

Resisting Authority

January 1, 2012

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Welcoming, Centering, Kindling, Opening:

We are here
on the first day of the month, and the new year,
to worship, to celebrate life and love
within the labyrinth of our time on earth.
It's freedom, not fate, which calls us;
honesty, not ease, which summons us here.

And so, without guarantees, we lean into joy, and bend toward a just way of life, both for our own sakes, and for the sake of our children and all beings with whom we share the earth. We would engage our mission wholeheartedly, with courage, self-questioning, compassion, vulnerability and honesty.

[Let readers be aware that there was a classical Chartres Labyrinth in the center of the Meeting House, with the chairs all around it. Thus references to the labyrinth, which is not a maze.]

Sequence for New Year's Day

Hear these words, written 2500 years ago by an unknown prophet,
whose texts were attached to the book of the prophet Isaiah:
How beautiful in the highlands are the feet of those who bring good news of peace.
And in the chambers of my heart,
the echoes of this great text flow like this:
*How beautiful in the lowlands are the hands
of those who comfort.*
How beautiful in the sky are the winter birds
which carol in the clouds.
*How beautiful in the sea are the dolphins
which leap.*
How beautiful in the community are the tears
which glisten on faces.
*How beautiful in the assembly are the courtesies
which support striking differences.*
How beautiful in the heart are the struggles
which remind us to seize each day with joy.
*How beautiful in the silence is the refreshment
which flows when words are dropped to the floor
and life is only what we sense, not what we say:
silence*

How beautiful in the assembly are the lives of those who remember loved ones; face themselves in the mirror of love; reach out to others in honesty; and bless the world with their lives. Calling to mind our own personal lives in the context of the larger life, our community, we are free here and now to name silently within, or whisper aloud, the names of the people who dwell today and every day in our hearts of love, worry, struggle or memory.

naming

How beautiful are the words of the prophet Isaiah:

רמא העושי עימשם בוט רשבם מולש עימשם רשבם ילגר מיררה לע וואן המ
כיהלא קלמ וויצל:

Mah nawu 'al heharim ragle m'vasser mashmiya shalom m'vasser tov mashmiya yeshu'a.

How beautiful upon the highlands are the feet of those who announce the good news of peace.

The First Reading *is from a famous sermon my dear friend Jane Rzepka preached in Madison back in 1996.*

There are two kinds of people. There are people who can sit there and let the phone ring, and people who just *have* to answer it. There are people who want to lay out a vacation's precise itinerary, and people who'd rather drift. Cat people. Dog people. Two kinds of people: People who like to shop; people who hate to shop. People who wear hats. People who don't. Shower people; bath people. Two kinds of people. People who believe a cup needs a saucer; and those who never notice. People who always know what time it is; and others who lose track. Some people keep everything; some throw it away. Some read the manual, and some fiddle with the knobs. Some like sailboats; for others it has to be a power boat. Two kinds of people. There are people who file every warranty, nice and neat. Others set them free. There are people who cross only at the crosswalk; and others who just...cross. Some people leave the dishes in the sink; others need to get them washed right away. We have morning people; night people. Some people jump into the pool; and the others like the slow, inch by inch approach. Two kinds of people. Two kinds of people.

The notion of "kinds of people" seems to be a natural one. We know it's never true, exactly, and that life is more complicated than that and the distinctions more subtle. We know how dangerous stereotyping is. We have our little systems for categorizing. They make sense, they create order, they seem obvious, real, and true – until we're confronted with someone else's categories. Once we hear a list of categories so distinct from the ones we ordinarily encounter, we are reminded that all categories in our lives are wholly artificial.

The Second Reading *is from the Scroll of Qoheleth, or Ecclesiastes, in the Hebrew Scriptures, which was written and edited by an anonymous philosopher in the 4th to 3rd centuries before the common era. This is my edition of Eugene Peterson's breezy and wonderful translation.*

Don't always be asking, "Where are the good old days gone?"

Wise folks don't ask foolish questions.

There is nothing better than wisdom.

Knowing how to interpret the meaning of life.

Wisdom puts light in the eyes, and brings gentleness

to words and manners.
Seize life now! Enjoy the bread you eat,
drink from your cup with a robust heart,
for God takes pleasure in your pleasure.
Dress well each and every morning, don't skimp on colors and grooming.
Relish life with the one you love, each and every day, too, for life is precarious.
Every day is a gift. Make the most of each one.
Whatever work you choose to do, do it heartily.
Invest in acts of generosity,
which always yield high return.

