

# Freedom is...

"... a spiritual attitude" (Nobuo Nishikawa)

"... being able to explore new horizons" (Barry Rogers)

"... the ability to understand and to act" (Dorte Kongerslev)

"... paying respect to the freedom of other people" (Alexander Streit)

"... to be satisfied with who I am" (Suresh Keerthi)

"... making the choices you want" (Susan Leslie)

"... being able to do what I want until I harm others" (Hajo Specht)

"... being able to decide for yourself" (Ellen Grünefeld)

"... the personal liberty to develop yourself" (David Paterson)

"... being able to move and to express yourself" (Frieda Kruidenink)

"... having the chance to find out who I am" (Stefan Nijenkamp)

"... a comfort zone" (Mijnd Huijser)

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What is freedom to you?

Why ask this question in the first place? It might seem a simple question with no relation to your work, but in finding the answer, the mind dwells upon many aspects of life.

With great frankness, eleven professionals in cross-cultural management pondered this penetrating question. I admire them for it, and eventually I had to show the same courage.

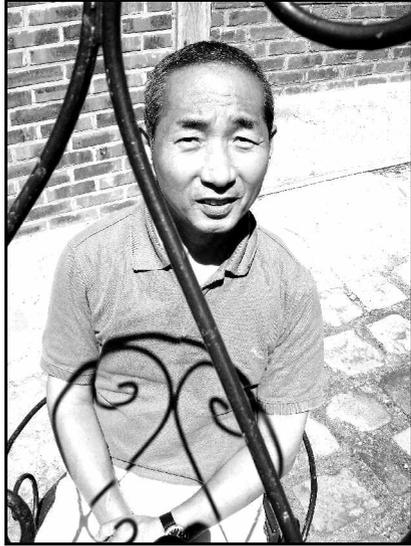
Early in August 2007, we gathered in France. I was to conduct a Master Class on the Model of Freedom, a visual and practical method for understanding cultural behaviour in teams. The participants flew in from all over the world to be trained as a licensee. As the Model of Freedom goes beyond awareness, and engages in exploring the powerful advantage of having cultural diversity in global teams, this was an excellent opportunity to have the proof of the pudding in tasting it. In other words, we tried to find out how the concept of a universal value, freedom, is perceived in different cultures, and how it relates to one's professional life.

Enjoy this kaleidoscope of definitions.

Mijnd Huijser  
founder of CMC – Culture and Management Consulting







Nobuo Nishikawa  
consultant  
based in Japan

“Freedom is a spiritual attitude”

Nobuo Nishikawa was in Germany when the Berlin Wall fell, and experienced the ultimate joy of “people who were suddenly freed from unseen constraints.” He was at that time living in Germany, working for a Japanese company, traveling all over Europe. Later, he was entrusted to shape a joint venture between a German and a Japanese company. Initially

it didn't work. A second attempt was more successful - until the new Japanese CEO changed his mind. Only after the German company merged with another Japanese company, were Nobuo's efforts sealed with success.

Nobuo: "Freedom has something to do with mindset. It is a spiritual attitude. Being free does not mean doing everything you like. In order to be free, you need self-control. Freedom without self-control creates chaos. Some people think that freedom is being free from traditions or free from obligations. The social trend nowadays may be that people tend to do anything they like, even if it is against the law. To me being free means that I can decide something, based on my will. But this does not mean that I do not pay attention to my environment. If I decide not to travel because I have to take care of my father, I might feel restrained, but that is the reality of life. In that case I accept that my freedom is restrained, because it is based on my will. Only with too many limitations I feel stressed. So, freedom probably means some sort of spiritual situation.

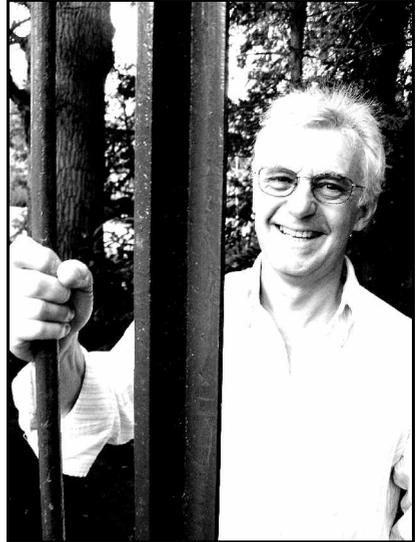
"I have not discussed this topic with colleagues of other nationalities, but I am sure that they have a different feeling of freedom. Some Germans told me that Japanese women have less freedom than Japanese men. Based on my concept of freedom I do not agree. Japanese women in general do not feel constrained. The majority of them are not complaining. They are free to leave their husband and say bye-bye to him.

