

Resistance is Never Futile

Eric Severson

April 9, 2017

If you are a science fiction fan, like me, the phrase “resistance is futile” may be familiar to you. From a 1980s US and Canadian television series and comic book titled “Captain Power and the Soldiers of the Future” to multiple episodes of “Doctor Who” to TV episodes and blockbuster films in the 1990s featuring “Star Trek: The Next Generation,” “resistance is futile” became a popular catchphrase and a call to arms for a generation of Trekkies and other fans around the world.

“Resistance is futile” could be a remark attributed to every real or imaginary villain in human history. But the act of calling resistance futile has never actually stopped people from resisting. We have seen many examples of successful civil resistance since Gandhi’s nonviolent efforts to win India’s independence from British rule, nearly a century ago.

And here we are today. With the Republican sweep of 2016, the latest transfer of political power has laid bare deep-seated fears among our fellow citizens.

The new administration’s proposed agenda was billed as focusing on cleaning up Washington, protecting American workers, and restoring the rule of law. But if you’ve been listening to the news, it’s clear that the agenda’s implementation includes some big steps backward in the areas of climate change, fossil fuels, immigration, health care, public funding for education, military spending, and more. Cabinet appointments and legislative changes seem tailor-made to destroy programs we citizens have come to rely on for generations.

Peter Morales, until recently the Unitarian Universalist Association president, acknowledged in a January letter to ministers that we are entering dangerous times. His expectation that the new administration would unleash human rights abuses at migrants and Muslims appears to be coming true. And in the longer term, he said, other marginalized groups (women, the poor, people of color, transgender people, etc.) will be in danger.” Morales very candidly and soberly advised that we need to prepare, to provide sanctuary, and to resist.

The 19-century social reformer Charles Eliot Norton once said, “In a large sense the moral law prevails in the long run, and man, perhaps, slowly improves, but how ‘blundering, wasteful and horribly cruel’ seems the process.”

How are we called to respond to such a monumental threat posed by corporatist and fundamentalist zealotry, brought to us by such a blundering, wasteful, and cruel process?

First of all, let’s not panic. Let’s put this moment in a larger context.

The election of this president and this rightward shift of our Congressional leaders seems to be part of a periodic worldwide trend, a rising wave of conservatism, which also caused the “BREXIT” crisis in Europe.

This cultural and political pendulum swing toward paranoia, fear, violence, even fascism, has repeated in human history. For centuries and around the world, men and women have defied what they considered illegitimate or immoral authority -- through revolution or by nonviolent reform. And humanity on the whole has survived, even thrived at times -- though not without some suffering and struggle, particularly for the more marginalized among us.

The Rev. Dr. William Barber II and others have noted how some resilient and determined peoples on the margins of society have always faced challenges like these on this continent: American Indians, African Americans, Latinos, other persons of color, LGBTQ folks, and others. The threats we see now are not new, but are the inevitable consequence of human beings muddling their way forward through time.

But many of us did not expect to see anything like this conflict of values in our lifetimes. Am I right?

We religious liberals are proudly tolerant, open-minded, even permissive. We are more accustomed to saying “yes” than saying “no.” The current political situation and its apparent lack of compassion disturbs us, and we progressives are caught up short when values that compel us to act on behalf of all people, values that we hope and believe have become mainstream instead come under attack, and we have to say, “No.” It seems that it may be our turn to speak truth to power. It sucks to be us.

But there is good news! The resistance is forming! Millions of women and men marched in protest in January, reportedly in more than 350 cities on six continents.

And organizations are forming and collaborating to provide strategies, toolkits, and checklists for the most effective ways to join the resistance. Artists are providing poetry, music, dance, and visual arts rich in symbolism that will console and inspire those who are in the struggle. Faith traditions stand ready to sustain their followers in the resistance. Moderate members of Congress, military leaders, intelligence officials, the courts, and international bodies appear to be pushing back, too. So, nearly six months after the election, there are small victories to celebrate.

How do we move forward? Let's begin by looking back. We need not reinvent the wheel.

