

**Resistance and Resilience©**  
**A Sermon by Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz**  
**Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**  
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Our theme this month is “tell me a story about a time when you found your voice.” When we look for stories about an inner voice of conscience, of God, we must remember the famous one about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. sitting at his kitchen table late one night. He had just received an anonymous phone call that said that if didn’t quit supporting the Montgomery bus boycott, they were going to blow his brains out and blow up his house. As he nursed a cup of coffee, he describes what happens next...

“I sat there and thought about a beautiful little daughter who had just been born. ... And I sat at that table thinking about that little girl and thinking about the fact that she could be taken away from me any minute. And I started thinking about a dedicated, devoted, and loyal wife, who was over there asleep. And she could be taken from me, or I could be taken from her. And I got to the point that I couldn't take it any longer. I was weak. ...

“And I discovered then that religion had to become real to me, and I had to know God for myself. And I bowed down over that cup of coffee. I never will forget it. ... I prayed a prayer, and I prayed out loud that night. I said, "Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think I'm right. I think the cause that we represent is right. But Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now. I'm faltering.

I'm losing my courage. And I can't let the people see me like this because if they see me weak and losing my courage, they will begin to get weak. ...”

And it seemed at that moment that I could hear an inner voice saying to me, "Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo I will be with you, even until the end of the world. ...” Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared.”

It’s a dramatic and true story, framed by King’s Christian faith, which may seem out of reach to many of us. In this congregation, we include many who people do not believe in the value of prayer or who have a hard time praying personally. In our lives, we are not public figures leading great protest movements whose phones are ringing with death threats. Most of us come from backgrounds that have insulated our lives with a certain degree of privilege and opportunity.

And yet, I am sure that in our own ways, every one of us has had our “kitchen table” moments in life, moments of isolation, anxiety, and indecision about what to do and where to go next, to fulfill the promise of our lives. I am sure that every one of us, regardless of our political leanings, is facing this new year and new political landscape with some uncertainty and fear. I am also sure that every one of us comes to this service today with concerns about how the least privileged among us – the poor, the immigrant, the minority communities – will be protected and will be sustained in the years ahead.

So we are listening for voices on this weekend commemorating Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s vision and legacy – voices of inspiration and comfort from leaders we respect and admire to be sure, but also voices from inside us, voices that can remind us where we will find the resilience to continue resisting all that threatens the principles and values that we have dedicated our lives to in becoming members of this Fellowship.

There is no doubt that these principles and values will be under siege in the years ahead. This is not just a matter of policy disputes about how the Affordable Care coverage net might be preserved or dreamers kept in the country or voting rights protected, as important as these issues will be in the days ahead. My colleague Tom Schade has framed

well the larger question we face as Unitarian Universalists. In a recent blog post, which I quote at length now, Schade wrote:

*“We put forth an idealistic and utopian set of social values in 1985, the Seven Principles...It is not surprising that a statement of public theology would become the cornerstone of our contemporary faith. We have long said that what matters in religion are “deeds not creeds.” And we have long thought, along with all the other practitioners of liberal religion, that the true test of religion was the effect it has on people and its society.*

*The seven principles describe our vision of the Beloved Community, both in our congregations and in the world at large. And so, we went forth to put them on posters in the entry ways to our sanctuaries, and to carry them on little cards in our wallets to give to curious strangers, and to teach them to our children as the highest order statement of our faith. Since then, however, we have learned that the obstacle to the Beloved Community the Principles envision are the systems of oppression that rule our world.*

*We learned that to live in the world imagined by our Principles, we had to root out and dismantle systemic injustices. We also began to see that oppression itself was encoded in human behavior. There is a human proclivity to create and sustain relationships of domination and subordination—which requires constant awareness and vigilance to even see. Oppression changes shape and form and surfaces even in institutions and organizations that commit themselves to fighting oppression. The realization of the pervasiveness of oppression carries with it the knowledge of individual complicity in it.*

*To see one’s own complicity with systems of oppression is not possible as an individual. To forego the rewards of that complicity requires a strength beyond individual character. Anti-oppression requires dependence on others, and on sources of personal strength beyond the self: on a covenanted community, and on however conceives of a “higher power.”*

*The realization that the obstacle to justice and equity is systemic oppression irrevocably merges our political/social stance with our spiritual message and religious traditions. Our collective*

*path to these revelations has been not a straight line, but by following our noses, UUism is moving from being hyper-respectable to an emerging radicalism.*

*Our story is our story, but lots of others are following the same trajectory. We are now a part of a large scale social movement(s) against systemic oppression.”*

I believe that in these last few sentences Tom Schade has raised for us a critical question about the nature of our resistance efforts in the years ahead, and the challenge we will face as far as our resilience is concerned. Unitarian Universalists enjoy our respectability. We are a minority within American religious denominations, and so we take pride in what we have accomplished, not unlike the pride that many black Americans felt when Barack Hussein Obama was elected President.

We shared that pride, because in a meaningful way, he was one of OUR own too. Nowhere has Obama’s Unitarian Universalist influence been more evident than in the two qualities of his personality and Presidency that Ta- Nehisi Coates points out in his essay – Obama’s unfailing optimism about the inherent worth and dignity of the American people, and his acceptance of the limitations of the American political system as a brake on getting things done.

We will miss the Obama administration in ways we are only beginning to comprehend. As Joni Mitchell sings: “Don’t it always seem to go, you don’t know what you got till it’s gone...” But at the same time, we should mourn the missed opportunities for a progressive president to name, to preach, and to challenge more decisively the systemic oppressions built into American assumptions of exceptionalism and American systems of government and law enforcement.