Sermon

So, it's New Year's Day in the year 2012. I'm pretty sure that when I was a ten-year-old, I believed that by now, I would see flying cars, a Hilton Hotel on the Moon, feel pride at a few trips to Mars under our belt, and marvel at the subway tunnel under the Atlantic Ocean to get us to London in a couple of hours. You know. The Future, capital F. Roadways soaring in the air between mile-high skyscrapers, spaceships to Alpha Centauri, and life spans of two hundred-fifty years apiece, just like that. Wouldn't you know it...all we have are these lousy cell phones (*holds one*) to indicate that decades have passed.

So, it's New Year's Day in the year 2012. There are a disturbingly high percentage of people in the US of A who, by totally twisting ancient Mayan texts, predict an end to it all; or, who read their own rage into the Rorschach verses of Nostradamus; or who ignorantly twist and literalize the images of the Book of Revelation with a lunatic's precision of dates; or who use the 1954 movie by George Pal, "When Worlds Collide," to shape their conviction that a fictional planet called Nibiru will pulverize the earth this year and smash us all to bits. Me, I just shake my head. And muster up some gladness that at least we do have some *small* measurable progress in this 2012. (*lifts up smartphone again*) At least I can research Nostradamus and Nibiru in *two minutes flat* on this thing. In 1960 I would have had to ride my bicycle to the library and spend a hearty *two hours*--or even *two days*--looking up the apocalyptic foibles of humanity.

So, it's New Year's Day in the year 2012. Election craziness is already beginning to pollute the media, understandable worry about the economy of *the whole world* is still stirring up our anxieties, and people are still searching for work in large numbers.

But, I have to say this too. In this new year of 2012, it's not all tough news. People are also searching for deeper meanings in their lives, for truths which impel them rather than repel them, and for the kind of love that roots them in the happiness, the joy, they first imagined for their future selves...with or without flying cars.

And Alice Walker tells us that "Resistance is the secret of joy." (*Possessing the Secret of Joy, 1992*)

It is? Resistance to what?

I'm suggesting this morning it's to authority. Now please, I am not talking about turning my back

to the mayor or congressperson, or thumbing my nose at some bishop or pastor that claims to know everything, or folding my arms and frowning while some professor or teacher or librarian or doctor is doing what they do. I'm not talking about tossing away organizational policy manuals, burning the newspaper because a critic slammed my new favorite movie, or righteously nitpicking, with flourish, the Ten Commandments. Or the Sermon on The Mount. Or the 12 Steps. Or the Bill of Rights. I'm not talking about those kinds of authority right now.

I am talking about the authorities in our lives which are invisible, which don't wear uniforms, tailored suits or smart outfits, badges, lab-coats, stoles, or which are not written down on paper somewhere.

Jane Rzepka makes clear to me the locus of the first authority I want to resist with all my heart. I am going to call it the Binary Authority of Categories. The idea that there are two, and only two, categories of anything and everything. Which translates, she says, into the authoritarian assertion that there are two, and only two kinds of people. *There are people who can sit there and let the phone ring, and people who just have to answer it. There are people who want to lay out a vacation's precise itinerary, and people who'd rather drift. Cat people. Dog people. People who like to shop; people who hate to shop. People who wear hats. People who don't. Shower people; bath people. People who always know what time it is; and others who lose track. Some people keep everything; some throw it away. Some read the manual, and some fiddle with the knobs. There are people who file every warranty, nice and neat. Others set them free. Some people leave the dishes in the sink; others need to get them washed right away. We have morning people; night people; and so many more she offered us. To that, I need to add: The introvert and the extrovert. The secular and the spiritual. The political and the religious; the scientific and the religious. And my personal favorite: the believer and the non-believer. In summary, I want to resist the claimed authority of the either-or. But thankfully, after that strobe-like list of *either's* and *or's*, Jane offers us this sensible and clear-eyed observation: *The notion of "kinds of people" seems to be a natural one. We know it's never true, exactly, and that life is more complicated than that and the distinctions more subtle. We know how dangerous stereotyping is. We have our little systems for categorizing. They make sense, they create order, they seem obvious, real, and true – until we're confronted with someone else's categories. Once we hear a list of categories so distinct from the ones we ordinarily encounter, we are reminded that **all categories in our lives are wholly artificial.****

Wholly artificial. Made up. Fictional. Projected. Comforting for a moment because it creates order, but dangerous if it persists, because the order it creates will eventually hurt someone outside our neat little categorical house of cards. "You know how those Catholics are..." is a categorical statement that hurts. "Oh he's one of these Christian evangelicals...they are all crazy as far as I am concerned." That is a categorical statement with the power to hurt, despite, yes, *despite* the true obnoxiousness of your uncle Faustus who goes on about non-Christians roasting in hell, or about the "evils" of abortion or same-sex marriage; or about those fool tax-loving Democrats; and, and here I quote, "that damn Obama who has ruined our country." His categories hurt too....but that does not mean we have to return the favor and universalize his hurtfulness.

