

Compassionate Resistance

Theodore Parker Unitarian Universalist Church

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Story for All Ages

More Is Not Enough/The Stone Cutter – a Buddhist story

There was once a stone cutter who was dissatisfied with himself and with his position in life. One day he passed a wealthy merchant's house. Through the open gateway, he saw many fine possessions and important visitors. "How powerful that merchant must be!" thought the stone cutter. He became very envious and wished that he could be like the merchant.

To his great surprise, he suddenly became the merchant, enjoying more luxuries and power than he had ever imagined, but envied and detested by those less wealthy than himself. Soon a high official passed by, carried in a sedan chair, accompanied by attendants and escorted by soldiers beating gongs. Everyone, no matter how wealthy, had to bow low before the procession. "How powerful that official is!" he thought. "I wish that I could be a high official!"

Then he became the high official, carried everywhere in his embroidered sedan chair, feared and hated by the people all around. It was a hot summer day, so the official felt very uncomfortable in the sticky sedan chair. He looked up at the sun. It shone proudly in the sky, unaffected by his presence. "How powerful the sun is!" he thought. "I wish that I could be the sun!"

Then he became the sun, shining fiercely down on everyone, scorching the fields, cursed by the farmers and laborers. But a huge black cloud moved between him and the earth, so that his light could no longer shine on everything below. "How powerful that storm cloud is!" he thought. "I wish that I could be a cloud!"

Then he became the cloud, flooding the fields and villages, shouted at by everyone. But soon he found that he was being pushed away by some great force, and realized that it was the wind. "How powerful it is!" he thought. "I wish that I could be the wind!"

Then he became the wind, blowing tiles off the roofs of houses, uprooting trees, feared and hated by all below him. But after a while, he ran up against something that would not move, no matter how forcefully he blew against it - a huge, towering rock. "How powerful that rock is!" he thought. "I wish that I could be a rock!"

Then he became the rock, more powerful than anything else on earth. But as he stood there, he heard the sound of a hammer pounding a chisel into the hard surface, and felt himself being changed. "What could be more powerful than I, the rock?" he thought.

He looked down and saw far below him the figure of a stone cutter.

<http://truecenterpublishing.com/zenstory/more.html#sthash.SbvDIHkl.dpuf>

Reading

"Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round

it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? They say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville; or, Do not these Southern outrages make you blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word.”

- Of Our Spiritual Strivings, pp. 3-4, *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. DuBois

While our service is not about issues of race this morning, it is the beginning of Black History Month, and I want to acknowledge the efforts that so many in this community have been making and continue to make to understand themselves and the broken institutional system that we inhabit and play a part in. I want to thank all of you who have created learning zones, through readings and movies, poster questions, the challenge of wristbands and buttons and yard signs [Black Lives Matter], shared thoughts and feedback. We are learning together. We are working to make of our congregation a sanctuary for all people. It is not fast work, and we make mistakes. We forgive ourselves and keep going; it is long-term and committed effort, and I am humbled and grateful for your willingness to wake up, and stay woke.

Reading

“For the most part, contemporary [people] pay little attention to the Sabbath. We more or less know that the day came to reflect, in U.S. culture, the most stringent disciplinary faith of the Puritans which, in recent time, translated into a moralistic prescription for a day of quiet restraint and prohibition. In many, somewhat pietistic homes that amounted to not playing cards or seeing films on Sunday, and certainly not shopping. I can remember each year debates in our rural community about farmers working on some few Sundays to harvest wheat in the face of devastating rains that were sure to come. I can remember from my earlier days, moreover, that because of “Blue Laws,” Sunday home baseball games for the Phillies and the Pirates in Pennsylvania could not begin a new inning after 6:00 p.m. The sum of all these memories of restraint was essentially negative, a series of “Thou Shalt Nots” that served to echo the more fundamental prohibitions of the Decalogue. This context did not offer much potential for seeing the Sabbath in a positive way as an affirmative declaration of faith or identity. And, of course, as church monopoly in our culture has in many places waned or disappeared, the commitment to Sabbath discipline has likewise receded.”

- Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying NO to the Culture of NOW*.

