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Resistance and Resilience

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First of all, it's hard to be inspiring when you have bronchitis, so there's that. Second of all, worse has come to worst, and Donald Trump is the president of the United States. There is nothing inspiring about that, unless you count disgust and dread. We aren't going to go shoot him, because that's not how we roll; and by and large, we aren't the ones with the guns, anyway. Impeachment is a possibility that is being actively explored, probably appropriately given the conflict of interests from which the new president apparently refuses to disentangle himself, but the prospect of President Pence is not all that comforting. Being part of the political mainstream was not something I ever enumerated in my knapsack of privilege, but I certainly am noticing its absence, and it's depressing. If there is a silver lining to any of this, it has yet to be revealed to me; there is no 'on the other hand.' I think we must leave it to history to demonstrate whatever unanticipated good might come of the next four years; I must suppose that there is bound to be something, if only because no victory is ever as unambiguous as the winners would hope.

In the meantime, my assignment - and if you are with me so far, our assignment - as I take it, is to dig in and survive. This is not the hour of our ascendancy, but we still have work to do; resistance, and resilience. Not easy, not fun, not triumphant; nothing that is going to tickle our egos or stoke our sense of superiority, which may turn out to be one of the hardest things about it. It's going to be grueling, and granular. It's going to be about taking stands and making gestures that seem to melt into the tides of history; it's going to be about being grit in the gears of a machine that grinds on anyway, only a little more slowly and ineffectively than it would have done otherwise. I would love to give you wise, lofty words this morning, but Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou are going to have to suffice for that; all I have is some very pedestrian, unglamorous advice - and I rather suspect that is all we are going to have for a while.

So how do we practice resistance and resilience? How do we keep each other alive and sane and willing to keep on keeping on? I think of Harriet Tubman, leading runaway slaves through the wilderness, saying, "If you hear the dogs, keep going. If you see the torches in the woods, keep going. If there's shouting after you, keep going. Don't ever stop. Keep going. If you want a taste of freedom, keep going." A decree that she enforced with her pistol, because for one to give up was to endanger all. So keep going - but doing what, precisely? These four things: get clear, stay connected, keep active, and be curious.

First things first: get clear, and stay clear, about your values. That is, presumably, one of the reasons you are here, and always has been. Here in church, I mean. Because values don't just grow on trees; you can't pick them up randomly at the mini-mart. Does anyone but me remember reading Jane Eyre? Most of us recall her early years at the abusive Lowood Institute, and the dramatic ending where her beloved Mr. Rochester's mad wife literally burns the house down. In between these life events beyond her control, Jane makes the difficult

decision not to assent to Rochester's plea that they live together in mutual love even though he is legally married to a woman who is congenitally demented, with this internal reflection:

"I will hold to the principles received by me when I was sane, and not mad – as I am now. Laws and principles are not for the times when there is no temptation: they are for such moments as this, when body and soul rise in mutiny against their rigor; stringent are they; inviolate they shall be. If at my individual convenience I might break them, what would be their worth? They have a worth – so I have always believed; and if I cannot believe it now, it is because I am insane – quite insane: with my veins running fire, and my heart beating faster than I can count its throbs. Preconceived opinions, foregone determinations, are all I have at this hour to stand by: there I plant my foot."

Whether or not she was right in her decision to leave the man who loved her, I have always believed that Jane was right about the significance of principles; they must be established outside the vortex of crisis if they are to be any use in a crisis. You and I must decide now what we will and will not do at the behest of a government to whose aims we are opposed. Will you answer questions about your neighbors? Will you hide those neighbors in your attic? Will you buy their house at half its value after they are rounded up? Will you invest in dirty energy stocks? Will you film police behavior on your cell phone? Will you warn your students, or clients, or co-workers about immigration raids? Will you help women who need abortions get them, even if it is illegal to do so? Will you advise your children just to say the Lord's prayer along with the rest of the class, and not make trouble? How difficult would it have to be to vote, before you would give up?