"In my work I experienced that Germans have fewer constraints in expressing their thoughts. In the beginning I was annoyed by their saying 'nein!' so often. We Japanese have other means to say 'no.' We are more cautious. We are surrounded by constraints. I got used to the German way of communicating, but when my boss came over from Japan it caused many problems. My boss was expressing himself

in a vague way, but the Germans wanted 'ja oder nein'. It became very unpleasant.

"My basic thought is that you need trust in a relationship with a partner, also in business. Trust is the key word in overcoming miscommunications that derive from cultural differences. The Germans and the Japanese have totally different ideas on how to manage a company, but they are unaware of this. In a German company everyone has clear responsibilities. Japanese people, however, tend to work in a group. There is no such thing as a job description in a Japanese organization. Let me put it this way: a German who wants to build a house will start with a clear and complete design, but a Japanese only has a dream and will start constructing this one little room, leaving the rest to develop later on.

"Having been an intermediary between such widely differing cultures, I decided to work as an intercultural consultant. Looking back, I realize that even as a young boy I was intrigued by cultural differences. During my graduate study on management in the United States, when I was thirty years old, I had to make a speech. The subject I chose was 'communication'. Probably I unintentionally realized the differences between the Americans and the Japanese, and wanted to bridge them."



Barry Rogers  
business coach  
based in Scotland

“Freedom is being able to explore new horizons”

Although a salesman at heart, Barry Rogers is now a facilitator and a coach. Still selling. His message, this time, is about personal and organizational development from a team perspective, but, says Barry, “not academic, very practical, very sleeves-rolled-up.” As a young man he joined the army, and later he worked in selling, until in 1995 he became partner in

a global learning and development organization. His need for independence made him start his own company four years ago. His need to be constantly on the move brings him all over Europe, "overseas" as this Englishman in Scotland calls it.

Barry: "When I think of freedom, I think of being able to explore new horizons. To me it is a basic right to do the things I find enjoyable, but I still respect my responsibilities to others and myself. It is not a selfish approach. Unfortunately a lot of us live in suppressing societies. I don't blame people trying to flee the Mugabe regime. When I lived in Africa, I soon discovered that for some people freedom meant something different than for me. I also see it in far more 'civilized' and prosperous societies such as Finland, where I often work. Watching people at a local Friday night dance in a northern town where money was hard-earned, seeing the enjoyment on people's faces from such simple pleasures of freedom – it makes me humble.

"I have never felt repressed or suppressed in any way. Not constrained either, other than by law. But I don't really see that as a constraint. If you want a civilized and organized society, you have obligations and responsibilities. I grew up in the late forties, early fifties. When I finished school my father said, 'you have to learn a trade. You're either going to get an apprenticeship or you're joining the army.' Being in the army, I still felt free, because it was a conscious choice to join. Even though I was primarily a tradesman – I was trained as a fitter - in reality, I was a soldier. Being able to use a weapon is part of the job description. So, I entered the army with an open mind. Nobody forced me. In early 1968, my unit was posted to Belfast and that was not a good place to be. Two weeks later, I received a posting

to Gibraltar. People thought me lucky, but I was quite disappointed to leave this group of guys, who felt strongly for each other.

"My wife, Kate, is Chinese. She puts up with a great deal from me because I have this itch to be constantly on the move. My freedom is my ability, my desire, to go worldwide and do my work. There has got to be a door for me to go through. Kate left China when she was three years old, but she still has these, I believe, deep Chinese traits. She is a very contented person, as she says 'I'm comfortable in my skin.' On our daughter, Natalie, we possibly even imposed freedom. She was born in Germany, lived in Gibraltar and went to school in Zaire, so she had quite a broad spectrum of experience at an early age. When she was sixteen-years-old, my company asked me to move from Yorkshire to Leicester. Natalie did not want to come with us and we couldn't force her. So, we purchased a mobile home near to her grandparents and that was it. We moved away. It was like parting. She has become very independent. She has a partner and two children, but I still see the free spirit in her. It lives on!"



Dorte Kongerslev  
business psychologist  
based in Denmark

“Freedom is the ability to understand and to act”

Dorte Kongerslev grew up in a remote area of Denmark, but was exposed to many different family cultures since there were always foster children in the house. So, she says, it was not only by having lived in Egypt and Nigeria that she acquired a sensitivity to cultural differences. Her childhood taught her “that you don’t know anything about people

before you know their circumstances.” She now works for a travel insurance company, preparing Danish managers and their families for international assignments, and coaching expats coming into Denmark

