

# “Putting Up Resistance”

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N.B. These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship, supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

*(sung) “Any day now, any day now...  
I shall be released...”*

In that classic Bob Dylan song, we hear the universal cry of people who feel somehow imprisoned.

It could refer to those living under specific kinds of oppression or injustice...but my hunch is that the songwriter had a more universal application in mind.

I believe he was singing to himself...and singing to anyone, anywhere...because no matter who we are, or what blessings in life we’ve enjoyed...

We experience resistance...and we long for release.

We may hear deep calls that we resist answering.  
We may resist some change that we know needs to come.

We may resist challenges that threaten our sense of self or security...may resist many forms of loss.

As we experience the pressures of modern life, we may need to resist the temptation to respond in ways that build more walls around ourselves.

At times we may be putting up resistance against prisons of our own making.

Some of our most important work in religious community, and as human beings, is to look deeply at our resistance...

So it may be transformed. So we may be freed.

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Many years ago now, about twenty in fact, I encountered a very fine teacher in the art of resistance.

This teacher was a diminutive person, of very small stature...but of formidable will and an extraordinarily focused mind.

My teacher demonstrated the art of resistance on certain days around 5:00 p.m., when I had to pick him up from Matthew-John Day Care and immediately go somewhere in the car.

I would lift up my son, to place him in the car seat, and he would arch his back and resist with all his might.

Try as I did to ease him gently into the safety of the seat and strap him in, nothing I could do could counter his resistance.

Arching and flailing and crying and yelling...his resistance was as embarrassing to me as it was inconvenient...

And it was heart-wrenching, because, of course, the car seat he resisted so passionately was the very thing that would keep him safe.

My son was resisting my love in action.

And there was nothing I could do.

I remember one of those frustrating, exhausting times, when I finally gave in.

I lifted him up out of the seat...and played for awhile on grass outside the daycare.

I wonder now, what appointment we were late for that day?

Once all of our resistance was gone, it must not have mattered.

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When we consider the topic of resistance, resisting external evil or oppression often comes to mind.

Last week, Shawn spoke to us about non-violent resistance...and the need to create peace within our own heart in order to counter destructive forces outside us.

He spoke of the deep “soul work” required to maintain a non-violent stance in the world.

This is not easy work...precisely because it requires us to encounter our own resistance...our own rigidity...in order for us to release into a new way of being that allows love to flow.

When we put up resistance against the very ways of life that might hold and protect us...

Like the two year old that we all once were...

It seems to me we put ourselves and others at risk.

On the other hand, when we learn to drop our resistance...  
Or perhaps, to stop acting like a child...

We might find that we're maturing. Surrendering perhaps.

Laying down our arms...and moving therefore with more ease and more trust in our relationships.

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The theme of resistance has been explored in religious communities for literally thousands of years...and one of the best-known stories about it is the story of Jonah in the Hebrew Bible.

Even if you didn't grow up Jewish or Christian, you may have heard it.

It's the story of resisting a call.  
A call from God according to the Hebrew scripture.

In the story, Jonah was called to preach to the people of Nineveh.

He didn't consider himself up to the task...and, frankly, he didn't consider the people of Nineveh to be worth the effort.

So instead of going to Nineveh, he high-tailed it off in the opposite direction, catching the first boat to Tarshish.

As the story goes, God saw what was happening and he sent a huge storm.

To avoid it, Jonah went to sleep in the bottom of the boat.

He was not only resistant, but very resourceful in the way he avoided his call.

The captain of the ship woke Jonah up and reminded him that he was cause of the whole storm!

Realizing his responsibility to the others, Jonah volunteered to be cast into the sea, and the storm did subside...but he hadn't gotten out of the difficult situation yet.

Because God sent a whale to swallow Jonah.

And so Jonah spent the next three days and three nights in the belly of the whale: a spiritual retreat centre of the scariest possible order.

Faced with that unavoidable darkness, Jonah finally turns back to God, saying "The engulfing waters threatened me...the deep surrounded me...but you brought my life up from the pit."

And then the whale coughed up Jonah on the beach.

Where he found himself, naturally, at Nineveh, where he was supposed to be in the first place.<sup>1</sup>

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We've all had our flights to Tarshish...our naps in the bottom of boats...and our time in the bellies of whales.

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Jonah 5-6.

The story of Jonah is the story of human resistance to the unique personal calls that are our own.

It may be, in fact, that our deepest needs and longings are the ones from which we run away the fastest.

These may be the aspects of ourselves that are hidden from our conscious awareness...

That may not fit neatly with the personas we wear or the plans we have for ourselves.

Jungian psychotherapist David Richo writes that “inherent in the ego is a resistance to spiritual progress...because it entails letting go of the ego’s favourite props: control, retaliation, entitlement.

The ramparts of our ego defend against change, against the work on ourselves that might alter our character and lead us to spiritual heights. [...]

This ego is the false front we present to mask our terror of this uncontrollable world.” It is, in his words, the “frightened child within us...who deserves accompaniment.”<sup>2</sup>

Like the resistant toddler unwilling to submit to the car seat, perhaps we too can only be softened with love.

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Deep in the belly of the whale, Jonah has no choice but to come to terms with his own resistance.

There is really nothing else to do in there.

And in story after story, both ancient and modern, there are similar tales of coming face to face with the beast.