I have been told that it's a myth about the frog in the pot of heating water, but the image remains instructive. There is probably no cliff between where we are today and the advent of tyranny; only a slippery slope of compromises and accommodations; only the ambiguous decision about whether taking any particular stand at any particular moment actually accomplishes anything. Get clear now about what you believe, and believe in, because events are going to become nebulous and confusing and bewildered, until one day you turn around and ask yourself, 'How did I wind up here?' It has happened before, to smarter people than you or me. As Tom Stoppard's characters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern ponder while their fate becomes inescapable, "There must have been a time, somewhere near the beginning, when we could have said No." If you are not clear about the values you are committed to at this point, they will slip through your fingers like sand under the pressure of history.

The UU Service Committee, together with the UUA, has created a document they are calling a Declaration of Conscience. It affirms,

- * In the face of looming threats to immigrants, Muslims, people of color, and the LGBTQ community and the rise of hate speech, harassment and hate crimes, we affirm our belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person.
- * In opposition to any steps to undermine the right of every citizen to vote, or to turn back advances in access to health care and reproductive rights, we affirm our commitment to justice and compassion in human relations.
- * And against actions to weaken or eliminate initiatives to address the threat of climate change – actions that would threaten not only our country but the entire planet – we affirm our unyielding commitment to protect the interdependent web of all existence.
- * We will oppose any and all unjust government actions to deport, register, discriminate, or despoil.
- * As people of conscience, we declare our commitment to translate our values into action as we stand on the side of love with the most vulnerable among us.

Sign this joint declaration; copies are available in foyer. Let the UUA know you have signed. We will spend every week of the next four years unpacking what these commitments mean in the conditions of the moment. And remember that this - these times - is precisely why we have been working with this language for the past thirty years, and teaching it to our children, so that we would have it available to talk about our moral commitments; what we will stand for, and insist on, and refuse to betray, no matter what the forces arrayed against us. If you don't like the UU document, write your own, but sign something. Put it where you will be reminded on a regular basis. Share it with other people; make yourself accountable. Crisis is where values get tested - it doesn't work well to be creating them in that moment. Get clear now.

Second, stay connected. One by one, we will be broken, and none of us will survive. Know your neighbors, literally. Go to meetings. Have dinner parties. Work in a community garden. Show up at church, obviously; invite other people to come with you. We have to have each other's backs, and know who we can count on. Work on your own cultural competency; get a handle on your white privilege, your wealth privilege, your education privilege, your temporary able-body privilege - on all the ways that you believe the world just ought to be because you unthinkingly like it that way. If privilege wasn't the enemy before, it certainly is now; the goal of making America great again is to restore a sense of international and cultural superiority to people who resemble Donald Trump, and therefore feel threatened by the changes of the 20th century. They are not wrong, those folks; that's the reality that the Trump campaign and the Trump administration have capitalized on. They really do have a lot to lose in a truly global, truly democratic world characterized by a real focus on education, human rights and a healthy environment. For the moment, they have the cards still, but demographically, their eventual defeat is assured. It's just a question of how much suffering and devastation - up to and including global nuclear war or fatal climate change - we have to endure before mortality has its way with them. In the meantime, we have to counter their divide-and-conquer strategy by reinforcing that interdependent web that we like to talk about. And that includes not just individuals, but institutions as well. We are going to have to climb down out of our non-profit and theological silos, and work together to preserve what we can.

Take, for instance, the renewed sanctuary movement. As many of us know from The Hunchback of Notre Dame, there is a very old tradition - it actually goes back to pre-Christian Greek and Roman practice - that if a person pursued either as a criminal or an enemy soldier can reach the sacred space of a church or temple, they cannot be carried away from it by violence, lest the god in question express displeasure at the defilement of his or her altar. This idea has long carried very little actual legal standing, but it still has a powerful PR appeal. Over the years, modern Anglican, Lutheran and United church leadership have actually issued regulations for local churches to use in deciding whom to grant protection to, as dozens of criminals of one stripe or another still flock to them seeking protection every year. In the 1800s, most of these "criminals" were runaway slaves or abolitionists. Then in the late 1960s and 1970s, they were conscientious objectors fleeing the draft for the Vietnam War. In the 1980s, hundreds of North American churches - including some UU congregations - banded together to form a united sanctuary movement, seeking to protect Central American refugees, rejected for asylum by the United States government, from being deported to political violence in their home regions.