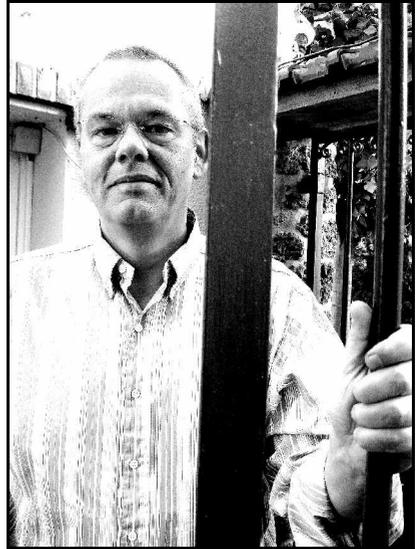
Dorte: “What comes to my mind is that freedom is the ability to understand and to act. Whether it is in my professional or private life, I think that is what I value, and why I basically feel quite free. I know how to get relevant information, also in cross-cultural settings, and I have the courage to act. In a Danish setting I feel obliged to speak up when I don’t agree on ethics, or when things are not up to standards. Sometimes I address such issues to our top management. It is respected and valued. To me it is freedom to have this ability. In a broader sense it is important to have freedom of speech, one of our deepest values in Denmark.

“I am positive that my concept of freedom is culturally biased. I wouldn’t talk about individual freedom if my children were dying of starvation. I’m sure that the value of being free, in my sense, is not the highest-ranking ideal of everybody. I come from a country with a welfare tradition focused on individual freedom, somehow framed in a semi-socialist system. Security is given; it is not something we have to question. In Denmark we have this joke that you practically have to fight to be a social outcast. There will always be someone from the system coming to rescue you. It is a little bit scary to me, because the system reduces personal freedom. In that sense I use to refer to myself as an in-the-closet American.

“Of course these issues are different if you come from a society where you don’t know if you can feed your child the next day. I really question if a discussion on freedom would make sense to a Nigerian. His highest value is security, having somebody who secures his daily

life. A manager or an expat in Nigeria will always be put in the position of a caretaker. In Nigeria I felt very much that I was in the position to give freedom by being the keeper of safety. Not in Egypt, where the feeling of security derives from strong ties to the family. Security would come from within the social sphere. The Egyptian society is more predictable because they have a strong leader. They will not have to face a coup tomorrow, or a revolution. They have more security in their state, within their family and within their social structures.

"I train people, managers, and their families going on international assignments. Cultural awareness is a great deal of what we do. You can't succeed if you are not reflective and not able to see the perspectives of others. It seems so obvious, but to many people it is not. They have never thought about different values, religions or beliefs. I come across people who say, 'Egyptians or Nigerians, they are lying, they are not trustworthy.' I always reply by asking, 'if you were in a similar situation, what would you do?' I myself know for sure that I would be able to steal, or even kill, if I had to for my children. The circumstances that you are in define how you feel freedom.



Alexander Streit  
claim consultant  
based in Germany

“Freedom is paying respect to the freedom of other people”

Alexander Streit is a lawyer and partner in a small consultancy and training business in Essen. He is specialized in claim management, so his job is to try and find long-term solutions for business disputes. Obviously, studying law has influenced

his thinking on freedom: "You have to think about basic human rights and how to define them properly without using a thousands words." Rosa Luxemburg, the Marxist political theorist and revolutionary, came to his rescue with her famous definition: Freedom is always and exclusively the freedom of those who think differently.

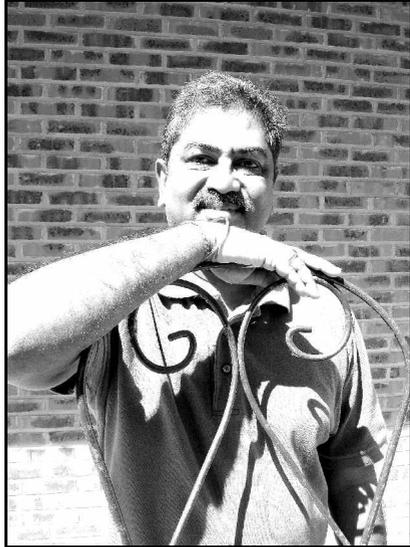
Alexander: "I'm a friend of this quotation of Rosa Luxemburg, that freedom is to pay respect to the freedom of other people to act the way they want. This is the major part of my personal concept of freedom. A lot of blood has flowed in mankind's history, because people were convinced that their way of living is better than those of other people, to force their way of life on other people. Just look at the history of South America, and all the things that were done in the name of the Roman Catholic Church for hundreds of years. That's suppression. I think you should reduce your own freedom, so others can live how they want.

"This perception of freedom has changed during my life. When I was younger I followed the more radical line of a maximum of individual freedom. I had long discussions with my father about such small things as until what time I could stay out at night. My personal freedom was to stay out as long as I wanted. The same kind of discussions that I have now with my children.

"Of course my concept of freedom influences my work, in which I look for fair and sustainable solutions: both parties have to put in something. This does not work irrespective of culture. Take this wonderful win-win model, spreading around for years in Germany. Although the Americans invented this principle, it is hard to negotiate with Americans on a win-win basis, because deep in their heart they are competitors. They try to win and not to win-win.

