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Courage & Compliance, 1/22/17

As a new administration moves in to the White House, the strength and vision of progressive religious institutions is even more important. We need one another to cultivate courage and support each other when we inevitably and unintentionally comply with injustice.

Sermon

Yesterday, we joined 10,000 people at the Women's March rally at the State Capitol – the largest protest there in at least a decade, if not more. [When I asked you to raise your hand if you were there, over half the congregation raised hands!] I've heard there were 5,000 folks from CT at the Women's March in DC – including a dozen from here, and others who went to march in Boston & NYC. People are marching this weekend who have never marched before. And gosh was it beautiful! So many women, so many children, so many male allies and queer & trans folk.

3 Million worldwide – small towns w over 1000 people, my nephews' first protest. 1400 in Astoria, OR (pop. 10,000), and 50 in Mendocino, AL (pop. 250)!

Yesterday we came out to say “we won't let fear and anxiety isolate us, together we will #GrowTheResistance.” We'll need that inspiration and beauty moving forward!

I am clear that more people will die and the environment will suffer under the policies of Trump and the current Congress.

The impending repeal of the Affordable Care Act, defunding of Planned Parenthood, deportation of thousands of immigrants, dismantling the already spotty safety net for poor and disabled folks, and loosening environmental regulation and more will all result in much suffering.

Then there are the cultural impacts of Trump's misogyny and racism: we've already seen an increase in hate crimes targeting those perceived to be Muslim, LGBTQ, and women. Last week the JCC down the street was one of 16 Jewish community centers to receive bomb threats.¹ Yesterday at the march in DC, USH member Lindsey Jones reported that a “man grabbed her arm as he shouted into her face: “I love pussy!” and a group of white men in their 60s or 70s had a loud discussion about how excited they were for [her] to get raped. “

Change is already happening, and the stakes are high. I'd like to bask in the beauty and hope of the millions out protesting yesterday, yet we cannot rest there – the stakes are too high.

My greatest fear is that President Trump will lead us to authoritarian dictatorship with mass detention/deportation/killings. I hope this fear is unfounded, but I can't rule out the possibility.

And so I've been drawn to books on Nazi Germany – hoping to understand more how a people could allow their newly appointed Chancellor to so quickly rip apart the fabric of their republic and implement lethal fascism.

What I've found, in part, are incredible stories of resistance by ordinary people and communities, just as we did this weekend. What underlies each of these stories are strong values and principles that served as a strong compass in impossible times.

For Tuvia Bielski, Saving Lives was the principle he lived by. Tuvia and his brothers fled to the forest in Belorussia and their forest community eventually grew to over 1200 Jews. There were many other groups of Partisans in the forest – mostly Russians and some Belorussions & Poles who were resisting the Nazis, and even some other Jewish Partisan groups, mostly young men, all able-bodied fighters. But the Bielski Partisans were nearly unique in accepting elders, children, women, and the infirm into their community. Tuvia was clear from the first days in the woods that their top priority was saving lives – and that meant accepting and taking care of those who couldn't necessarily contribute to or help protect the camp. [harsh conditions – feed & house & cloth all those people for months on end – in the woods!] When the entire forest came under massive attack by the Germans, the Bielski camp succeeded in moving over a thousand residents through 7 miles of swamp to temporary safety on a secluded island. Six people out of more than a thousand didn't make it to the island – scouts were sent to look for them and brought them ALL back – so every single person was accounted for safely! So many lives were saved because of Tuvia's clear commitment to save lives.

For the people in the little village of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon in southern France, the value was nonviolence and the preciousness of life. "Following their consciences meant refusing to hate or kill any human being."ⁱⁱ The people of Le Chambon, with the leadership of their pastors, quietly and resolutely "organized to save thousands of Jewish children and adults from certain death"ⁱⁱⁱ by harboring them in their homes and farms, forging identity cards, and helping them escape to Switzerland. It wasn't extraordinary for them – they were simply doing what was right – they were living out their faith and values in a way that was ordinary and obvious to them.

What was it about Tuvia Bielski and Le Chambonnais that they had the courage to put their values first, above even their safety? Certainly there were many in their positions who made different choices.

Many Jews resisted Nazi detention and deportation – and most were killed in the process. Many Jews were compliant, hoping it would keep them alive – some chose to stay with their families rather than attempt to escape ghettos or camps alone, and many Jews didn't believe that deportation meant death – after all, they had all lived together as civilized people, Jews and Christians together for a long time, right? Yet Tuvia Bielski and his family built a camp to which hundreds of Jews were able to escape to and survive! It was a minor miracle in such a devastating time.