In every major societal conflict there have been people, movements, organizations born or developed to foster resistance and help us cope with injustice. We can take inspiration from the stories of social reformers of the past: Tubman, Anthony, Thoreau, Gandhi, King, Mandela -- so many before us who engaged the powers and refused to compromise their values or comply with injustice. I have two examples to share from our own history.

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper was a 19th-century African American writer, lecturer, and political activist best known for her poetry and fiction. You might say she was an older Malala Yousafzai of her day.

Harper used her own words, her own voice, to promote abolition, civil rights, women's rights, and temperance. Her writings appeared in newspapers and eventually were published as books. At the time of the Civil War, most of what she earned from her books and speaking tours went to help escaped slaves along the underground railroad. This is when she first made friends with a Unitarian. And when Harper and her daughter settled in Philadelphia, she joined the First Unitarian Church there.

When slavery was abolished, Harper turned her energy to women's rights and suffrage. She worked with Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton to secure votes for women. Beyond writing and lecturing, Harper engaged in social reform locally with black churches near her home. She fed the poor, worked to prevent juvenile delinquency, and taught Sunday school at the Mother Bethel AME church, where she also was a member.

A more prominent of our moral exemplars was 19th-century Unitarian minister Theodore Parker. He is remembered for his sermon “A Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity,” in which he challenged the bounds of Unitarian theology and broke from orthodoxy within our movement.

Parker served in Boston and increasingly preached a prophetic social activism. He was involved in the intersectionality of reform movements of his time -- peace, temperance, education, women’s rights, and prison reform. Midway through his ministry, he, too, focused mostly on abolition. The Fugitive Slave Act required law enforcement and citizens of all states to assist in recovering fugitive slaves. Parker led a movement against that act. He and his followers instead formed the Committee of Vigilance, which helped to hide and protect escaped slaves, even in Parker’s own home.

Harper’s and Parker’s words and deeds endure today as urgent and vital as in their day. At its core, the abolition of slavery was about valuing every human being, treating him or her with compassion and respect -- in our parlance, affirming their inherent worth and dignity. Harper and Parker showed courage in speaking out for humanity. They were willing to risk their own freedom, their own reputation, and their own personal safety.

And hundreds more of our ministers and lay leaders have modeled courage and commitment through the centuries. Unitarian Universalists have been arrested for protesting apartheid, war, genocide, nuclear weapons, the death penalty, police-involved shootings, oil and gas pipelines, immigration policies, as well as for marrying same-sex couples, and much more.

One of the foundational sources of Unitarian Universalism, one of the touchstones of our movement, printed in the front of our gray hymnal, is the “words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.”

Resistance to injustice and oppression is part of our religious identity. Name a social justice issue, and a Unitarian Universalist somewhere has probably been arrested.

So we need not reinvent the wheel, but can look to our forebears for inspiration. What else do we need to know about resistance to move forward?

There are many tactics one might use. These include civil disobedience; disrupting social systems by striking, mass marching, and being arrested en masse to fill jails and tie up courts; and interrupting public ceremonies. And because some people and

institutions respond more quickly when money is involved, another tactic is using economic pressure, letting our money speak for us by divesting, boycotting, or withholding our taxes.

Resistance requires us to build bridges, make connections, form networks between people. It means organizing and mobilizing people. One idea is what Reverend Barber calls “fusion coalitions,” diverse groups grounding their activism by reclaiming moral language and reframing issues in that context.

Resistance means educating and advocating, increasing public awareness of issues and calling attention to dishonest, inhumane or nefarious activities with which we do not agree. This might include crafting public statements of conscience. But we need to look beyond propaganda and focus on actions, particularly those of our elected officials.

Resistance requires learning to be good allies, showing up, taking direction well, and sharing leadership roles. And it means monitoring the emotional, spiritual reservoir that sustains us and provides for our resilience.

There are many ways to be involved.

Now plenty of resistance movements throughout history failed to bring about major change in the world, in Asia, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East, for example. So why would I say that resistance is never futile?

For three reasons. Resistance is never futile because ...