“Depending on the culture, it is easier or more difficult to find long-term solutions. I found that the Dutch are very money-oriented in solutions. Once I was liquidating a company and I tried to bring in some ‘soft’ aspects, like the good relationships between parties or a history of dealing with people in a fair way. But these aspects don’t count in the Netherlands. In the end, for the Dutch a fair solution depends on the amount of money. I guess it is because they have this long history of being merchants. This is different from a fair solution in Germany, where in labour contracts such privileges as using a laptop or a car from the company are as good as money.

“That fairness can be perceived differently, I also encountered in India. We finished a project, and we needed permits to dismiss several people. It appeared that we had to pay for that. Some Indians told me, there is this big invisible fence running through Indian society, and either you live on the right or the wrong side. Being fired means landing up on the wrong side of the fence. So you have to give this person a certain amount of money to be able to survive until he a new job brings him back to the right side. This was completely new to me, to have this very personal aspect within an agreement with a company.”



Suresh Keerthi  
entrepreneur  
based in Singapore

“Freedom is to be satisfied with who I am”

Suresh Keerthi worked with several multinational corporations for about twenty years. By then he knew that he could survive in any business environment, even as an ethnic minority in the western world. So, he thought, why not give it a shot at being an entrepreneur himself? He set up businesses,

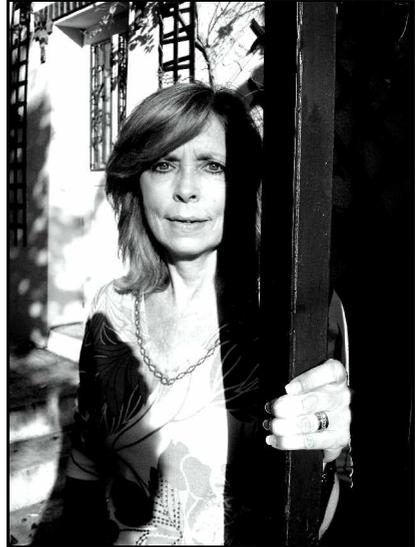
with dwindling speed, from South Africa to Yugoslavia, from Belgium to China. It wasn't all sunshine, considering the impact of the Balkan War, the collapse of the South-African Rand or 9/11. Still, his children call him 'solar powered,' because of the energy he displays from sunrise to sunset.

Suresh: "To me freedom is being part of the globe; I can be part of any society. When I was young, my freedom was constrained by a lot of family expectations. In India parents and children depend heavily on each other. There is a lot of bonding and binding that keeps you tied down. It needs courage and self confidence to get out of it, because the moment you fail, the whole society is going to laugh at you, 'see, I told you, so well educated and still so stupid to fail.' I gained my initial freedom by understanding my roots and gaining self-confidence. Only by knowing who I was, I could go into a strange world. Later, freedom meant providing security for my family. Then it became freedom to do what I wanted in life, to be a global citizen with the ability to travel, live, adapt and succeed in foreign countries. Today freedom has evolved from financial and emotional freedom to selflessness and altruism: I feel the need to help the less privileged around the globe. The driving philosophy in my life is 'it is not what you have that you can take to the grave, it is what you give.' So now, freedom is to be happy and satisfied with who I am and what I have.

"Understanding their Asian roots was what I later wanted to offer my children, who grew up in Europe and Africa. At a certain stage my wife said, 'I have no objection to our youngest son marrying a non-Asian girl, but I don't want him to think that he is a European marrying a European.' We always believed that if you know your roots, during adversities you would be a better man of character. If you don't know who you are, you can't face the world. So we needed to be closer to home, we did a tour of Asia and decided to settle in Singapore - as India would be too much of a culture shock for our

children. They understand now what is Asia, they understand western culture, we have made them independent and, most important, we have allowed them to travel anywhere. I told them, 'go and see the world, because everywhere people are the same'.

"One thing I always hear my kids saying is 'Dad, give us more space!' They mean to say that they are old, smart and educated enough to be trusted by me. I must say that I learned a lot from my kids, although their perspective on freedom is different. They don't want any kind of influence from my wife or me on their thinking. They don't want us to force our point of view on them. They are modernized in the sense that they value their individual freedom, but they still maintain that Asian element of respect. They avoid controversial deliberations or discussions. They let me speak and hear me out, but whether they listen to me, that is a different issue."



Susan Leslie  
training manager  
based in the US

“Freedom is making the choices you want”

Susan Leslie is a Learning & Development business partner at an American industrial company with globally some 15,000 employees. With counterparts in Germany and China, and her manager residing in the UK, there are constant reminders of differences in management and communication. In a recent meeting with the global management team, to discuss the

challenges they encountered, “we realized that we had to raise the bar, and offer tools and solutions for our management teams to help them manage in a global environment.” She both organizes the training programs and executes training.

