

The Spirituality of Resistance

By Janelle Gray

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Alright, to get this party started, I think I should channel Virginia Woolf, who said: “Whenever you see a board up with “Trespassers will be prosecuted,” trespass at once.”

When Bill told me the theme for April was Resistance, well—I mean, you all have a pretty good sense of who I am—how could I resist? And, if I was able to give a talk about meditation, for crying out loud, then Resistance should be a piece of cake. Right up my alley. You might even say...Simply Irresistible. Okay, I'll stop.

We Americans love a good resistance story. It's baked into our national identity. Our country came into existence as an act of resistance to colonization. Our Constitution was written as a statement of resistance to monarchy, and as a support of the radical notion that all men are created equal, and entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Of course, I'm simplifying and leaving out the harm the creation of the United States did to native populations, the sexism in the founding documents, and the fact that many of the signers of the Declaration of Independence were slave holders. But still, the Boston Tea Party? Tom Revere's midnight ride? Washington crossing the Delaware? These are thrilling scenes of resistance from our nation's history.

We are also highly entertained by stories that feature seemingly impossible, but ultimately successful, acts of resistance. Think Star Wars, where a spunky group of resistance fighters takes down the Death Star—too big to be conquered from the outside, but vulnerable at its core. Or any true story from World War II about the French Underground or other small but important resistance movements, like Schindler and his List. Or in this century, Daryl Davis, the black musician who befriended and ultimately persuaded over 200 Klu Klux Klan members to give up their robes. Now that's a modern metaphor for a Death Star and internal vulnerability...

Resistance, when the cause is just, is inspiring. And inspiration is ultimately spiritual.

We UU's have our own beloved resisters and resistance stories. Unitarianism itself arose from a resistance to the theological idea of the Trinity. We claim as a hero Michael Servetus, a brilliant surgeon and thinker, who was burned at the stake, purportedly, for refusing to change an “a” to “the” — that is, he refused to say “Jesus is The Son of God” instead insisting “Jesus is A Son of God” — although I think his feud with John Calvin was really at the heart of his demise. Nonetheless, we UU's get a thrill

out of this history of heresy, and claim as a point of pride our subsequent hounding throughout Europe and centuries-long exile in Transylvania.

A friend says I've had a front row seat to resistance with all that I've been through on the health front, which is interesting given that one definition of resistance in Webster's New Collegiate dictionary is "The inherent capacity of a living being to resist untoward circumstances (as disease, malnutrition, or toxic agents)". The crux of my resistance has been a refusal to die on the Standard of Care Schedule (which was the same for Stacy). I spoke at length about the spirituality of this journey in my talk on meditation, so I'll simply say, again, that this particular resistance has taught me to value and appreciate life more than I think I otherwise would have, to be alive for my life.

But today I want to share what I consider my foundational resistance story, a tale from my youth which was dramatic and terrifying and has had consequences that have lasted a lifetime. I thought of this immediately when I talked to Bill. I realized right away that I had plenty of lived material to talk about *resistance* itself. But I wondered: how in the heck is resistance spiritual? I've been thinking about that non-stop since I volunteered for this talk, and I've concluded that it is—boy howdy, is it ever—and I think I know why! Hopefully, I'll be able to convey that to you.

When I was a teenager, I got involved in Christian Fundamentalism via the Wesleyan Church (apologies if I've told this story before). One morning, when I was probably 15 years old, I woke up with the absolute certainty that there was no god. Kind of a problem in the circles I ran in!

I was terrified. I felt like I was dangling over the abyss. I felt unmoored. I had no idea what to do. I didn't know anyone who didn't believe in god. A belief in god wasn't something you thought about—everybody just believed; it was the bedrock of everything I knew about life. If I acknowledged how true this thought felt to me, I'd be different from everyone I knew, and I didn't want to be different. So, I suppressed and went overboard in the opposite direction. Some of the more embarrassing steps I took were to become a "Jesus Freak" and carry a Bible everywhere, etc.

This went on for some time. I worked hard to deny how truthfully this resonated in my core. Yet the thought would not go away. Doubts persisted, and grew, and with them came anger. In college, I was exposed, at last, to different thinking, to the joy of questioning deeply, to doubt—which is very closely tied to resistance. I came to love doubt. Eventually, I rejected not only the Wesleyan church, but Christianity itself, and I didn't do it gently or quietly. By then I was very, very angry.

Victor and Phil have been having a back and forth conversation about faith. Victor recently shared this quote by Cornel West: Despair and hope are inseparable. One can never understand what hope is really about unless one wrestles with despair. The same is true with faith. There has to be some serious doubt, otherwise faith becomes merely a dogmatic formula, an orthodoxy, a way of evading the complexity of life, rather than a way of engaging honestly with life.

Makes perfect sense to me. But what I discovered was that my doubts were not welcome in the church I was in. If my doubt could not be addressed, and banished, with a story from the Bible, I was not faithful, and I would go to hell. Yet the doubter in me, the resistor in me saw questioning as highly spiritual. Call it what you will-- resistance, skepticism, doubt-- it all manifests the same way: as the individual being fully present. You're genuinely engaged and considering everything that is being said. It's an act of respect for sure, and maybe even of love. I had come to value the duality of things: faith AND doubt, joy AND pain, etc. But duality is anathema to evangelical-type faiths. You have to have faith alone-- in fact, it is often said that "we are saved by faith alone". This proves your loyalty.