And as far as I'm concerned, the world is not divided between believers and non-believers. I can think of at least ten other alternatives to either belief or unbelief. Jungian alternatives. Spiritual

practice alternatives. Cultural alternatives, like many Reconstructionist Jews, or Cultural Catholics. Emergent Evangelical alternatives. Multi-cultural alternatives. Classical mystical tradition alternatives, such as those of Johannes Eckhart or Shankara. Poetic alternatives. Alternatives where people pray *without irony* to "Oh God, you who both are and are not..." You can complain about Karl Marx's economic theories, or you can revere him, but in any case, I liked reading recently that he was very clear that "non-belief" is simply a mirror form of "belief" as understood by the non-believer, and that ultimately, this artificial dualism too would not stand up to the passage of time.

So I want to spend 2012 resisting the authority of binary, either-or categories. I may fall into using them some times...it's normal, Jane reminds us, but my commitment is to *shatter* those "eithers" and those "ors"...those artificial, if sometimes momentarily convenient, categories. And in that resistance, I imagine finding some sense of joy.

The second authority I want to resist is the authority of the Imagined Past. As the unknown philosopher who wrote the scroll of Qoheleth put it so clearly: *"Don't always be asking 'Where are the good old days gone?' Wise folks don't ask foolish questions. There is nothing better than wisdom. Wisdom... brings gentleness to words and manners."*

So much of the national conversation is neither gentle nor mannered. Loud voices decry the way our nation has been going, and lift up the way "it used to be" as some ideal: white picket fences edging the bungalow's lawn, families of pearl-wearing mothers and suit-wearing fathers and the two aw-shucks kids sitting around the table eating pot-pies with superlative manners, the beloved old malt shop down the street, the friendly and honest auto-mechanic named Mac down at the Shell station, and a \$40 grocery bill for the week for a family of four. And none of these Roes or Wades, these marches on Washington, these little people ungratefully resenting trickle-down economic philosophy, these pride parades and movies suggesting that sexualities, and human beings, come in more than one representational variety. Why can't churches be family size instead of these large and even mega-church monstrosities? And we never used to mention Hanukkah or Kwanzaa or things like that. Why start now?

But this is fantasy-land of course. Based in part, sure, on the personal memories of a small number of people, but also on the self-serving desire to make those singular personal memories part of the universal memory of the national past. So don't even bring up the parts of the past that don't fit this perfect little fantasy...such as that African American veterans couldn't get loans to buy homes whereas their white comrades could, after the Second World War. Or that there were mega churches back in the thirties, except that they were all liberal and the often Unitarian-based People's Churches, such as the one in Chicago led by Preston Bradley with 4000 members; or urban Catholic parishes with 25,000 members like the one I went to; and that the conservative evangelical churches were small in those days. Or, that there were marches in the 30's too, and that being invisible in your sexuality or your gender does not mean the same thing as not-existing; and that just because you personally weren't neighbors with the Blitzsteins in 1953 doesn't mean that Hanukkah is a new invention. Yes, Kwanzaa wasn't invented yet, but then neither were these fool cell-phones, (*lift it up again*) soooo... so what? The "good old days" were partially good, partially bad, partially neutral, just like these present days. There were picket fence homes *and* tenements back then, just as now there are \$500,000 homes in the suburbs *and* \$5000 homes in the ghetto. The choice to abort a pregnancy has been chosen since ancient

times, and it has nothing to do with either Roe or Wade. Liberals and conservatives are saying rough things to each other? Do you think vocal anarchists like Emma Goldman pulled her punches when speaking of the likes of the KKK blossoming all over the South in the "good old days"? She was boldly lifting up the dignity and rights of sexual minorities back in 1915 too. So Qoheleth is right, I think. Resist *anyone* moaning and wringing their hands that the good old days are gone, and how sad that is. There *is* no wisdom in such a thing, especially since they actually *are* gone, that is, in the past. Only the present is here. And we are wise, the author says, when we make the best of every *present* day, not lionize days that never were like we think they were anyway. And I know that I for one DO experience the feeling of joy when I live in the present, instead of living with resentment that much of what I knew in 1960 no longer exists.