Susan: “Freedom is the ability to do what you feel is important for the needs of the people around you. Freedom means that you can make the choices you want, while considering the needs of the greater whole. As an American, I have always felt very free to do the things that I felt were best for myself, my family and my company, but I have never sat down and really thought about it. I know that my idea of freedom changed substantially on September 11, 2001. It was a defining moment of truth to realize that I was no longer free to travel, to experience different cultures and to recognize that as an American my freedom had been challenged.

“Growing up in the US, the question of freedom was rarely raised as a topic of conversation; it was a given. Even as a sixteen-year-old, I felt free. Of course I had to abide by time constraints and such, but my parents let me free to make my own choices. Later in life I felt less free, mainly because of the work constraints. In an American business culture, employees can easily feel that their freedom is limited by business or management requirements: they give the parameters for what they want to accomplish and you have to attain those for them. Luckily, my present organization is very open, ‘the sky is the limit,’ and much more free than what I have experienced elsewhere.

“My profession has allowed me to move between many different types of industries. Because of that experience people have often advised me to become an independent consultant. I tried it for a while, but I always felt quite tense; where was the next job coming from, how would I gather more business. That was not freedom to me. Not knowing whether I would have an assignment next week

made me feel quite constrained. It showed me my need for more security in order to feel free.

“From a family perspective, freedom has been an integral part of my children’s lives. As a stepmother for the past eight years, it has been one of the best experiences in my life. While it may appear to take away some of your freedom, it also gives you newfound freedom. You think about your behavior a lot more, you are more cautious of what you say or do in order to be respected as a mother, and you see the freedom that your children have taken on and it is extremely rewarding. It has been a joy, because I think the children and I have grown a lot more together. I know that I have definitely learned more from them than the other way around, which is a great thing!”



Hajo Specht  
coach and trainer  
based in France

“Freedom is being able to do what I want until I harm others”

Hajo Specht is a German who is very satisfied to have ended up in France seven years ago. He is there to stay, with the full consent of his wife and his two children. In Germany, he worked as an HR-director for a French multinational. Later

he worked for an American company with European headquarters in Lyon. When his job became superfluous, he decided to leave the corporate world and started his own consultancy.

Hajo: "Freedom is being able to do what I want. Until I harm the interests of others in a major way. I want to have the freedom to go where I want. Frontiers, set by the culture of the country where I live, are acceptable as long as I am able to leave the place. I do not mind, for example, if they only permit short hair, provided that I can step out of the system. Otherwise I would feel restrained and would feel compelled to do something.

"My parents are farmers. I grew up in the North of Germany, in an environment with many obligations. For the first part of my life I accepted those obligations – they were partly set on me and partly I set them on myself. However, the older I got, the more I discovered that I had neglected many needs. I permitted myself more personal freedom. And I enjoyed it. Later, when I lost my job, I even went to the extent that I took the freedom to change profession.

"Working for an American company gave me, especially in the beginning, quite some stress. I was not able to follow with the process, and prepare the actions I was asked to do. It was stimulating, but it also brought a lot of tension. I enjoyed the responsibility, I felt important and I was successful, but I paid a high price: I started feeling insecure because I often would have needed more time for preparation. In other words, I neglected my needs again. It had a lot to do with the freedom I allowed myself. Freedom is mainly self-created. As an individual, I have many possibilities to do what I want. The pressure I felt was self-inflicted. I was never obliged to do things. I did them, because I was interested. It was much in line with what I wanted. However, at a certain point I did not want to be part of a big

system any longer. If I may paraphrase transactional analysis, the theory of personality that uses the Parent-Adult-Child-model to understand how people function and express themselves in their behaviour, my impression was that I was more in the Child phase and the company was my Parent. Today I want to be an Adult, and have that sort of relationship with a company. So now I have my own business, I am free to choose what I focus on, what I want to offer. Of course, the challenge is to find clients, but I think that if I focus, the clients will come.

“The only real constraints I feel are the needs of the people in my close environment, my children and my wife. I teach my children the same concept of freedom that I have: in expressing their personal freedom they have to take care of their environment. They have to be aware of where they might harm others. I tell them not to be shy to check with other people if they go too far.”



Ellen Grünefeld  
manager of a training and consultancy firm  
based in the Netherlands

“Freedom is being able to decide for yourself”

Ellen Grünefeld combines the management of her own small firm with interim-management. Currently she has been called in by a municipality to solve the problems in a department with employees from six different cultures. “Often you see these intercultural teams disintegrate because of wrong mutual perceptions. What is perceived as good-fellowship by one

culture can be interpreted as nepotism by another culture.” Her background is in Human Resources, but through various jobs she has gradually specialized in intercultural communication.

