

Embodying Resistance

By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD February 8, 2026

“You are not obligated to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it.”¹ This simple yet profound reflection is offered by a rabbi in the ancient Jewish text The Ethics of the Fathers. Written in 200 CE, this ancient teaching is so very applicable in today's breaking world. Judaism's ancient and deeply held call to action rejects the very easy apathetic life, even when the task at hand may feel so very overwhelming. A Jewish mentor of mine elaborated on this much beloved text. Each blessed person in this finite realm must imagine that the world is evenly balanced between good and evil. It is each individual, intentional, moral decision that determines the destiny of the entire world.

Every day we encounter moral decisions. We see an unhoused person on a sidewalk with a sign asking for help. Do we walk past with intentional indifference, or do we acknowledge this person with a simple greeting? Do we offer to purchase food? We face regular choices: Do we use our disposable income to donate to worthy causes, or do we purchase that much unneeded electronic device? Do we create warm, welcoming spaces for those of all identities – gender, race, immigration status - in our church or our community or our workspace, or do we maintain the status quo? Do we call our local elected officials, or do we sit in inaction? As Unitarian Universalists, we make such moral decisions not from a fear of burning in hell – for we do not believe in eternal damnation. Nor do we do this for a promise of eternal bliss in a heavenly realm. We do this from our own inherent goodness. We do this knowing everyone is worthy of a life of compassion and equity.

What does it mean to live each of our finite days with moral integrity? How does this become a life of resistance? It means our choices, however seemingly mundane, are guided by our ethics. It means that we act with love and justice, promoting equity, even if we will never see

¹ Ethics of the Fathers 2:16

the outcome of our actions. We may leave this finite realm well before justice prevails. We act simply because it is the just, ethical, and moral thing to do.

Journalist Chris Hedges offers this: “I do not, in the end, fight fascists because I will win. I fight fascists because they are fascists.”² We fight racists simply because they are racist. We fight against authoritarianism because it is an evil system – that is all the motivation we need. Whether or not we win the fight, we have acted with morals and conviction. When we see hunger, we bring food. When we see fascism, we vote. In each of our days we make those intentional decisions working to create Beloved Community.

So much of this work and basic morality is inspired by faith - whether Unitarian Universalism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism - the list of loving, compassionate, and just faith movements carries on. Journalist Chris Hedges offers that it is, quote, “a mix of divine inspiration and necessary defiance against oppressive reality.”³ I think this is a truly important topic to explore for us as a people of faith, as we continuously grapple with divinity. I think it is safe to assume that each of us engages with something greater than ourselves. To some, this is nature and the expanse of the universe – trees, stars, the endless night sky. To others, it is a transcendent, unknowable essence. To yet others it is a higher power that has served as a guiding force. What I do know is that, in our faith, as articulated by our religious forbearers, this nature or essence or higher-power guides us with a holy and divine unconditional love. This evolved from our split from Calvinism and their belief in a vengeful God. So, it is this Unitarian Universalist love - an active love - that emanates from all things sacred and holy. It demands of us to go out into the world and perform acts of goodness and acts of faith in each day of our finite lives. This encapsulates my own daily prayer practice, as I ask, “dear spirit, please guide me towards a life of greater faith and greater love.” Hedges elaborates that a true and embodied faith is to be fundamentally coupled with an intentional defiance against oppression.⁴ Our oppressive reality is parents on the streets begging for money. Single mothers who struggle to put food on the

² “The Cost of Resistance” by Chris Hedges

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

table. People who cannot afford their insulin. Coupling faith with defiance calls us towards so many acts of compassion and resistance. It is engaging with those of whom Christianity has termed “the least of these.” – far too often overlooked and rejected. May we tend to spirits and souls as we welcome everyone with open hearts, open arms, and open minds. May we tend to equity and safety as we offer acts of compassionate justice.

As mentioned, this imperative towards compassion and morality continues through the faith traditions. Jewish theologian and rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel writes that for a person to wallow in despair is to “surrender to evil.” He goes as far as to say it is truly sinful, a break from the loving and empathetic divine. There are so many of us who feel that the situation is too grave; that there is simply too much to do; that their small actions cannot possibly make a difference. Yet what are the effects of doing nothing? People suffer. Heschel writes, “The greatest heresy is despair, despair of [humanity’s] power for goodness, [humanity’s] power for love.”⁵ If we give up on the Unitarian Universalist idea that those who commit evil cannot repent, that they cannot return to that inherent goodness, that they cannot ever know the power of love, that society cannot change, we feel hopeless. We feel our work is in vain. Heschel says this is heresy. In contrast, we live with moral integrity. We see the power in resisting.

