

On Sundays in Paris, the streets resonate with the sounds and smells of the various markets in each arrondissement. The small, open-air shops and tents house every item imaginable: bread, fish, silk scarves, umbrellas, shoes, oranges. But the most fascinating are the outdoor bird markets, where thousands of jewel-bright colors swirl as the birds squawk in their cramped cages, waiting to be sold. Some birds vehemently flap their wings in a futile attempt to shatter the bars, or at least to garner pity from their captors. Others perch on the highest bars of the cages in silent resignation, gazing out at the bustling crowd beyond the wicker barrier that blurs their vision and makes the acknowledgement of their bondage finite.

Jean-Paul Sartre once said that "Freedom is what you do with what's been done to you." The bird who accepts his fate will never be free, because he cannot comprehend the meaning of freedom. The bird who beats against his bonds is already free, for he can taste the enticement of escape and change and betterment and is willing to fight for it.

Freedom is not merely an opportunity. It is the willingness to take that opportunity. In history, oppression has forced many racial, social, and religious minorities to submit to the power of the majority. But for many of these groups, the status quo has changed due to their will to fight against oppression. From the moment Rosa Parks first refused to move to the back of the bus, she was free. She, as an American citizen, realized her right to liberty. It did not take the passing of the Civil Rights Act to free Rosa Parks. She was free as soon as she released the shackles of oppression from her mind.

The key to freedom is education, understanding, and courage. With education, one has the historical and analytical knowledge to realize oppression. With understanding, one has the ability to reason with others and comprehend the situation. And with courage, one can release oneself from fear of the unknown and become free.

The birds who sit at the tops of the cages are silent. They may not have the ability or knowledge to fly. But the birds who have the courage and understanding to flap their wings and cry to release themselves from captivity are the only ones with the possibility of escape. Once the seed of an idea is planted, freedom flourishes easily. The women's suffrage movement of the early 20th century only occurred once women educated themselves to understand the situation. By 1920, activists had earned themselves the right to vote. Had these bold women never taken the initiative to act against their oppression,

the 19th Amendment may never have passed.

Freedom is not easy. Freedom is a choice. But once the recognition of the worth of the inherent rights of mankind are realized, freedom is inevitable. All it takes is the spirit to fly.