Most recently in America, the 2006 case of Elvira Arellano, an illegal Mexican immigrant trying to avoid deportation and subsequent separation from her seven-year-old son, an American citizen by birth, drew attention back to the

self-proclaimed right of sanctuary, which has since been used by dozens of churches and undocumented individuals and families to draw attention to American immigration policies and the very human plight of those caught up in the system. As an act of public witness, the New Sanctuary Movement enables congregations to provide hospitality and protection to immigrant families whose legal cases clearly reveal the contradictions and moral injustice of our current immigration laws and practices, while working to support legislation that would change their situation. While our particular building would not make for picturesque video of immigrant families clutching altars, there is much we might do as a congregation to support both the sacred and practical hospitality being offered by other faith communities here in Kansas City, if we choose. Every human and institutional connection that we make, or strengthen, is one more strand in the web that will ultimately bring down the forces of autocracy.

The third practice of resistance and resilience is to keep active, and by this I mean active as citizens. If you have not already discovered and downloaded the Indivisible Practical Guide for Resisting the Trump Agenda, do it today. If downloading isn't your thing; ask me, and I will make you a copy. Read it, and act on this no-sentiment advice from congressional staffers who watched the Tea Party agenda work effectively on members of congress to block initiatives of the Obama presidency. It's not hard, it's just tedious sometimes, but getting the attention of legislators is not as much of a challenge as you might think. Showing up at events and meetings matters. Phone calls matter. Pick one issue or two, that you can stay informed about, and pester your representatives; it's their job to be pestered. I am committing to you today that I will make at least one phone call or attend one event every day -- to Roy Blount or Claire McCaskill or Emanuel Cleaver; to Eric Grietens or Gail McCann Beatty or Kiki Curls; to our friend Mayor Sly James, or our city council members Kathryn Shields and Jolie Justus, or my own city council reps, Alissia Canady and Lee Barnes. I will talk to them about racial justice at the state and national and local level. I will pester them about our civil liberties and religious freedom. The ones who don't already know who I am, will. Never forget that the majority of Americans who voted, didn't vote for Donald Trump, and many of the leaders of the Republican party originally wanted nothing to do with him. His billionaire, Russian-backed agenda is not invulnerable, and we the people are not powerless, unless we choose to be. Keep your citizenship active.

And finally, stay curious. Read a variety of news sources. Support local independent reporting. Ask questions, ask for sources and verification. Do not be distracted from your curiosity by fake fights or salacious scandals. Attempt to follow, as always, the money. Read history. Be curious about what people who have been down these roads and been doing this work for a long time have to teach us. Be curious about the next generation of leaders, and what we can do to help them.

New Yorker essayist Adam Gopnik wrote recently:

There's no point in studying history if we do not take some lesson from it. The best way to be sure that 2017 is not 1934 [Germany] is to act as though it were. We must learn and relearn that age's necessary lessons:

that meek submission is the most short-sighted of policies;
that waiting for the other, more vulnerable group to protest first will only increase the isolation of us all.

We must refuse to think that if we play nice and don't make trouble, our group won't be harmed.

Calm but consistent opposition shared by a broad front of committed and constitutionally-minded protesters—it's easy to say, fiendishly hard to do, and

necessary to accomplish if we are to save the beautiful music of American democracy.

Get clear. Stay connected. Keep active. Be curious. It won't be glamorous, it won't necessarily be a lot of fun, and it will probably be frustrating and at times infuriating. But all of that is better than helpless and overwhelmed and paralyzed. And think about it - what if we all got clear about our values, and connected to our neighbors; if we all became curious, active citizens - well, wasn't that the world we were going for in the first place? Resilient, resistant, stubborn; we are in this thing together, for the long haul, and we shall not be moved.