If Obama is like us, it is in that we have all been too timid about stepping outside the accepted consensus of the American story, and telling that story from the point of view of those for whom the American dream has never been true, or possible. We have wanted too much to be all things to all people. We can’t afford to continue to do that in an era where the power of definition as well as legislation has shifted to the religious and spiritual right. Our voices – yours, mine and those of both

liberal religious and secular faith are essential, and need to be heard.

As a nation and as people of faith, as we move into this next Administration, we are going to need the same kind of discernment and confidence in our own voice that Martin Luther King found that night in his kitchen. Although we are not facing bomb threats, there are many among us whose very lives and livelihood will be directly impacted by the changes coming. So we are going to have to continue to speak – not shriek; to sing – not shout; to call out injustice in a strong and clear voice, made stronger by the voices of those whose values we share; whose lives we care about, whose hopes and dreams are ours as well.

We must be part of the resistance; both in acts great and small. Those small opportunities for resistance are many, varied, and will come upon us suddenly. We must strip ourselves of any self-righteousness; and simply, plainly and clearly use the power of our voice our words and sometimes our bodies to resist. Dr. King said there are some things in our social system to which all of us ought to be maladjusted. We must not ever become adjusted to the degradation or diminishment of the human spirit.

At the same time, the price of this vigilance can be physical, emotional and spiritual exhaustion. Every single day there seems to be a new outrage revealed either in the news or on social media. We cannot stay at a heightened sense of on guard forever – or, at least for the next four years. What we must also develop is resilience.

In the book: *Resilience: Why Things Bounce Back*, authors Andrew Zolli and Anne Marie Healy write that a key aspect of resilience is called “preserving adaptive capacity,” which is the ability to adapt to changed circumstances while fulfilling one’s core purpose.”<sup>1</sup> What’s important about that insight is the ability to adapt *while fulfilling one’s core purpose*...In order to fulfill one’s purpose, one has to know it...to know what you’re about, what you stand for and what you will NOT stand for. It’s also important to know which battles to pick. Arguing with people on social media or through

blogs probably will only wear down your own resistance and resilience.

Attending anti-racist workshops and retreats; learning about by-stander or up-stander training, which trains us to intervene in situations where we witness verbal harassment; writing, petitioning, and interrupting the narrative that is still so prevalent in this country - that people of color are thugs, that immigrants are stealing our jobs, that people on welfare are lazy, that women are uppity and that gay and lesbian, bisexual and transgender people’s love is somehow undermining the stability of the American family.

While resisting these old tropes, we also have to be resilient; not only for our own long term health, but so those who are most targeted by these slanders can rest. Those of us with privilege, with white skin or some degree of financial security, we’re the ones who, if invited by the leaders of groups targeted, must stand on the front lines and bear the abuse, the scorn, the ridicule.

Why, you may be asking yourself? I ask myself the same thing. Why do these things? Because I believe what is good for black and brown and Asian and Native America is good for America. And what is good for women and children, and the poor and the otherly abled and our gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, genderqueer friends and family members is good for America. We have to send this message to the White House over and over again; you shall not trample on the dignity of the American people. You shall not shred the fragile fabric of this democracy with lies, with half-truths and with tweets.

Friends, this is not going to be an easy time, but it is the time for us to **persist and resist**;

If you’ve never felt that you alone had the strength to fight the powers that be; then **it is time** for all of us together to **persist and resist**;

If you’ve got white privilege, forget about feeling guilty – you’ve got some power, and it’s a privilege to be able to use it **to persist and resist**;

If all you’ve got is a voice or a pen or a body, then you have all you need **to persist and resist**;

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<sup>1</sup> Zolli, Andrew & Healy, Ann Marie. *Resilience: Why Things Bounce Back*, pg. 8

If you've got children whom you want to teach your values – you've got to **persist and resist**; if you've got a vision of what the world should be – then you've got to **persist and resist...**

It's time for every one of us to stand up and stand out and develop the capacity to move and groove to the rhythms of justice whenever we hear them and wherever they are needed to help give people the persistence and resilience to survive.

That's what's at stake here. We need to survive. And by we – I mean not only the values we hold with so many others– but I also mean this Faith tradition and – this Fellowship. How we gonna do that? **PERSIST AND RESIST!** We're going to do it by persisting in developing spiritual, moral and theological resiliency. One of the ways we do that is by not being afraid to step into and experience another's music or culture or life narrative that we may not be entirely comfortable with.

So the song I'm going invite you to participate in singing now is actually one of the ways that we can build theological resiliency. It's a contemporary song that's sung in black churches because its message hits the mark, especially when speaking to young, black and brown men. It says "I need you. You need me. We're all a part of God's body. It is His Will that every being should thrive. You are important to me, I need you to survive."

It's been our Unitarian Universalist practice to change words to hymns and songs to fit a one-size-should-fit-all theology. I'm not doing that with this song, because I see it's a part of our on-going work to step into a particular people of color's reality; and by so doing, honor its truth. You don't have to personally believe in the theology expressed this song, but my hope is that you will wholeheartedly embrace it as true for people whose lives are, and will be threatened by the changes we'll see in the next four years. This is an important song for you to know and to hear and, my hope is, to sing as well: "I Need you to Survive" written by David Frazier; the words are on the screen behind me; and once you hear the tune, you are welcome to join in singing – because Beloveds, we are going to need each other now more than ever – not just to survive – but to thrive. Amen and may it be so.