Many of you have expressed the despair you feel for the succeeding generations. This is why we act without connection to the result. This is why we donate and vote and volunteer and act with a basic morality and intentional compassion even if we will never know the fruits of our labor. We are fearful for our children and grandchildren's future. The climate crisis. Gun violence. The rise of fascism. These threats which are both immediate and remote call us towards action for those who are yet to come. We have an enduring faith in the continued strength, morals, and basic goodness of society that calls us to carry on. The effects of our actions today ultimately ripple throughout time and the yet unborn generations. We keep this possibility alive, tending to the flames of justice, flames that our children will continue to

⁵ “Religion and Race” by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

stoke. I lift up our interdependent web. What binds us together in holy connection to all who have come before, to all who are, and to all who ever will be. Each generation that tills the soil with seeds of justice for an imagined and possible future. Sown with love, rippling out as one act of justice inspires another inspires another. Our actions of morality and compassion spread well beyond our own insular circle of beloveds, both in time and in space.

I am reminded of today's Jewish wisdom tale - that of Honi and the Carob Tree.⁶ We encounter an old man tending to a tree whose fruits would not be realized until decades after he has died. In this selfless act, he is met with a much younger skeptic, incredulous of his actions. Why would you do this? I do this for my children, and my children's children, the old man responds. That they may know the sweet fruit. Would we be faced with similar doubt and suspicion with our own moral choices? Perhaps. May we, like this man of hope, who offered just what his ancestors had offered him, continue to live our ethical, future-oriented lives no matter what doubt is cast.

To return to the theme of faith, I lift up words from Galatians 6:9 "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up." Two items of importance here: do not become weary! Good work is difficult work, especially if we make each decision based on our morals and integrity. It is not easy to navigate each day and each mundane action in love and compassion. Sometimes we will slip, and that imperfection is ok. Yet it is our call as a people of faith and action to continue this important work. Second, we will reap a harvest, if we simply do not give up. As our work ripples out throughout years and decades as well as it surpasses distance, we will sow and cultivate love. We will sow and cultivate justice. We will cultivate equity. And I truly believe that we can do this powerful work if we remain grounded in hope, which can be so very elusive.

For hope resides alongside despair. Hope that when we teach our own children how to resist, they will teach their children, who will teach their children. Hope that as protestors gather in

⁶ Traditional Jewish tale

the streets, their solidarity and comradery creates a movement for change that will ripple throughout the generations. Hope that together, as we offer consistent acts of morality and compassion in an often immoral and unjust world, these initiatives, both small and large, ripple throughout society. We see this hope, over and over, alongside despair. This dedicated persistence heals.

When I was a child, my parents introduced me to “Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood.” I think many of us are familiar with this gentle man who taught ourselves or our children the importance of simple kindness and love. It is not surprising that, when we are faced with immorality and distress, we can turn to this beloved teacher. Mr. Rogers offers gentle and profound wisdom, quote, “When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’”⁷ There are always good and moral people in our midst. In times of tumult search for those who make sure everyone is fed, housed, safe, loved, and secure. In our actions, may we be those helpers. May we be the ones for those among us who are distressed, those who are confused or scared, those who are uncertain - may we be the ones they can turn to in a moment of need. May they know that we will act with love and courage and not rest in complacency.

For this is a moral revolution. It is grounded in our persistent and enduring vision of another world and another way of being. Our enduring vision is of peace, faith, hope, and love. Where the destitute have the resources to live a fulfilling life. Where the least of these know that they are truly worthy. We are called to be intentional in how we want to live in this world – each action based on our deeply held morals, convictions, and integrity. This work is a moral imperative, and many of us will act without seeing the results – but we labor anyway. We labor with no true promise that our actions will bear any fruit whatsoever. Yet we do not do what is easy, we do what is right. German philosopher Immanuel Kant wrote: “If justice perishes, human life on earth has lost its meaning.”⁸ If our days are not grounded in creating Beloved

⁷ Fred Rogers, Archive of American Television interview, 1998

⁸ *The Metaphysics of Morals* by Immanuel Kant

Community, we begin to lose purpose. We become immersed in despair, inaction, hopelessness, and fear. This is our faith. We do not fear hell nor aspire to heaven. We adhere, instead, to justice. It is my favorite quote of the humanists, “be the change you want to see in this world.” For, to many in our faith, heaven is here, now, this finite realm. For us, for the least of these. As such it is our moral imperative to make sure that everyone’s heaven is one of faith, hope, and love. Let us build that place together.

May it be so, and Amen.