

## THE COURAGE TO RESIST

By David Herndon

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First Unitarian Church

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In his book The Forgotten Door, published in 1965, Alexander Key tells the story of a young boy watching the stars with his family on a hillside covered with sweet summer grass. But then he steps to one side and falls down a hole in the earth.

When he regains consciousness, he finds himself in a shallow cave. Looking up, however, he sees no passage into the cave from above. He crawls to the entrance and drinks from a spring, which helps ease the aches and pains from his fall. Emerging from the cave, he looks around at wooded slopes with absolutely no idea where he could be.

Mystified and confused, the young boy begins walking to learn more about his predicament. At the bottom of the wooded slopes he arrives at a valley with fields and fences and the occasional farmhouse. After a narrow escape from a suspicious and hostile farmer, he finds a hiding place by the side of a country road and waits for someone who might help him.

An hour later, after several cars and pick-up trucks have passed, the young boy hails a passing vehicle containing a mother, a father, and two children. They take him back to their home, nurse his aches and pains, provide him a warm supper, and offer him a comfortable bed—all the while wondering who this strange boy could be.

The plot of the story becomes more complex at this point, and I will not review all the details. It will suffice for me to say that the family soon discovers that this young boy is quite extraordinary. He apparently has the ability to read the thoughts of other people. He learns English within one or two days. And he can run by jumping, perhaps thirty or forty feet with a single stride. But he has great difficulty remembering who he is and where he has come from. Moreover, the family learns that ordinary concepts like using money, locking doors, hunting animals, telling untruths, and fighting wars simply have no meaning for this strange young boy.

The plot of the story grows tense when the young boy is accused by the suspicious and hostile farmer of stealing some expensive equipment. At a preliminary hearing before the local judge in the small town in the center of this rural county in the Southern Appalachians, the young boy tries to explain who he is by demonstrating his mind-reading abilities. Despite the judge's strict orders that no one present is to tell anyone what they have witnessed, headlines in the next day's local newspaper raise pointed questions about the so-called "wild boy." Soon a high-ranking military intelligence officer comes to this remote valley to make inquiries about the boy.

Meanwhile, the father in the family and the young boy have discovered the cave where the young boy found himself after falling through the hole in the earth. By now, they have pretty well figured out that the young boy has come from some place other than earth, that he came through some long-unused doorway from that place to earth, and that the threshold of the earth side of that door is the cave high up on the wooded slope.

An evening or two later, with the military intelligence officer intent on capturing the young boy, with television news reporters creating a glare of publicity, and with many of the local citizens more than curious about the “unnatural” guest of the family, under cover of darkness a group of suspicious and hostile men with rifles and flashlights are approaching the fences of the family’s farm. There is a moment of fear and uncertainty, and then suddenly the young boy receives the thoughts of his family calling for him. Having made repairs on the long-unused door, they have come through the door to find him. Quickly the young boy convinces his new family to follow him. Together they elude capture and walk uphill to the cave, the young boy and his four friends. The people from the other side of the door have brought lights with them. There is a moment of grateful reunion, and then the lights disappear, one by one, and then the woods become quiet again, as if no one had been there at all. In the valley, those coming after the strange boy and the family who sheltered him find the house unlocked, the evening meal untouched on the table, the inhabitants gone, and all their belongings left behind.

Many of us may have felt something like the young boy who falls through the forgotten door into an unfamiliar place. I first read The Forgotten Door when I was about twelve years old. Just about that time, my family moved from the sweeping wheat fields of North Dakota to the ancient wooded hills of the Southern Appalachian region. Like the young boy in the story, I felt strange and confused. The landscape was unfamiliar, the culture was unfamiliar, the language was unfamiliar.

But one need not experience a geographic move to feel as though one has fallen through a forgotten door. Many Unitarian Universalists and other progressive people feel sometimes that they are strangers in a strange land. Whether by inborn constitution, or by deliberate education, or by happy accident, we come to have values that set us apart from the mainstream culture. We may question a wide range of theological, social, political, and cultural understandings that are quite common in our culture.