Most Non-Jews had more options during the war. For most Christians in Nazi-occupied lands, if they complied with Nazi (or Vichy French) dictates, they would likely survive. And yet for Le Chambonnais (the people of Le Chambon), the cost to their consciences of compliance was simply too great. They could not sit idly by while others around them were rounded up to be deported to their deaths. And the strength of this COMMUNAL conviction, deeply rooted in their Huguenot faith, compelled them to courageous choices.

I do not know what I would have done had I been a Belorussian Jew or a French Huguenot villager during World War II. I would like to THINK that I would have been right alongside Tuvia Bielski and the Chambonnais.

So what would have helped me do that? What will help US cultivate the spiritual resources to be courageous in the days and years ahead?

I don't have a crystal ball to see what we'll need, but I am clear about two things:

- We need to know what we believe in. We need to be crystal clear about the values that we hold SO DEAR that we are willing to be non-compliant – disobey authority – in order to uphold.
- We need each other to stay true to those values when the going gets rough.

Caitlin Breedlove, director of our UU Standing on the Side of Love campaign, wrote a piece recently called “Spiritual muscle, courage, and non-compliance.”^{iv} In it, she writes: “Compliance is so seductive a response because it involves simply going along with a force already in motion. Compliance does not imply harm or evil started with us. It does not imply that we created it. We simply yielded to it.”

I've done this. I do it all the time – we all do. For example, I comply with airport security – I stand politely in line with my drivers license and my empty water bottle. I take off my shoes and belt. I walk through the line. I do all this, knowing that my Black friends with dreadlocks or natural hair routinely get pulled out of line and their hair disrespectfully handled. Knowing that my trans friends get pulled aside and have TSA workers touch their intimate parts. Knowing that my brother with Down Syndrome can act unpredictably in security and fearing what response that might evoke on his next trip. Knowing that my white and Muslim activist friends who have fought to get off the mysterious “no-fly” list wonder each time they fly whether they will be detained and for how long. Meanwhile, I comply with the TSA – because I am “going along with a force already in motion.”

I am compliant, and I realize that my privilege allows me easy passage through security that is denied to many.

It's hard to make an argument for massive non-compliance with TSA security screenings now because we've gotten so used to them. But do you remember the days before 9/11, when the TSA didn't even exist? Those days when security was simple and family could walk with you right into the gate with our coffee in hand and shoes on our feet?

That was normal, and then the bar moved. And now we're used to this “new normal” that regularly harms people just like you and I are who are simply trying to get on a plane but who happen to be Muslim, Black, transgender, or disabled.

And now, with Trump and the new Congress in office, we need to be prepared for the bar to move to a “new normal.” Again and again.

And each time, we will choose our response.

It is time for us to get crystal clear about our values, and profoundly strengthen our community to be able to hold fast to those values when they are challenged. We need to be ready to NOT comply when the bar moves. Because once we get used to the new bar – like TSA security procedures – it’s hard to go back, even when harm is being done.

The people of Le Chambon were clear about where they stood – and that made it easy for them to choose their response. You see, Le Chambon was not just a generic French village. It was a Hueguenot village – a community of Protestant Christians who for centuries struggled to maintain their faith amidst hostile Catholic governments. They knew what it was to be persecuted for their faith. Their commitment to nonviolence was an integral part of their Christianity- not something they had a meeting to vote about when the Nazis occupied France! Assistant pastor Edouard Theis later reflected: “Nonviolence involves preparation and organization, methods patiently and unswervingly employed...Nonviolence must have deep roots and strong branches before it can bear the fruit it bore in Le Chambon.”^{v vi}

The villagers of Le Chambon thus were clear about their nonviolence and had strong spiritual muscles to act according to their consciences rather than succumb to fear and compliance when they began to unquestioningly harbor Jewish refugees at great risk to their own safety. Because of those deep roots, they acted swiftly and with unity to resist and protect Jews.

So now is the time, my friends. Now is the time to get crystal clear about our values and to strengthen our ability to uphold them. It’s time to deepen our roots and strengthen our branches.

Think for a moment about what value or principle that you hold SO DEAR that you are willing to disobey – to break stated rules or law – to uphold?

Perhaps:

- every life is precious
- Integrity
- Free speech
- Freedom of assembly

Write it down. Put it up on your fridge or bathroom mirror. Share it with someone else here or at home. Find one thing you can do each day to fortify that value.

