to change. That's why I think abolition is a politics and abolition work, that is the work of changing everything, is the practice of freedom.