

Let Freedom Ring?

Do you really still have First Amendment rights and will the courts uphold them? Can you peacefully demonstrate without the fear of being beaten by police even though you are unarmed?

by Roxanne Acquistapace

On July 4th I woke up in military-occupied Santa Cruz. I innocently made myself a cup of coffee and walked down to Twin Lakes Beach before 8 a.m. Just sipping and cruising and enjoying the crisp, fresh air, I thought I would visit the beach before the hordes of tourists and locals descended on it. I was in for a big surprise!

As I came into view of the beach, I saw that it was blocked off as far as I could see by hideous, day-glo orange, plastic fencing. There were rangers and harbor employees everywhere blocking off free access. There were only a few points where the public could enter after submitting to a search. Although I asked, those in charge seemed unclear as to whether alcohol, drugs, fireworks, sharp objects, or terrorist bombs were the reason for the search. They did not want to answer my questions.

I was very down and drove to work thinking that just having fun was not possible anymore in the relaxed ways I had known in the past. Uniformed police with guns and batons swinging from their belts patrol the main beach all summer long, rifling in coolers and watching everyone. Their shadows block your sun ominously as they pass. Even the lifeguards are armed.

The public is constantly watched in the downtown area by city employees euphemistically called "downtown hosts," who really operate as cop wannabes. The police are there all day in full force to roust out those who rest on benches too long or sit on the cement planters. Only

Master Card are spared.

There are those who have a stake in making us fear each other. It is job security disguised as being for our own good, for our safety. I passed a church billboard that had the words in all capital letters: "LET FREEDOM RING." I maintain that it should have said: "LET WHAT LITTLE IS LEFT OF YOUR FREEDOM RING."

These are my questions to all those who think everything is still so great.

Can you sleep out under the stars anywhere if you are not bothering anyone, just because the night is beautiful, or because you have nowhere else to sleep?

Can you speak your mind at public City Council meetings or will you be hauled out, even arrested, by police if what you say irritates public officials? Do you really still have First Amendment rights, and will the courts uphold them? Can you peacefully demonstrate without the fear of being beaten by police even though you are unarmed?

Can you draw on a public sidewalk with the abandonment of a child in washable chalk or blow bubbles for the sheer joy of it in your downtown area? Are there people in jail for this?

Can you really homeschool your children without a degree of fear? Can you leave your children unvaccinated without it being used against you by Child Protective Services in court as proof of medical neglect, even though it is not against the law? Are you really innocent until proven guilty?

Can your children be removed from



"Chalk not lest you be arrested." Robert Norse and Randy Sue Winchell in downtown Santa Cruz. Activists have been arrested for writing in chalk on sidewalks, and hassled by the police for giving flowers for donations. Becky Johnson photo

mandatory court order and without your knowledge if your child says something that may be misinterpreted by a teacher (mandated reporter)? Can you be kept from seeing your children more than an hour a week for months to years until the misunderstanding is straightened out (usually only done by a high-priced lawyer)?

Can you park in front of your own house without being forced to buy a permit for space that was once free and paid for by your property taxes? Can you leave your car downtown overnight if you've had one too many drinks and decide to take a cab home?

Can you have beach fires on a starry summer night, or is that simple pleasure soon on its way out? Can you get four

death, but 22 years for setting three new SUVs on fire with no loss of life?

Some people will smugly think to themselves, "I don't want to do any of those things, so what do I care?" But more and more people have become uneasy with the passage of the Patriot Act and the advent of Homeland Security. Every time we allow rights to be taken away from certain segments of society, we are letting them be stolen from ourselves.

It has become increasingly clear that all and sundry may be held on a whim and a rumor without benefit of counsel or knowledge of family. You can just disappear! Like the "disappeared ones" in communist, fascist, and dictator-run countries.

Just like in America. *Let freedom ring?*