SERMON

Compassionate Resistance

the Rev. Anne Bancroft

Our poor stonecutter. He was never content. He was never satisfied with his position in life.

Maybe he should have gone to church, except that it’s a Buddhist story. . . .

Walter Brueggemann is a theologian and an Old Testament scholar who wrote a book, published in 2014, called, *Sabbath as Resistance*.¹ “Sabbath,” he says, “is a bodily act of *testimony* to alternative [values] and *resistance* to pervading values and the assumptions behind [them.]”

Our stonecutter had been captured by the allure of power. And, we imagine he was knee-deep in what Brueggemann calls the “turn to commodity,” the idea – resonant in our own culture – that “having more would generate well-being.” (Brueggemann)

It is a fascinating book and I recommend it, but what most captured my attention was his reference to Sabbath – the rest time, the 7th day – as an act of *testimony* and *resistance*.

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We are talking about resistance today. It feels like everywhere we look we see that word these days, or some form of it . . . Resist. Resist. Resist. We have been seeing it locally for more than two years with respect to the Pipeline, and since the election in November, we have seen it proliferate exponentially.

I went to a meeting at First Parish in Brookline the other day to hear more about the process involved in becoming a sanctuary church, and there was a huge sign on the wall: Spectrum of Resistance! There were lots of subject headings and then hundreds of sticky notes attached to it, and I thought, I wouldn’t even know where to start.

And then I remembered: **sabbath as an act of (bodily) testimony (to alternative values) and resistance (to existing ones.)** Start there.

Collect yourself. Avoid the chaos. Find your base. Start there.

This has been another troubling week on our national stage, for many adding insult to the injury of whatever personal concerns may be weighing on them. Whatever side we find ourselves on regarding the wisdom or lack of it being exercised, the speed of it all, alone, renders us anxious.

If we are to survive this period of time – of confusion and what feels like unprecedented divisiveness – if we are to survive with our hearts and souls intact, we must recognize the Sabbath for that gift – the act of compassionate resistance to the chaos – and in recognizing it, commit to practicing it. It feels like we need this bodily act of testimony and resistance so badly.

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¹ *Sabbath as Resistance, Saying No to the Culture of Now*. John Knox Press. Louisville, Kentucky, 2014

Let me share you a bit more about my friend, Walter Brueggemann, and then take a slightly different tack from his course.

Brueggemann sets up a duality in his book – subtitled *Saying No to the Culture of Now*. On the one hand, Pharaoh’s culture of frantic productivity and fear of scarcity (making bricks, building pyramids, working, working, working 24/7) over and against God’s commandments to trust that “enough” would be provided, and to seek regular rest in that trust. We can feel the parallels between Egypt’s culture and our own: more is better, bigger is best, produce, produce, produce in order to avoid disaster. The commandments assure us that wasn’t important. Love God. Love your neighbor. Love is abundant, and oh – by the way, Brueggemann reminds us, dipping into the Gospels – you cannot serve two masters. You cannot serve the Spirit of Love and money simultaneously. You must choose, and Sabbath will help you “break the pattern of the divided heart.”

We are still faced with these challenges, right? We still struggle with wanting more than we need; we worry about financial stability and security, often doing what serves us, as opposed to what serves the common good.

But more than manna, right now, more than the financial or security pulls that tug at us, we are in a struggle for our hearts. Many of us are so caught in fear and anxiety, in anger and urgency that we have jumped on the boat and hoisted the flags that say “fight, fight, fight,” and are going full-steam ahead.

Wait, I want to say. You will be lost in your hurry. The heart of you, the compassion in you, will get lost.

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Brueggemann at one point reminds us that the Israelites wanted to eschew Pharaoh and all his values. They just didn’t realize how hard freedom would be. We are coming to see that, aren’t we?

Many of us are concerned that our freedoms are at risk, that the present political climate will deny us the ever-evolving rights and liberties that our country has stood for, imperfect and unequal as they have been, DuBois reminded us earlier.

But we can only be humbled as we join the myriad countries who have struggled, as well. Did we think we were immune? How is it we allowed ourselves such hubris?

Brueggemann says that the “faithful practice of work stoppage . . . declares in bodily ways that we will not participate in the anxiety system that pervades our social environment.” And more, that we must not be defined by that system.

