

160110 Spiritual Defiance: Building the Beloved Community.

Originally I was going to preach on how we pay attention to and respond to the violence that is too much a part of life here in Syracuse. However, it is amazing how teeny tiny germs can reek havoc with one's plans and dreams. And so after 10 days or so of being really really sick I am bringing back a sermon I preached earlier one that focuses on how we can resist.

We are stronger together than we are alone.

I use as my inspiration this morning a book written by Robin Meyers, *Spiritual Defiance: Building a Beloved Community of Resistance*. (all references to his book in this sermon are from the Kindle edition) In it he defines "resistance" as "a form of direct or indirect action opposing anything in the dominant culture that brings death and indignity to any member of the human family, or to creation itself."

As Unitarian Universalists I would bet that many of us could get behind that. We affirm the dignity of each and every person so yes lets resist whatever brings death and indignity to any member of the human family or to creation.

But wait a real resistance that can be a catalyst for transformation in society is not simply some kind of knee jerk reaction or pushback. We who are liberal minded do not change the conservative minded by posting articles from democracy now on Facebook and the conservatives among us will not change the liberals by posting links to Fox News. Resistance cannot be simply making a really loud noise. If anything the louder we are the more chaos there is and the less likely there is to be any real, change, or transformation.

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Actually let me amend that a bit. Resistance could be just a big noise. a huge argument, a loud gong signifying nothing but looking like resistance. Perhaps it is a faux resistance. Central to Meyers definition is the word action. And I think Meyers means action with power. I can stand in my kitchen and raise my voice to my children and wave my arms and make myself look mean - and in that I might feel like I am resisting their attempts to not clean up after themselves. But it might be way more effective for me to resist their natural inclination to messiness by quietly saying - the consequence to not cleaning up after dinner is that you will lose your phone. No yelling is necessary in that instance.

And key to all of this is that resistance does not transform unless you or I or we are undone first.

"In the church, as in life itself, the rule of entropy still applies. Things fall apart before they are put back together. Disorientation precedes reorientation" (Myers location 322). Our Facilities team knows this all too well. Folks look back at the troubled times of this congregation and wonder how did we let ourselves argue like that - how could we have been so - and there any number of negative judgmental words that folks will use to end that sentence. But there is another way to look at those troubled times. They were the time that this congregation was being undone. Some might describe it as pruning the plant so healthier growth can happen and it is that in a sense. But it was also a time of undoing, a disorientation.

Perhaps first UU has already been undone or maybe this is a process that repeats and is not a once and for all kind of event. Maybe the troubles were one of the undoings; maybe we are in a process of reorienting. What this all points to is that change is hard.

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Rev. Gretchen Haley puts it this way: (all references to Rev Haley are from <https://revgretchenhaley.wordpress.com/2016/01/04/beloved-community-of-resistance/>)

“Critical to Myers definition of resistance is the word *action*. Resistance for our purposes is not ideological, analytical, or theoretical. It’s embodied in action that either directly or indirectly opposes those things that bring death or indignity. Spiritually grounded resistance has the goal of creating or facilitating transformation.”

Myers puts forth that there are three things that get in the way of this transformation, ego, orthodoxy and empire.

What if we were to see faith as resistance to ego.

Here is where I think we UUs fall short a lot. We can get so caught up in having the right answer that we get stuck. I think I have told this story before but I have a colleague who served in a congregation on the West Coast. A place that you would expect to be on front edges of environmental causes. Her congregation spent two years trying to develop a plan on how to compost at their church. They argued containers, methods, worms, volunteers, location, policy, practices. In the end they never did, at least while she was there, start to compost their compostable waste. An opportunity was lost because individual folks in the congregation got stuck on making sure that their view, which of course they each thought was the best or right view, was the one that won out. Sometimes to create change we need to get our egos out of the

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way.

For a group of people as tolerant as we are, and we are tolerant, we get our backs up way more often than you would think. We have a strong intellectual history, a kind of DNA that is super comfortable being smart and right.

My answer might be THE answer but then again it might also simply be one of the answers. THE answer might be the interweaving of all of the answers.

"When it comes to the Beloved Community, the ego must give way to something more powerful than image or ambition." Or even reassurance that all is OK because MY plan is being followed. (**Spiritual Defiance: Building a Beloved Community of Resistance** location 249)

Meyers also speaks to faith as resistance to orthodoxy - we think we have this one down - we are the heretics after all aren't we?