1. It can help us wake up. It can shake us from our ordinary, mundane lives and challenge us to clarify and defend our fundamental values.
2. It can help us feel empowered, not just depressed. Martin Luther King Jr. noted that such engagement can give us new self-respect and resources of strength and courage we did not know we had.
3. By resisting, we can model that courage for future generations and contribute to a story much larger than our own. Michelle Obama, at the Democratic National Convention, pointed out that, “With every word we utter, with every action we take, we know our kids are watching us.”

Clarifying our values, feeling empowered, and modeling courage. These, I believe, are why resistance is never futile.

Alice Walker, in our first reading, pointed to something deeper about being part of a resistance. “To be such a person or to witness anyone at this moment of transcendent presence is to know that what is human is linked, by daring compassion, to what is divine. Whatever the consequences [of trying to change the world], people ... have expressed who they really are, and that ultimately they believe in the love of the world and each other *enough to be that.*”

In other words, we are linked by our compassion to what is divine. And when we engage in activism, we not only express a love of the world and of each other, we become that love, we embody that love. ... And embodying love is spiritual work.

As we look ahead -- as the tweets and posts and headlines wear on us -- we will feel afraid at times, but let us not allow fear to distract us from the work that needs to be done. Other people -- other change agents -- have been here before us, and we are more resilient than we think.

Teresa Youngblood, in our second reading, said: “Though we may have fallen, ... my beautiful, colorful, many-faithed, differently abled, lovers-of-all, polyglot people ... We have found each other in our shining pain, ... and in numbers we huddle not to hide but to strategize; not to blame but to build.”

There are many online resources to help us strategize, better understand the issues and ourselves, and build a successful resistance. I will recommend just one, the website of our denominational office: uua.org. There you will find a Declaration of Conscience, which I encourage you to read and to sign. On the “Social Justice” page, you can find out what other congregations are doing; a host of materials for study, reflection and action; and links to other organizations such as the UU Service Committee, UU College for Social Justice, Standing on the Side of Love, and Church of the Larger Fellowship.

In the days ahead, we will have opportunities to add our own links in the long chain of those fighting for justice. It might be a hard road and a heavy load, but let us walk and bear it together, confident that resistance is never futile.

May we have the courage of Malala Yousafzai, Frances Harper, and Theodore Parker, to speak and act on our convictions. May we build a new way, starting with love and working to be free of hate and greed and jealousy. May the fire of commitment set our minds and souls ablaze. And may we, by our courageous choice, build a deeper justice, that our promise may find fulfillment.

Blessed be and amen.

Online Resources for the Resistance

- [womensmarch.com](https://www.womensmarch.com), which I expect will remain active for some time.
- the moral agenda of Reverend Barber's group, Repairers of the Breach, at breachrepairers.org.
- *Indivisible: A Practical Guide for Resisting the Trump Agenda*, produced by former congressional staff members, at indivisibleguide.com.
- the 12-point resistance plan by former U.S. labor secretary Robert Reich, at robertreich.org.
- a wealth of information on civil and human rights by a coalition called The Leadership Conference, at civilrights.org.
- the news and media channel occupy.com, amplifying the voices of the 99 percent.
- two organizations associated with UU activist Tim Dechristopher, peacefuluprising.org and climatedisobedience.org.
- resources on a host of issues related to ensuring rights for all and eliminating discrimination, at naacp.org.
- The Natural Resources Defense Council, defending against environmental assaults, at nrdc.org.

Online Resources for the Resistance

- [womensmarch.com](https://www.womensmarch.com), which I expect will remain active for some time.
- the moral agenda of Reverend Barber's group, Repairers of the Breach, at breachrepairers.org.
- *Indivisible: A Practical Guide for Resisting the Trump Agenda*, produced by former congressional staff members, at indivisibleguide.com.
- the 12-point resistance plan by former U.S. labor secretary Robert Reich, at robertreich.org.
- a wealth of information on civil and human rights by a coalition called The Leadership Conference, at civilrights.org.
- the news and media channel occupy.com, amplifying the voices of the 99 percent.
- two organizations associated with UU activist Tim Dechristopher, peacefuluprising.org and climatedisobedience.org.
- resources on a host of issues related to ensuring rights for all and eliminating discrimination, at naacp.org.
- The Natural Resources Defense Council, defending against environmental assaults, at nrdc.org.