Specifically, we may wonder how someone like the Rev. Pat Robertson, who this past week publicly called for the assassination of the President of Venezuela, could have risen to such a high and mighty place in our society. Or we may wonder how our own President could say that the principled dissent of Cindy Sheehan only weakens the United States, as he recently did, essentially equating political opposition to current foreign policy in Iraq with disloyalty to the nation.

More generally, we may wonder why so many people live in poverty in our world, why the human rights of so many people are so routinely denied, why, when untold millions of people have died in wars, we still use deadly violence to settle conflicts, why religion so often divides rather than unites, why we have such trouble structuring our societies in environmentally sustainable ways.

But unlike the young boy who fell through the forgotten door from a distant place where civilization has advanced far beyond our own, practicing ethical standards far higher than our own, we who inhabit this world and this chapter of history cannot step

through a door and transport ourselves to some distant world, with our houses unlocked, our evening meals touched on our tables, and our belongings left behind. We must remain here.

Resignation is one response to the huge gulf between the world we envision and the world we actually inhabit.

But there is another response, a response I would call resistance. We can resist the cruelties and injustices and failures of our world as it is, while contributing toward initiatives and communities that can move our present world a little closer toward the world we envision.

Resistance can take several forms. First, resistance can be personal. The poet e. e. cummings once said: “To be nobody-but-[your]self—in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else—means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight, and never stop fighting.” I appreciate the fierceness that cummings places into this challenging statement. To be fully and vibrantly who one actually is, then, is the result of fierce resistance.

When cummings implies that one should resist the forces that seek “to make you everybody else,” we need not understand him to mean that one should strive to be totally different from everyone else. Rather, the goal is simply authenticity. In his biography of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Robert Richardson wrote that Emerson “had a powerful craving for direct, personal, unmediated experience. This is what he meant when he insisted that one should strive for an original relation to the universe. Not a novel relation, just one’s own.”<sup>1</sup> In this spirit, we can say that one need not have a unique and entirely distinctive personality. Rather, the goal is simply to have one’s own personality.

In family systems theory, the process of developing an authentic personality is called “differentiation.” Edwin Friedman, a rabbi and psychologist who worked with Murray Bowen, the founder of family systems theory, offers the following definition: “Differentiation means the capacity of a family member to define his or her own life’s goals and values apart from surrounding togetherness pressures, to say ‘I’ when others are demanding ‘you’ and ‘we.’”<sup>2</sup> Although Friedman does not inject his statement with as much fierceness as cummings did, nevertheless both suggest that being true to one’s self requires no little resistance to the forces of sameness and conformity.

If one part of personal resistance is self-differentiation, another part of personal resistance is self-discipline. Not every desire or passion that wells up within us is unquestionably honorable. We may “fight the hardest battle which any human can fight, and never stop fighting,” as e. e. cummings said, in order to bring forth an authentic personal identity from within ourselves. But in that creative flux coming from within ourselves we need to be able to discern what is worthwhile and what can be set aside. Some of what comes forth from within us is selfish, immature, mean-spirited, impatient, self-centered, and perhaps even lazy. We need to be able to discern what to nurture and what to avoid, and then discipline ourselves to nurture what should be nurtured and avoid what should be avoided.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert D. Richardson, Emerson: The Mind on Fire (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Edwin Friedman, Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue (New York: Guilford Press, 1985), p. 27.

“If only it were all so simple!” wrote Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in The Gulag Archipelago. “If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.”<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this sermon, that statement makes the point with perhaps excessive vigor. I am simply observing that it is naïve to think that just being oneself with no outside interference, just going with the flow of desires and impulses and random thoughts that well up inside, will automatically produce a perfectly honorable person. Self-discipline is necessary as well. I would add that addictions and psychological difficulties such as depression can make this even more challenging.

So far in my sermon I have said that we can choose to respond to the huge gulf between the world we envision and the world we actually inhabit with resignation or with resistance, and I said that one form of resistance is personal. Another form of resistance is political or social action.

