

## **Nurturing Sacred Resistance**

**By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD April 30, 2023**

He stepped through his back door as the sun began to rise, the darkness of the evening giving way to hues of orange, red, and pink as uncovered feet fell upon dew-covered grass. He looked intently at the changing sky, breathed in the cool morning air, and whispered “Thank you. Thank you.”

She entered the small stone church, the oldest structure in town. At an altar she lit a candle, kneeled, and offered a prayer of petition, asking her God for the wellbeing of her beloveds who, for reasons beyond her control, were immersed in devastating pain.

He sat on the floor, barefoot facing the image of the Buddha, soothing sounds of music surrounding him. While chanting the words of his sacred text, he prayed that all sentient beings be free of sorrow; that all beings live in equanimity and equality.

I imagine prayers of this sort fill the hearts, minds, and souls of worshipers throughout millennia, spanning faith traditions and practices as people of faith search for meaning, solace, worthiness, and love. There are differences in these prayers I lifted up, the fictional devotions of a humanist, a Christian, and a Buddhist. But there are similarities as well – similarities that I find to be at the core of all people of faith. There is an acknowledgement that there is something far greater than our simple finite lives, and there is an intentional connection with this greater thing held sacred.

Today we ask how this grounding in faith can help us to resist. Resistance - defying that which seeks to define us and that which seeks to tear us down; confronting that which seeks to harm our beloved community both within these walls and beyond. Through our faith we learn to resist like the sun with gentle rays of warmth and comfort, not the brute force of domineering

wind.<sup>1</sup> We learn to resist, not with anger, resentment, nor violence, but with faith, love, and compassion.

Pause with me in this moment, and hear the words of Lal Ded, a Kashmiri mystic and poet in the thirteen hundreds.

I was passionate,  
filled with longing,  
I searched  
far and wide.

But the day  
that the Truthful One  
found me,  
I was at home.<sup>2</sup>

These words echo a search – a meandering, passionate, intentional voyage – a painful and beautiful exploration held at the core of any person intent on a faithful life. This poem offers that, perhaps, we need simply let the sacred find us. Can our journey be an intentional pause? I remember one of the most powerful moments of my life. I was connecting through prayer to an ancestor alongside a blooming blue bush when something sacred and immanent found me and whispered in my ear “You are never alone.” Let us hold these words close this morning: “The day the Truthful One found me, I was at home.”

For this is it: the first task of a faithful life is to acknowledge that there is something far greater than oneself. In our liberal faith this ultimate source is not prescribed but found on a journey towards truth and meaning. How we understand the sacred may be a journey in and of itself –

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<sup>1</sup> “The North Wind & the Sun” an Aesop tale

<sup>2</sup> “I Was Passionate” Lal Ded

for there are as many understandings of this ultimate source as there are people questioning. In my own faith journey the ultimate began as nature, transformed into an entity, and in this moment is held as both transcendent and immanent. “The day the Truthful One found me, I was at home.”<sup>3</sup> I bring us to the words of ancient Japanese poet Izumi Shikibu, reflecting on the spiritual homes we build within us. Shikibu wrote,

Although the wind  
blows terribly here,  
the moonlight also leaks  
between the roof planks  
of this ruined house.<sup>4</sup>

If our spiritual home – our body, our very being – is built and crafted so tightly that not wind nor rain can penetrate – that allows no space for pain, anger, longing, nor grief to filter in, so, too, will we be walled off from that which is most wanted – love, compassion, faith, and the sacred – as a glimmer of moonlight. Not pain nor joy can be held without the other – in opening ourselves to hardship we, too, open ourselves to all we hold sacred. If in our fear or hate or anxiety we are impenetrable, neither will we love.

There is something out there far greater than any one of us. After acknowledgment comes connection – just as was portrayed in our opening prayers. Let us reflect again on Mary Oliver’s thoughts on prayer. The poet writes, “This isn’t a contest but the doorway into thanks, and a silence in which another voice may speak.”<sup>5</sup> The voice of the whispering tree or bubbling brook, the voice of an entity whispering sacred murmurings into our ears, the voice of our ancestors offering us love and strength. That is what we are offered when we cultivate silence. What do we offer in return? Gratitude, praise, petition, mantras. Perhaps your prayer is “Thank you.” Perhaps your prayer is “Please. Please help.” My first prayers were of love sent to my ancestors,

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<sup>3</sup> “I Was Passionate” Lal Ded

<sup>4</sup> “Although the Wind” Izumi Shikibu

<sup>5</sup> “Praying” by Mary Oliver

which became a conversation with a deity, which is now coupled with simple, sacred words of gratitude. Or what connection through meditation? A sacred pause to simply be. A few minutes to breath, to walk amongst the trees, to taste the sweet juices of fresh fruit filling our mouths. A walk in the grass can be the holiest of acts. We pause, together – human, nature, divinity.

