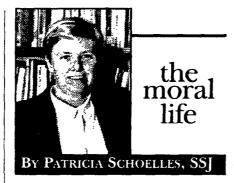
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Freedom is about claiming life's events

I want to write this column on personal freedom, but I'll warn you right away that in spite of this being one of the most important topics in moral theology, I used to dread the classes that dealt with it. I think this is because the discussions always sounded so abstract to me. For that reason, I'll try to draw some concrete illustrations in this column. I'm not talking here about political freedom in the sense guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution, nor referring to limitations on human behavior enforced by a government or external authority. Rather, I'm talking about an interior ability to make actual the deepest yearnings of the human soul, which we understand to be the root of all our actions

Ordinarily, religious people try to argue that human beings are capable of doing this; thus, we are "free." Other forces in the culture and in intellectual history proclaim that we are not free. Freud taught that human beings are powerless in the face of sexual and psychological urges and, therefore, determined by them. Marx thought that we are economically determined and so overpowered by economic factors that freedom becomes an irrelevant category. B.F. Skinner held that human beings are determined by the external influences that surroand us and that these combine to decide for us what we ultimately become and do

In spite of these theories to the contrary, Christian theologians argue that human freedom is a meaningful categorv. Of course with that said, establishing what we mean by personal freedom is



still a matter of considerable difficulty. As I listen to commercials and look at various forms of advertising, I get the impression that our American culture has decided that freedom is simply the capacity to make choices. This is associated with the notion that the more options we have to choose from, the freer we are.

Personally, I don't think that's a satisfactory idea of personal freedom at all. What if someone had to choose to die from starvation or torture? I don't think someone faced with that "choice" would be very free at all, no matter how many options are offered.

I've rejected that idea of human freedom. Part of my reason for doing so is a growing awareness that, as I look back over my life, I take a different view of past "decisions" I thought I had made in total freedom. In fact, many of my past choices, even important ones, now appear to me as having been less than fully "mine." Many of my decisions seem now to have been more like "events that happened to me." This includes even my choice of teaching as a profession. So many aspects of my history, including my

upbringing, ethnic heritage, neighborhood and school communities, personal and psychological determinism contributed to the actual choices that I've made, that I view past decisions in a manner akin to the way I view external events of my life.

I am mistrustful of imagining that had I known more at the time, I would have been "freer." I think it is way too simple to conclude that freedom can be reduced to knowledge. In fact, I now think that an adequate description of freedom is closer to an ability to identify with my choices than it is to making choices. I think we are free to the extent that we are able to claim our life as our own. Freedom is more a matter of identity than of choice.

I can give an example of what I mean. I once heard a wise teacher say that no matter whom you marry, it will be the wrong person. He went on to say that if you have children, you can be sure that they will be the "wrong" children. Every life choice will sooner or later be judged to be "exactly wrong for me." He was implying that much of our "doing" actually responds to, and maybe even depends on, what happens to us and how we accept it.

If we take this view, freedom can most adequately be defined in terms of intention. I am free not because I can cause certain external things to happen, but because certain things that happen, whether the result of my decision or not, can be made "mine" through my power of intention. Freedom is not as much about cause and effect, as it is about describing my life. We are free not to the extent that we can make things happen, but to the extent that we can claim the decisions and events that make up our life, and fit them into our ongoing story.

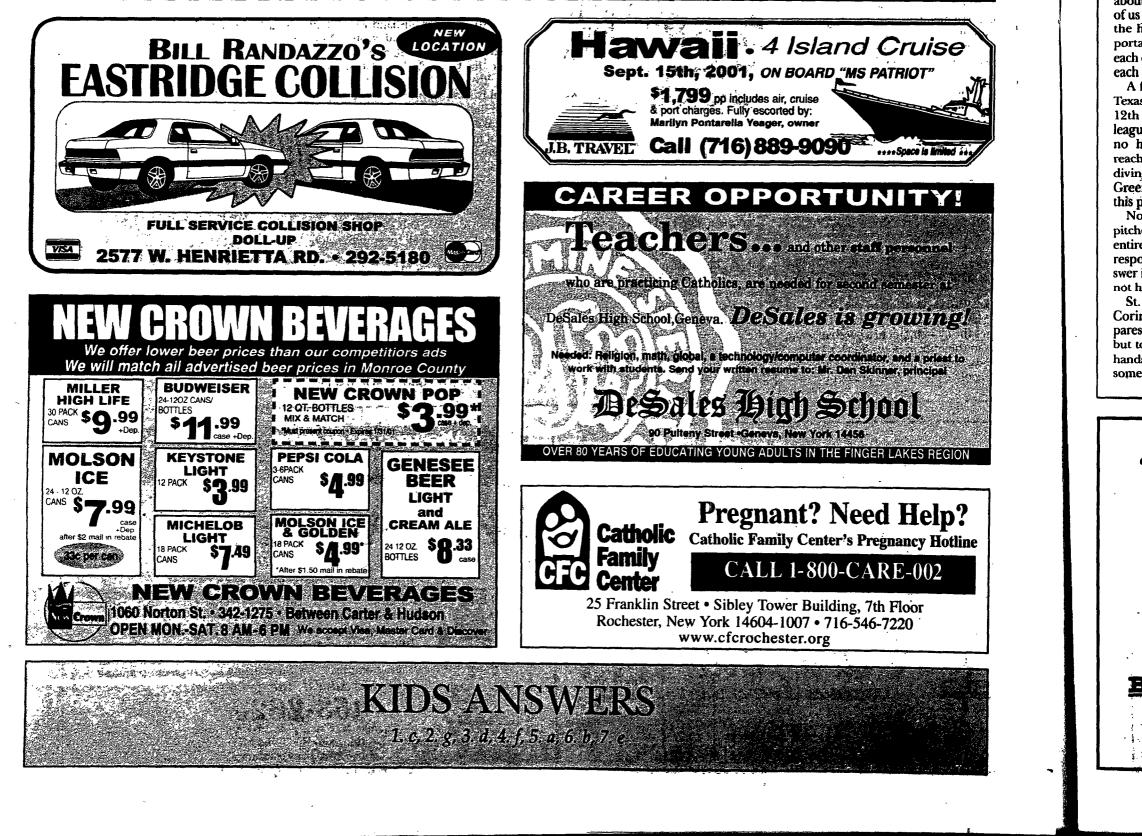
Obviously, this view of freedom requires that we understand our life in terms of a story, or narrative. It requires also that we understand that some of what makes up our life is quite positive, while some of it is negative. The point of freedom is not to try to remake the past or the present over into what pleases us, but to learn to claim our life as our own, and to have the courage to do so truthfully. Learning to be free involves moving beyond illusion and self-deception so that we become capable of incorporating the whole of what happens to us and who we've become - good and bad - into our particular life story.

For us as Christians, our life story is not told only in the terms of human relationships, professional endeavors, personal successes and failures.

The most significant telling of our life story is in terms of our ongoing relationship with the One who is ultimately the object of all our seeking. The terms in which we tell our individual life stories come to us from the story of the Gospel. They include terms like healing and forgiveness and rebirth and redemption. Thus, learning the language of the Gospel and learning to live in that story is ultimately learning the language of our own freedom.

Sister Schoelles is president of St. Bernard's Institute.





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