In his book God’s Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn’t Get It, Jim Wallis offers important counsel for those wishing to engage in political or social action. He writes: “Many people will engage in protest, but even more are likely to follow an alternative that offers a better way. To offer an alternative is always more challenging than just protest; it requires more work, creativity, and risk.”<sup>4</sup> He continues: “Protest should not be merely the politics of complaint . . . It should instead show the way for both personal and social transformation. That’s what excites people and invites them to give their lives for something larger than themselves. The power of protest is not in its anger but its invitation. The test of protest is whether it points and opens the way to change or merely denounces what is.”<sup>5</sup> Wallis concludes: “We need people who pledge themselves, not just to object to what is wrong, but to help find and fashion an alternative.”<sup>6</sup>

I believe that Unitarian Universalists are much better about offering theological alternatives nowadays than we were in the 1960s when I was growing up in our movement. At that time, it seems to me, we had trouble identifying our theological affirmations. It was easy to say what we did not believe, but it was difficult for us to say what we did believe. “No” was easier than “yes.” Protest was easier than invitation. The adoption of our seven principles twenty years ago, in 1985, signaled a new approach. We created what linguist George Lakoff would call a new way of framing our concerns, our own way of framing our concerns. We no longer had to fumble and stumble when called upon to explain ourselves. Do we believe in the Virgin Birth? No. Do we believe in saints and sacraments? No. Do we believe in the Second Coming of Christ? No. But those questions come from someone else’s frame, and of course we will not have very interesting things to say in that frame. But when we use our own frame, then the

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<sup>3</sup> Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, The Gulag Archipelago, translated by Thomas P. Whitney (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 168.

<sup>4</sup> Jim Wallis, God’s Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn’t Get It (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), p. 46.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

questions might be: Do you affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person? Yes. Do you seek justice, equity, and compassion? Yes. Do you understand yourselves to be part of an interdependent web? Yes. In this frame of reference, in our own frame of reference, we can be much more positive.

But many Unitarian Universalists, along with many other progressive people, may still have room to grow when it comes to political and social action. Nonviolent approaches to conflict resolution provide one example. Jim Wallis strongly believes in nonviolence, yet he also strongly believes that anti-war protests are not nearly enough. He writes: “If nonviolence is to be credible, it must answer the questions that violence purports to answer, but in a better way. Those who seek alternatives to war must not underestimate the problem of evil in the world or the threat of ruthless and dangerous dictators like Saddam Hussein. . . . In their protest against the war in Iraq, some in the peace movement seemed to underestimate the evil and dangers of Saddam, or, at least, failed to respond adequately to his many atrocities. . . . So those who clearly did propose to deal with Saddam appeared to be stronger than those who didn’t. When a peace movement appears to be ‘soft’ on the problems that war claims to be able to solve, alternative solutions will seem weak.”<sup>7</sup> Wallis concludes: “To avoid or prevent war, we must have answers that effectively deal with the real problems and threats but are better than war.”<sup>8</sup>

Thus, resistance, to be effective, needs to move beyond protest and offer credible solutions. This is not easy, and the work can be discouraging. But it might be helpful to recall this observation from the physicist Freeman Dyson: “Hope is not the lucky gift of circumstance or disposition, but a virtue like faith and love, to be practiced whether or not we find it easy or even natural, because it is necessary to our survival as human beings.”

Alexander Key tells the story of a forgotten door. But that is not the only forgotten door we might consider this morning. Sometimes the door of equal opportunity is a forgotten door. Sometimes the door of human rights is a forgotten door. Sometimes the door of nonviolent conflict resolution is a forgotten door. Sometimes the door of ethical treatment of animals and stewardship of the earth is a forgotten door. It is a worthy aim for Unitarian Universalists and other progressive people to remember the doors, too often forgotten, through which our own civilization must pass if we are to advance: and not only remember these forgotten doors, but open them wide and invite our entire world to walk through them.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.