Looking back, I think this all started with another trope that was often uttered at church, a casual admonition to "accept Jesus into your heart".

I didn't get it. It made no sense. Maybe if they'd said accept Jesus into your brain, or your soul. But then I would have struggled with the Jesus thing because I think even then I had the sense that Jesus was simply a man-- an amazing man-- but not god. And if it wasn't that, it would have been something else, because not much of that religion made sense. Still, looking back, it was the beginning of my resistance. Which maybe saved my life, and certainly led me to this Fellowship.

So what does my story, or Star Wars, or the tales of American Independence or World War II resistors or Michael Servetus or Daryl Davis say about the characteristics of resistance?

First, I think resistance starts with a gut-deep, undeniable recognition of a truth. Maybe, like for me, there might at first be paralyzing fear. But that can't remain if this is to become resistance. Eventually, there must be anger, and a specific anger: one that demands action.

In the case of Resistance, anger is a messenger. It is saying SOMETHING IS WRONG. And it leads to examination and evaluation of the situation.

But Resistance, if it is to be Resistance, can't stay in anger. There has to be action. Put another way, Resistance is a big NO in search of a YES, in itself a sort of duality. It results when internal resonance, an internal truth, conflicts with what is going on outside, just like it did with me when I could not believe the unbelievable things that were being preached. But being in search of a YES is also a very important aspect of resistance. Resistance leads to re-evaluation, re-alignment, re-direction. Resistance sees a problem and attempts to make things better.

Well now, doesn't that sound like Unitarian Universalism?! In fact, just a cursory examination shows that resistance is profoundly interwoven with our principles and theology. Justice, equity and compassion in human relations? That doesn't just happen; it takes fighting the status quo. Likewise, the right of conscience in our congregations and in society at large? Simply screams resistance. Our theological principle that truth continues to be revealed? Clearly bound to resistance, since it involves questioning, examining – basically, practicing logic and science and being open to change. Fundamentalism, on the other hand, insists that everything is already known. Not only does this banish doubters and damn questioning, it has had, in regards to the environment, deeply disturbing consequences, leading to a view of the earth as a commodity, one that we should use up because it will soon come to an end, as stated in the book of Revelation.

As the Unitarian Universalist Reverend Douglas Taylor says in a sermon entitled "A Theology of Resistance":

When you joined this congregation you signed up for the resistance. ... We are not called to be respectable among the other religions; we are not called to be palatable or popular or within any proximity of prevailing opinion. We are called upon to be radical, to be a community of resistance, to be the light of the world, the salt of the earth. ... Here we strive to be not only counter cultural but radically transformative of culture as well.

Welcome to the resistance: here we insist that all are welcome, all are inherently worthy and equally filled with human dignity. Here we buck conformity and call each to live as a human being not as a market niche, not as a label, not as an illness, not as a stereotype. Welcome to the resistance. .

And finally, just some last thoughts on our first principle, The Inherent Worth and Dignity of Every Person. Maya loves this principle, and I struggle with it, not just as it relates to other people, but in regards to myself. The low-grade, persistent anger that resulted from my resistance to an unpalatable idea when I was a teenager has often made me feel inherently un-worthy--even though one of my favorite Bible stories is where Jesus gets angry at the commerce happening in the temple, knocks everything galley-west off the tables, then overturns them for good measure. Surely this demonstrates that righteous anger does, in fact, have a place in religious practice?

But whether by upbringing or religious training, I did not know how to handle my anger. And so, I was ashamed. But I'm learning to reframe. If I'm frustrated with an absurd status-quo? I'll work towards finding a better way. If I'm troubled by an annoying situation? I'll try to set boundaries. If I'm upset at the way treatment, or something else, is going? I'll remember why I chose this particular course of action, and the very good reasons for it.

The resistance that began when I was 15 led me, by a long and winding road, to this Fellowship, and that's why, ultimately, Resistance is so profoundly spiritual to me. If I could go back to that girl who had just woken up with a thought in her head that was so dark that it threatened to extinguish her world, what I'd tell her is: you can be spiritual without believing in god. You can celebrate awe and wonder in a house of worship without having to swallow dogma whole. You can believe that Jesus was a god, or that you're a god, or that there aren't any gods at all. You don't have to choose between belonging or lying to yourself. There is a home here in UU for you.

Closing Words, by someone named Janelle Gray...!

What does Resistance do for us personally? Surely it gives us the satisfaction of knowing we're making a difference, however small.

Maybe it gives us courage? I'm not sure. For certain it magnifies the courage we bring to it.

But I think by far the biggest thing Resistance gives us is coherence, a resonance between the inner life of the spirit and our external actions. This alignment can be so deep and profound and compelling that, like Michael Servetus, we might willingly go to the stake rather than live a lie.