Robin Meyers writes of our Christian ancestors but it could just as well be about us UUs

"Our formative story is not a tale of personal piety, but of daring and sometimes deadly dissent. Resistance is in our DNA. The spirit is not just a "balm in Gilead." It's a troublemaker - Damascus, Denmark, and Denver; in Selma, South Africa, and Sarajevo; in Phillipi, Palestine, and Peoria. The spirit will not leave us alone. It awakens us to the simple but unbearable fact that the world as it is cannot possibly be the world that [the sacred] intended. (location 1393)

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We have been working on civil rights and equality for hundreds of years our universalist and unitarian forbears were on the forefront of abolition and women's rights, of labor rights; we are on the forefront on LGBTQ issues and immigration rights, on environmental issues. we are known for this. And even with decade after decade of work and passion we are a denomination that is 88% white. As a denomination we are taking a visible stand supporting Black Lives Matters but We are failing miserably at actually being a diverse denomination in our pews, at our potlucks, during committee meetings. We may grumble about conservative theologies but their actions speak loudly. Seventh Day Adventists and Muslims top the list as the most ethnically diverse (<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/07/27/the-most-and-least-racially-diverse-u-s-religious-groups/>)

We mean well, of course. We sing our hearts out. [we listen to sermons, some of us even] pray long prayers. But none of it can finally compensate for the fact that as a change agent, we have all but disappeared. Instead of leaven, we are like chameleons... absorbed into the very dominant culture we are called to critique and resist. (**Spiritual Defiance: Building a Beloved Community of Resistance** location 109)

It is possible that we have an orthodoxy that we are unwilling to look at. An orthodoxy that prevents us from being the Beloved Community with a welcome that transforms individuals and the world.

It is not that we need to throw out all the old ways - but let us be aware of why we do something and what its impact is. If we resist orthodoxy we will be more welcoming

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and open, not just welcoming to folks who act like they are well educated euro-centric white folks.

And what about faith as resistance to empire?

Our roots are in the American Christian church, especially the heretical part of that church. We are good at telling society how it must transform but we are sometimes a bit resistant to looking at how we must transform our own communities.

We are part of an empire the United States of America. We, as long as we choose to continue living here in this country and receiving the benefits from that, participate in this empire. And it is easy to get seduced by it. I could do a whole sermon on political resistance but that is not what I am trying to get at.

We are a heretical people with a prophetic voice and we must not lose it.

Here are the ways that we can resist empire:

"When you are standing in line in the grocery store and you see a young black man who is sacking your groceries and avoiding your gaze, then wait until he meets it and say, 'Thank you, sir.'"

You could put in a garden so you won't forget where food really comes from.

Raise nonviolent children," (location 1866)

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Eat dinner with your family, if you live alone find ways to connect face to face with other people (seriously this is coming from your pastor who loves social media)

"Mute the soundtrack of the empire and its incessant babble and take a walk. Read more poetry. Figure out how to be alone with yourself and not go to the bar looking for a hookup. We really are what we do when no one is looking.

remember the gospel truth: not a single one of us gets out of this life alive, all families are dysfunctional, and either all of us matter or none of us do. (location 1830)

It is not that planting a garden will break the military empire of our world, I am not that idealistic. But if I take time and make a life that does not as a default follow the empire's status quo I am way more likely to be prepared and ready to resist from a place of spiritual depth than I would otherwise.

All of this resistance to ego, orthodoxy, empire helps to build beloved community and it is beloved community that is so, so countercultural. I was talking with someone the other day about the story of John Murray, the minister credited with bringing Universalism to this continent. As the story goes when he landed in America Thomas Potter said to him - "I am so glad you have come here - I have been waiting for you."

The person I was speaking with said that sentence had such impact on them. What would it be like if we each had a place, or a person that lit up when we came in the room. Or, what if we each said to ourselves - I am so glad I am here I have been waiting for me. What if we said that to each other as we greeted one another.

"So that as we invite someone into membership in our church, and as we each feel

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moved by this faith, we might imagine we are being recruited into a great counter-cultural resistance of love, a joyful effort that seeks in small and big ways to offer our lives as witness to and keepers of the great story of human connection, goodness, beauty, equality and love. “ (Rev Gretchen Haley)

I am so firmly convinced that as we create that community here a place where we light up when we each come in the room, a place of extravagant welcome, a place where we love the hell out of the world, we will transform each other, and we will welcome the larger community into this place and transform it, and we will take that extravagant welcome out into the world and be part of that transformation. That is what spiritual defiance can do. And in fact this must be our response to the violence that exists in this world.

In a world without end may this be so.