Sabbath – as an act of testimony and resistance. I will not lose my heart to this time. I will rest and renew as an act of resistance to the chaos, with compassion for myself and others.

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A few years ago I attended a conference on Excellence in Ministry. The senior minister of the host congregation in Seattle shared a conversation he had had with a Catholic colleague, the priest for a local parish. This was during the tenure of Pope Benedict, the former Cardinal Ratzinger, a conservative and by-the-books leader. The minister asked his colleague how he felt about serving his congregation with the ultra-conservative and restrictive news coming out of Rome, to which the priest replied, “it’s not an issue for me. I know whose I am.”

It begged the question – quite suddenly - for every Unitarian Universalist minister in attendance. You could hear the in-breath coming up short. “Whose are you?” We can imagine the priest meant he had given his heart and allegiance to Jesus. And, there were some among us similarly disposed, I’m sure.

It felt like a push comes to shove kind of moment. How would we each name that to which we belonged? In the company of our non-creedal, non-dogmatic tradition, would we have the courage to do so? How would we each name the spirit or otherwise that we had given some portion of our hearts and souls to? Would we call it God? Would we call it love? Would we name it as each other? Was it the earth, Gaia, to whom we pledged ourselves?

I think we, here, are similarly challenged just now to dig within and determine whose we are.

You may find this an irrelevant question. But particularly when we are in collective states of uncertainty, of anxiety, of confusion, it can be very helpful to have a sense of one’s base, one’s touchstone.

In this community, we have no need to have the same one, or even to name them similarly, there is no requirement, and no test – but to be able to locate that spark for yourself, whatever it is. That awareness informs our compassion, and our resistance.

Our opening words this morning came from a story in a small book called *Breakfast Epiphanies*², by the Episcopal priest, the Rev. David Anderson. It is subtitled *Finding Wonder in the Everyday*. (Someday I will create a piece of art with all my favorite book titles, or perhaps just start posting them around my house.) In the jacket description, it says, “he explores how the divine surprises us in these ordinary events.” I so hope the divine – however we imagine that – can still surprise us in these not-very-ordinary days, that is, I hope we can still be surprised by life.

² Anderson, David. *Breakfast Epiphanies*.

Anderson tells the story of the time his church burned to the ground. Can you imagine how that would feel? They had to move their preschool down the street to the Quaker meetinghouse. He describes a child tugging at his sleeve on the morning they opened at the new location. She was inviting him to run across the yard, and even though he was wearing a suit and tie, he joins her and runs to find the new playground and then play tag. “For the first time since the trauma I forgot about it – for nearly twenty still seconds.” He describes how every other moment, waking or sleeping, he smelled smoke and saw flames, but “even twenty seconds in a place where we are free (which is another way of describing love) can heal a wounded heart.” It was his Sabbath, running in a playground with a small child.

And here’s the thing. He didn’t get there by himself. “. . . often,” he suggests, “we can’t get to that place by trying. We have to be pulled through the door.”

When I asked you to imagine your base, what came up for you? Was there a spark that regularly informs your compassion? (Or occasionally informs it?) And if one did not jump to mind, don’t worry. Think on it in the days ahead, gently and curiously.

Anderson offers us one thought. “This is grace,” he suggests, “when an unwitting child pulls me into twenty seconds of fire-forgetting joy. Grace is the mysterious pull from somewhere beyond my own little self. Only later, catching my breath, do I realize that I have been to another place and back.”

Only later, I would suggest, does he realize his time of Sabbath – of bodily testimony and resistance to the despair of the fire.

In this time, when we may feel that much around us is in some form of flame – at the very least, at risk to be so different as to feel unrecognizable – let us resist the pull to be engulfed by it. Let us not lose our very hearts and souls to this time by turning only to fight.

Let us turn also to Sabbath – where we are reminded of and renewed in another way. Let us inhabit *with our bodies* a testimony to love as the alternative and a resistance that affirms compassion, for ourselves and for all those around us.

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Sometimes we sing in celebration of what we have. Sometimes we sing about that to which we aspire. Whether you’ve got it or want it, let’s sing together . . .

Hymn #100 I’ve Got Peace Like a River