It matters not how you pray nor when you pray, not how nor when you meditate, but that a connection to love, beauty, and the sacred is made. Perhaps we find all we hold holy in artwork, music, hiking, or the written word. Perhaps we connect to the sacred when we don raincoats and rubber boots and dance in the rain, when we put to our lips the cool metal of a flute, when our pens produce sonnets. It ultimately matters that we open ourselves up to a journey. We are called to be, to love, to have faith, and to let the beating of our hearts destroy nobody.

And this – this grounding in life-sustaining faith – is what allows us to resist. Not with the brute force of the howling wind, but with the gentle nudge of warming sun rays.<sup>6</sup> With these basic elements of faithful living – a belief in something greater and a sacred, intentional connection to whatever that thing may be – we endure. A belief in something greater takes us beyond ourselves – beyond our insecurities, beyond petty quarrels – offering a sense of perspective. And we know we have something beautiful that we can access no matter what ills we face in life. Through our prayers and meditations and dances in the rain we form a holy companionship – just as was whispered to me by the blue bush – we are never alone. So, too, do we carry with us our cloud of ancestors, found in our blood and our DNA just as firmly as they are held in our memories and embraced by the sacred. When all seems hopeless, or when immersed in soul wrenching pain, we meditate. We pray. We write words of prose. Within those cracks that allow in hurt, anger, and pain so, too, to do love, kindness, and generosity find their way in. We find wholeness and strength buried within that which matters most – the bond formed between ourselves and all we hold sacred. In our Unitarian Universalist faith, we are held, always, in love.

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<sup>6</sup> “The North Wind & the Sun” an Aesop tale

When the love we prioritize is that of the sacred we no longer seek affirmation trying to obtain the love of strangers or of those near us who offer criticism and judgment. If what or who we are trying to please is our own beating heart and the source of all we hold sacred, the power of societal norms falls to the wayside. Superficial value becomes meaningless as intrinsic value is prioritized. We create and foster a more creative and accepting world where self-expression – fostered from intimate connections with the heart and soul as well as with the sacred – is honored above all else. What would it be like to make one’s way down the street where folks of any gender could wear a dress, or where love between couples was no longer heteronormative, or where all immigrants are valued and cared for, or where the impoverished are not shunned but empowered, or where Black lives were not in danger simply for being Black? A place where we can look at anyone in our midst and offer the words “you are beautiful, whole, and worthy” What of a world where shared values became the priority – not wealth nor fame nor prosperity nor accolades. Where our time was not spent cultivating outward beauty, but inner beauty. Where we cared not so much for our own prosperity but for the well-being of society at large.

Society at its worst seeks to define us and tear us down. And yet this world that seems unimaginable is within our grasp. We can live these values in each of our days. We can practice this acceptance and celebration of worth within the confines of our own lives, within our own faith community, our own families our own coworkers and trust that this will ripple throughout our web of life – reaching those we will never even meet. When centered in love and faith, we can trust that each loving action we take is one small step towards creating a just world. Each of us a ray of sunshine, not a gust of wind. Unitarian minister Edward Everett Hale wrote, “I am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something. And because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.”<sup>7</sup> Or, in the words The Dalai Lama, “If you think you are too small to make a difference, try sleeping with a mosquito.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> From *Soul Matters Worship Series: Resistance*

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*

So commune with the holy through a murmured prayer, calm the spirit in an act of silent meditation, center in the natural beauty of budding wildflowers and towering trees, feeling oneself a part of all that is - but one small strand in our web of life. Allow a “silence in which another voice may speak”<sup>9</sup> and let those sacred whispers draw you towards action. There is too much pain in this world. We are each called to be a part of the solution - one intentional act at a time. When you feel that empathetic pain seep into your being, know that “the moonlight also leaks between the roof planks of this ruined house.”<sup>10</sup> We are not alone - held with the ancestors, held with the divine. You are sacred. You are holy. You can help change this aching world.

May it be so, and Amen.

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<sup>9</sup> “Praying” by Mary Oliver

<sup>10</sup> “Although the Wind” Izumi Shikibu