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<sup>2</sup> David Richo, *Shadow Dance, Liberating the Power and Creativity of Your Dark Side* (Boston, Shambhala, 1999), 38-39.

In her book “Radical Acceptance” the Buddhist teacher Tara Brach tells the story of the yogi Milarepa, who spends many years in isolation in a mountain cave.

During this time, the most frightening and disturbing aspects of himself come alive to him...and he learns that the only way he can live with them is to be welcoming and curious.

One day his cave is filled with demons, and the one that is facing him is the most terrifying of all!

Instead of running away, fighting with the demon or denying its existence, Milarepa puts his head directly into the demon’s mouth...

And with that—poof! —all the demons vanish.

In the words of another Buddhist teacher, Pema Chodron, “When the resistance is gone, the demons are gone.”<sup>3</sup>

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Similarly Parker Palmer, the contemporary teacher from the Quaker tradition, tells a personal story of facing his own demons while on an Outward Bound course.

Tethered to a rope and halfway down a sheer cliff face, he has to navigate around a large cleft in the rock.

Terrified, he freezes, unable to go on.

From the top of the cliff, the instructor calls down, “Parker, are you okay?”

And at that point the well-known teacher, speaker, and author of many books, can only manage to squeak out the words: “I don’t want to talk about it.”

At that point the instructor says it’s time for him to learn the Outward Bound motto:

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<sup>3</sup> Tara Brach, *Radical Acceptance: Embracing Your Life With the Heart of a Buddha* (New York, Random House, 2003), 152.

“If you can’t get out of it, you’ve got to get into it.”

Realizing he has no choice, nowhere to go... his feet start to move and within minutes he’s on solid ground.

Reflecting later on the experience, Parker Palmer writes, “Because there is no way out of one’s inner life, one had better get into it.

On the inward and downward spiritual journey,  
the only way out is down and through.”<sup>4</sup>

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In each of these stories, and in the stories of our own lives, we see ways that we resist the call of the deep Self, of Being, of God...of Life itself.

We resist facing our fears...embracing our unique tasks...  
awakening to the world as it is.

But in each of these stories, the wisdom teacher—who is just a stand-in for each of us, of course—is cast straight into the darkness.

The belly of the whale, the mouth of the demon, the sheer drop below the cliff face.

Each of these, of course, can also be seen as a metaphor for death itself...something we may resist facing with all our might, by running away into distractions and consumer entertainment.

As our world is changing now in frightening ways, we might put up resistance by falling asleep in whatever luxury boat we’ve bought a ticket on.

Yet we know that ultimately the planet Earth itself will cast us into the waves of change that call for our transformation.

It’s natural that we resist this experience.

After all, it requires that we relinquish some control.

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<sup>4</sup> Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Discovering the Inner Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco, Wiley, 2000), 84-85.

That we give up the need to do it all our way.

At many points in our lives, we may be called to overcome our resistance to an experience that could transform us and carry us forward.

Like the car seat...

Like the whale that will deliver us home.

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When we notice our own resistance, and begin to work with it, without condemning ourselves for having it...  
nor fighting against it...

We might find that it softens of its own accord.

Earlier I read the poem "Allow" by Danna Faulds.

Her poems are all inspired by the practice of yoga.

In that physical and spiritual discipline, a pose is patiently held despite our initial resistance...

Until, guided by gravity, the muscles relax to gradually become more supple.  
More agile.

The point is not to eliminate all resistance...but to notice it, and breathe into it, as tight muscles release.

As a personal teacher of my own asked me recently, "What resistance in you is being called to soften?"

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*Any day now, any day now, I shall be released.*

The life that we are called to...

The deep Self that calls to us from the depths...

The interdependent web of existence that embraces and shapes us...

These are mysteries that inspire both our awe and our terror.

Perhaps the thing we must resist the most, is the urge to run away.

On some level, we may identify with both the fleeing Jonah and the tantruming two year-old.

But as Unitarian Universalists, encouraging spiritual growth in ourselves and within our congregations...

We also know that our resistance may have something to teach us.

And that at times there is value in surrender and letting go...held as we are in the Web of Life, in all its creative capacity.

In Bob Dylan's lyrics, he says that he "sees his reflection some place high above this wall"... above falling...and above protection.

Is it possible that we might indeed rise above the walls of our own resistance, to finally see the "light that is shining from the west unto the east?"

To live in a liberated and liberating way that brings new meaning to life...in all its joy and sorrow?

This is the freedom sung about in gospel music...

It is the deep joy beckoning from every spiritual tradition...

And it is the peace of mind taught in secular paths that guide us to live with ethics, courage, and mindful presence.

No matter how valid the teaching may be,  
no matter how reliable the source...we may resist it anyway.

In fact at times, it seems that putting up resistance is the only thing we know how to do.

But fortunately, Life has a way of maturing us...even the most stubborn among us who like to think we know a thing or two.

Of course I'm talking about myself.

Today I don't want to wrestle with her.

Today I'm inclined to be patient with her resistance.

To ask her about it.

To investigate where it's coming from...

To ask what it's all about.

And maybe then, go for a walk...and notice how the springtime soil is resisting the first of the tulip bulbs...how the trees are resisting the winds of this changing season.

Noticing them, I might be surprised to see that I'm carrying a little less resistance to the changes that are gonna come...

In my life as in yours.

I might be a little more willing to take the hand of the ones who might go with me.

As we travel our roads together.

Blessings to you all.

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