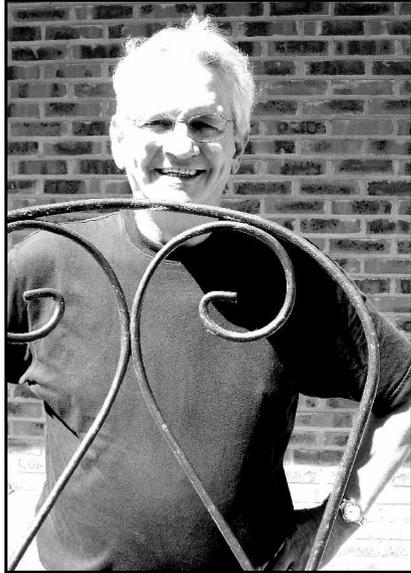
Ellen: “Freedom to me is independence, is being able to decide for yourself. I feel blessed to be born in the Netherlands, where, safeguarded by an intricate social system, you can take a lot of risks. What I like about my profession is that I come across people from many different cultural backgrounds, which makes me even more aware of my freedom. In my opinion, one mostly experiences freedom the moment it is curbed. I have been married to an Egyptian, who suddenly forbade me to do certain things simply because I was his wife. It was something that had never occurred to me, and within eight months our marriage was dissolved. Sometimes you don’t even know that you have certain privileges until someone tries to deprive you of them. Freedom is not something I will easily let go of. Freedom is to be defended. Obviously, I was born an individualist.

“I have traveled all over the world, and I have no trouble adjusting in countries where I am less free than in the Netherlands. As long as there is no suppression, it’s fine with me. People feel comfortable in their own culture. If it is their own choice, that’s alright. In many Arab countries, as a woman I may feel very restricted, but I have no problem adjusting. Well, as a matter of fact, you better adjust, because you don’t want to find yourself constantly fleeing from flocks of men. What I find very hard to adjust to, are Asian cultures in which you are not supposed to express your thoughts or feelings, not even in body language. That is not my strong point. I feel more at ease in African and Latin-American cultures.

“I am aware that my concept of freedom is culturally biased. Having worked in asylum centers in the Netherlands, I gradually noticed that

freedom is not self-evident. Being confronted with people who fled from suppression, sometimes even suffered physically, I realized how privileged I am. The Dutch love complaining - it is their favourite pastime - but we have greatly managed to create freedom. The problem, though, is that the Dutch cannot refrain from pointing out to people from other cultures that they restrict themselves. The Dutch don't hesitate to give air to their opinion that they don't appreciate those cultures, whereas the people they address feel very comfortable in their culture.

"I have again married a Muslim. My husband is from Togo. We have a son of nine years old. We try to raise him with the idea that he is responsible for his own life, that he is free to make his own choices as long as he respects others. That is where we draw the line: he should always respect other people and should not give offense to others."



David Paterson  
management consultant  
based in the UK

“Freedom is the personal liberty to develop yourself”

Working in marketing and sales for British Airways for over twenty years brought David Paterson to every continent except South America. It aroused his interest in intercultural communication, further fueled by being in the management

team of a major Arab airline, right after the Gulf War in 1992. That was, as the British understatement goes, "quite different." After starting his own consultancy, he took the time to get a Master's degree in intercultural communication, which took him back to the Middle East for his research: "I'm particularly interested in what makes Arab managers tick."

David: "Freedom is the personal liberty to develop yourself and your interests, if you choose to do so. Of course there is no freedom without responsibility - there is a difference between liberty and libertarianism. I am very fortunate to have the freedom to pursue professional interests that are also personal interests. That is a gift. I am doing what I want; I am not just doing it for the money. My real thrill is making other people think 'Aha, that's why!!!' The 'Aha-moment,' when the light bulb goes on, that is very satisfying.

"I grew up as a Scottish Presbyterian, a culture with an enormous emphasis on personal responsibility: stand on your own two feet, you are what you make of yourself, self-determination. You can easily go through life with that idea in Scotland, but not in every other country. My first deep exposure to other cultures was when I moved to London at the age of 19, a city that even in that time was much more multicultural than the rest of Britain. I shared a flat with Indians, Jamaicans, people from everywhere, and started questioning my own ideas.

"Later, working in the Gulf, I became very conscious of different conceptions of freedom. Arab societies are group oriented and individual freedom is much more circumscribed. It has far more limits to it. Two of the very few words I know in Arab are 'halal' and 'haram,' permitted and forbidden. It originates in religion, but has become a very strong cultural tradition of good or bad. This desire

for right and wrong, for absolutes, brings an unresolved tension in Arab societies about freedom. Apart from a certain fear for the unknown, what causes them to do that is a genuine fear of losing their history, to be overwhelmed by what they see as not necessarily positive aspects of Western culture.