Fortify your conscience, and let us work together to fortify our collective conscience.

[See the UUA & UUSC’s Declaration of Conscience, and sign it here:

<http://connect.uusc.org/l/103112/2017-01-17/gpgn2>

Wednesday evening is our second Spirit and Action gathering – we’ll gather to fortify ourselves spiritually and support one another in taking action. This week, we’ll be doing a deep dive into this values exercise of fortifying what we believe and what matters most to us – join us here at 6:30pm Wednesday.

We'll be taking this exercise from writer Sarah Kendzior, who wrote "I need you to fight in the way that matters most, which is inside. Authoritarianism is not merely a matter of state control, it is something that eats away at who you are. It makes you afraid, and fear can make you cruel. It compels you to conform and to comply and accept things that you would never accept, to do things you never thought you would do.

"You do it because everyone else is doing it, because the institutions you trust are doing it and telling you to do it, because you are afraid of what will happen if you do not do it, and because the voice in your head crying out that something is wrong grows fainter and fainter until it dies."^{vii}

This is already what I do in airport security line – I know it's easy to do! Kendzior is saying notice where you draw the line now and don't let it slide.

I know that none of us want to do be compliant with evil and injustice – we want to have the courage to live out our values. And I know that we are ALREADY doing this – I see it in your Facebook posts from yesterday, in the inspiring commitments you wrote on index cards last month at Rev. Heather's urging; I've experienced this when I got arrested with your support during a Black Lives Matter action out there in the intersection last year; I hear your courageous commitments in our chit chat at the beginning of meetings and in brief commentary in the receiving line.

I know that you – that we – are a committed and courageous group. And I know that are in a time where we need to strengthen our collective courage and clarify what we stand for.

Now is the time to strengthen our spiritual muscles.

Let us continue to show up – as so many of us did yesterday and the day before, -- soak in the beauty & love of being together protesting. May the hope we generate fortify us for what's to come.

Let us name the values we hold dear. May we write them on our hearts and declare them in our kitchens and in the streets.

Let us recognize our privilege as we build relationships outside our comfort zones. May the bridges we build create broader and broader communities of safety and care.

We are in this together. We will resist and protest in a thousand different ways. And we will come together, again and again, to fortify hope, build courage, and renew our commitment to peace and justice for all.

UUA UUSC Declaration of Conscience ([sign it here](#))

At this extraordinary time in our nation's history, we are called to affirm our profound commitment to the fundamental principles of justice, equity and compassion, to truth and core values of American society.

In the face of looming threats to immigrants, Muslims, people of color, and the LGBTQ community and the rise of hate speech, harassment and hate crimes, we affirm our belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

In opposition to any steps to undermine the right of every citizen to vote or to turn back advances in access to health care and reproductive rights, we affirm our commitment to justice and compassion in human relations.

And against actions to weaken or eliminate initiatives to address the threat of climate change – actions that would threaten not only our country but the entire planet – we affirm our unyielding commitment to protect the interdependent web of all existence.

We will oppose any and all unjust government actions to deport, register, discriminate, or despoil.

As people of conscience, we declare our commitment to translate our values into action as we stand on the side of love with the most vulnerable among us.

We welcome and invite all to join in this commitment for justice.

The time is now.

For further reading:

“Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed: The story of the village of Le Chambon and how goodness happened there,” Philip Hallie.

“Defiance: The Bielski Partisans,” by Nechama Tec

“Beyond Courage: The Untold Story of Jewish Resistance During the Holocaust,” by Doreen Rappaport (lots of short stories of resistance)

ⁱ https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/17/opinion/why-we-need-a-project-to-document-hate-crimes.html?_r=0

ⁱⁱ P.10, “Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed: The story of the village of Le Chambon and how goodness happened there,” Philip Hallie.

ⁱⁱⁱ “Lest Innocent...” book jacket

^{iv} <https://medium.com/@caitlinbreedlove/spiritual-muscle-courage-and-non-compliance-630563e0554c#.i3vdqseoz>

^v Hallie, 35.

^{vi} Hallie, 93: Their Pastor, Andre Trocmé, learned early in his own life that “nonviolence could, in fact, increase violence if it was not chosen in the right way at the right time”

^{vii} <https://thecorrespondent.com/5696/were-heading-into-dark-times-this-is-how-to-be-your-own-light-in-the-age-of-trump/161114266432-e23ea1a6>