The third thing I want to resist is Stated Interpretations of Reality instead of Actual Sensual Reality. What do I mean? Qoheleth says: *Seize life now! Enjoy the bread you eat, drink from your cup with a robust heart, for God takes pleasure in your pleasure. Dress well each and every morning, don't skimp on colors and grooming. Relish life with the one you love, each and every day, too, for life is precarious.*

These are rich sensual details. Bread and wine, cloth and color, relishing a loved one. Sensual reality. I can taste bread. I can life up a cup in toast on New Years Eve. I can wear colors around my neck.

But this week, I had to resist someone trying to get me to not pay attention to sensual details. I have a friend, whom I've mentioned many times in this pulpit before, who has been struggling with alcoholism for much of his life. He's been doing pretty well for a few years now, getting his life in order, and I have been proud at his progress. It's a hard road, certainly. But this week he showed up at the front door of my building, drunk, WAY drunk, at one o'clock AM. He wanted me to let him in. I told him **No**. I told him he was drunk, and that I was mad at him for waking me up, and disappointed in him. He said, "But I'm not drunk; I haven't had a single beer." He said this with *amazingly* convincing sincerity. Part of me wanted to buckle and believe him, it was so sincere. But I resisted his own description of his reality, and opted instead for the sensual reality I myself perceived. I said to him: "I can see your lower lip is swollen, which has always been clear evidence that you tossed quite a few down. Your voice is lower by a whole half-octave, and it's raspy. Your words are slurred. You are drunk." He kept on insisting he was not drunk. "But you are my friend!" he said. "You should be there for me." He was bringing out the big guns, because, despite his problems I have always loved and cared for him. But, fortunately, I didn't trust his sincerity, or even my sympathy for him as a troubled human being I've genuinely cared for, but rather, my own capacity to read the sensual details of the reality right before my eyes. It meant leaving him outside in the cold, barely able to walk...so it was a serious decision to trust my senses and not his words. He would have to sleep outside. But I did it. The whole incident kept me up for a couple of hours because it disturbed me that he had lost himself again, and it pained me to witness this. But reality is what it is, not what I wish it could, or should, be.

But where is the joy in such resistance? you may well ask. You may say: "Deciding not to be co-dependent is exhausting and hard work. I know. I have an addicted father, son, brother, mother, daughter, spouse, friend, or second cousin twice removed. It doesn't seem joyous when I have to resist their incessant baffling attempts to deceive me."

I understand, but I do feel the joy of knowing that I have not contributed to his self-deception by falling for it. Yes, he was *angry* I resisted his ploy. Yes, it kept me up. Yes, he wanted to blame everyone but himself. But I know that giving in to him to avoid those pains would have made things worse both for me *and* for him. Sometimes, just keeping things from getting worse is even better than when everything is going OK without me. Sometimes walking the labyrinth of life, where you yourself come out of it exactly where you entered it, is more helpful than trying to solve the difficult maze erected by those suffering from deep addictions.

So, it's New Year's Day in the year 2012. It's right now; not yesterday, not tomorrow. We're not divided into only two categories, but are a community of unique individuals with amazing stories that overlap sometimes, and don't overlap sometimes. But no matter, the wise know that every category is artificial, and has no lasting authority.

And it's not the past, the good old days, with all of their joys and sorrows, ideals and disappointments, *but the present right before us*, with its joys and sorrows, its ideals and disappointments mixed together, where we really live. It's the present moment, not tomorrow, which offers us sensual details we can relish, and to which we pay attention to make our responses to life clear. By resisting the Binary Authority that saws reality into artificial either/ors; or by resisting the Authority of the Imagined Past that fools us into thinking that change, in-and-of-itself, is evil; and by resisting the Authority of Described Reality instead of engaging with what I actually sense, I might, in this year 2012, actually experience a deeper joy than I ever before imagined.

Offering

To invest in our future, to secure the strength of the presence of this congregation in the lives of its members and in the life of the community it embraces, to offer practical expression of our stated mission of generosity of spirit, we offer this time of offering. It's not too late to put Holiday Appeal on the Memo Line if you are writing a check. Guest at Your Table boxes can also be placed in the baskets today.

Riff Prayer

(On) ne voit pas les choses du dehors. (Nous sommes) dans le labyrinthe aussi. (*Alain Robbe-Grillet Dans Le Labyrinthe 1959*)

We are in the labyrinth too.

We cannot stand outside the cosmos.

We cannot get a view from the other side of the edge of things.

We can only live within the universe,

and face what befalls us with honesty, courage,

doubt, faithfulness and the life-giving hallelujah

we call wonder, we call love, we call awe,

we call humility. The glory of this hallelujah

chorus echoing through our hearts is the very soul of our life on earth. Glory, glory, hallelujah!