“Working in the Gulf, you simply cannot apply European conceptions of personal liberty. For example, you cannot ask ‘why don’t we have a more participative management style?’ All you do is worry them, you scare them. They have the expectation that someone will tell them what to do. Not because they are stupid, but it is their cultural expectation. If a manager does not know all the answers himself, then why is he the boss? Others do not impose the restrictions in personal freedom on them. They themselves think like that. It is their preference. A lot of Arab people value as much the cultural restraints on personal freedom as personal freedom itself. Restraints have a value too.”



Frieda Kruiderink  
relocation manager  
based in the Netherlands

“Freedom is being able to move and to express yourself”

For thirty years she had a hectic life, traveling all over Africa and the Middle East as a marketing and saleswoman for a Japanese global multimedia company. When her company dissolved the Africa/Middle East division three years ago, she started working for the Human Resources department of the

European headquarters, supporting mainly Japanese expats who come to live in the Netherlands. "I am a kind of Mother Superior to them and their families." She conceives her job, coaching and training, as trying to be a bridge between East and West.

Frieda: "Freedom is being able to move and to express yourself. Of course I know that there are boundaries. Boundaries can appear in social behavior, in responsibilities in your job, in obligations, for example, towards my mother who is 94 years old and who needs to be taken care of. Freedom is restrained by what is socially acceptable. But I have a strong sense of freedom. I don't like to be told what I should or cannot do. Having targets in my work, however, does not feel as constraining my freedom. That has been more of a challenge, working my way through difficult countries with revolutions, earthquakes and heavy restrictions on women, like Iran or Kuwait. I like finding solutions.

"I have encountered many cultures where freedom is restrained, especially for women. A couple of years ago I had a shocking experience in Iran. I had an appointment with a saleswoman, whom I had known for a long time. But when she entered the room I did not recognize, because she was now wearing a chador. Confrontations with such restrictions on women make me appreciate very much the freedom we have in the Netherlands to express our views and to go wherever we want.

"I think I am quite good in getting along with people from different cultures, in trying to find out what motivates them, but I really have problems identifying with women who voluntarily become orthodox Muslim, Jew or Christian. If covering your body from head till toe is freedom, I consider that a pathetic way of feeling free.

"Of course, working with Japanese has confronted me with an different perception of freedom. For a Japanese, the company comes first, and the family comes second. Even if they wish, they cannot change that because they feel such a strong obligation to give priority to their job. The wives of Japanese expats in the Netherlands often have a hard time. They miss their relatives, their husbands work late, and they are all alone. But they don't want to bother their husbands with their problems. And as they are not allowed to work here, they feel very restricted. In a sense they are less free in the Netherlands than they would be in their home country. But that is not the way they express themselves. They speak about feeling safe or unsafe.

"I was raised in a quite protected environment, as an only child. But I have always felt free to think or do what I wanted. The reason why my marriage failed was that my ex-husband told me to quit my job as a stewardess. I obeyed! That would not happen to me anymore. I have grown wiser. In my work I have also been confronted with restrictions, for example when my division was dissolved. I really felt exasperated. But I did not want to quit, so I kind of shaped my own new job within the company."



Stefan Nijenkamp  
trainer and consultant  
based in the Netherlands

“Freedom is having the chance to find out who I am”

As a seven-year-old Roman Catholic boy in a tiny Dutch village, Stefan Nijenkamp dreamt of “helping poor people.” Almost thirty years later he finds himself to be a partner in a young company that supports organizations in managing

cultural diversity. In the intermediate years he took some detours. He traveled in Africa, studied documentation, was the pivot in asylum centers in the Netherlands, and worked in recruitment in China. Having his own company gives him neither a feeling of freedom, nor of worries. "I just didn't choose the easy way."

Stefan: "Ten months ago I became a father. It is only now that I am aware of the freedom I've always been allowed by my own parents. They never traveled any further than some twenty kilometres from their village. Nevertheless, they allowed me to go to Africa as a young boy. They never objected to my marrying a Chinese wife. They always let me free in my choices. Being born in a free country is not essential to me. More important is to have had the chance to find out who I am, to make mistakes, to deviate, to define my own role in life. Now that I am a father myself, I sometimes reflect on the life I want to offer our son.

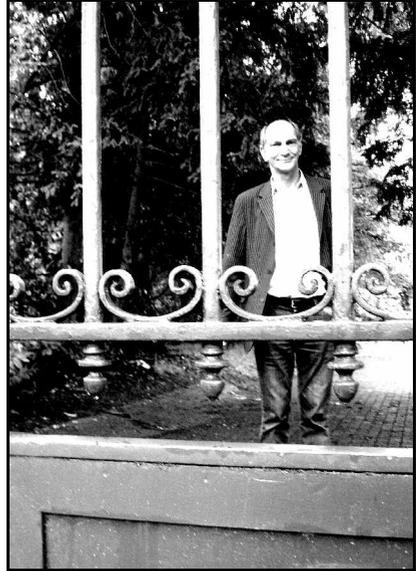
"In China, where we have lived for a year and a half, freedom means security. For them the Western freedom stands for social chaos. The Chinese concept of freedom leads to social order, to a safe society with imposed harmony. It is not about being able to do what you want, but about having someone to take care of you. That 'someone' can also be the Communist Party, or the company you work for.

"Between my wife and me, freedom is not an issue we talk about. But the older our child gets, the more I expect we will have discussions about it. Recently she used the analogy of the camel: a child should be soaked with knowledge as a resource for future years. That does not exactly comply with my view, in which a child should be able to play and discover its possibilities - much like the way I grew up. I do think it is an essential part of freedom to provide your child with a lot of

knowledge, but rather by stimulating its curiosity and allowing it to discover the world in its own way.

“When I worked in asylum centers, which in the Netherlands put up hundreds of people, I got acquainted with many different backgrounds. I discovered that refugees or asylum seekers are not people to be pitied. They represent strength and potency. Most of them are young men, who chose not to become a rebel, not to take up their weapons, not to stay with their family, not to flee to a neighboring country. No, they decided to come to Europe, which is essentially their free choice. What was not their free choice was being condemned to an idle life in a former army base or a trailer in the Netherlands. That does not represent a potent life; that is more like being imprisoned. The Dutch system makes them sleep their blooming life away, because they are not allowed to work.

“Dutch organizations have a lot of trouble in integrating cultural minorities. They are willing to hire them, but they are always looking for a copy of themselves or of their former employee. Whereas society is changing rapidly, they themselves remain the same. So we both train the employer and the employee to be able to work together.”



Mijnd Huijser  
cross-cultural management consultant  
based in the Netherlands

## “Freedom is a comfort zone”

It was only after extensive traveling, studying philosophy and anthropology, and working in a wide range of jobs, that Mijnd Huijser fixed his mind on a subject that would keep him busy ever since: cross-cultural management. “Only too often global teams stumble on misunderstandings that turn out fatal for the project, or even for the company.” In fifteen

years of training intercultural teams, he developed the Model of Freedom, a model that empowers professionals to take advantage of cultural differences, instead of stumbling over them. He conducts Masters Classes on the model.

Mijnd: "Freedom to me is a comfort zone. To feel good, you want neither too much freedom, nor too little. Too little freedom implies that you have to overcome obstacles. But with too much freedom you get lost in chaos and anarchy. Being in my comfort zone means that I willingly accept the limits to my freedom. I believe that one's cultural environment fosters most limitations. Values, and thus behaviors, feel 'normal'; your norms guide your life. You don't feel constrained, though others might think you are.

"What struck me in the previous interviews is that, although they are unique personal stories, they often strongly correlate with the cultural environment of the interviewees. It is easy to relate their statements to the Model of Freedom. Take the three Anglo-Saxons. In their different definitions of freedom, they all emphasize action, freedom of movement, the right to take decisions. They have, what I call in the Model, an action-orientation. If you compare the German interviewees with the Anglo-Saxons, you find that the former value principles and thorough preparations, whereas the latter value actions more than theories. The Germans have a task-orientation in the Model, but differ from other Northern-Europeans as a group, in the sense that Germans appreciate a higher degree of formality and discipline. For the Dutch, like for all 'Nordics', what counts is being independent. Although they live in a society with strong internal social control and with government regulations that meddle deeply in citizen's lives, they want to feel independent, to be free to decide for themselves. Like the Dutch and the Germans, the Danish are task-oriented. 'Freedom is the ability to understand and to act,' is what the Danish participant said. It is typical for these cultures to apply this

for self-actualisation; most social duties are outsourced to institutions, at the detriment of high taxes. The Japanese participant stressed that he accepts limitations to freedom, because it is based on his will. He is complacent with fulfilling his obligation, for example as a caring son, because it is a joy to do the right thing in the right way. In Asia this is an often-felt kind of freedom, and in my Model it corresponds with the role-orientation. The other Asian in the Master Class, originating from India, is so much of an entrepreneur that he is quite action-oriented in his professional life. Nevertheless he remains very much an Indian, whose highly educated and well-travelled children ask him to give them some space. Freedom is a gift, transmitted to you. You receive freedom from an ascribed authority. You don't achieve it. That corresponds with the process-orientation in the Model of Freedom.

"Your cultural origins do betray you, as well as the cultural influences you were exposed to. I now discover that my feeling of freedom is much closer to the Asian definition than the ones found generally in Western countries. My lifestyle may be profoundly Dutch, but I think of freedom as a gift. A gift that I defend in my social life, that I need to express in my professional life and that I am happy to transmit to my children."





