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CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

Resistance & Resilience: What Does (and Doesn't) Work in Movements for Social Change

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On Saturday, January 21, five 56-passenger buses—carrying 280 people—departed the UUCF parking lot for the **Women's March on Washington: an unforgettable day of peaceful protest amidst an estimated 500,000 people in the streets of D.C.** If you add in all the sister marches, the total rises to more than 3 million people acting for peace and justice.

I am grateful for the opportunity to attend the march, but as successful as the #WomensMarch was on many levels, it is also important to reflect on **what it did and did not accomplish from a strategic perspective**. It did not change any laws or result in regime change. It did, however, help many people feel less isolated and alone. And it gave many people—who had little or no previous political activism—a taste of what it feels like to act for peace and justice. That first step may well be related to a sustained increase in activism in recent days.

Around the time of the #WomensMarch, I shared that **two of the books I am finding most helpful for such a time as this** were [This Is an Uprising: How Nonviolent Revolt Is Shaping the Twenty-First Century](#) by Mark Engler and Paul Engler—and [The End of Protest](#) by Micah White. Drawing insights from these books, I would like to invite us to reflect on what history has shown us about what does and does not work in creating social change.

Looking backward, history is often taught in a way that makes events seem inevitable—whereas at the time, the future was unclear to everyone involved. History can also be taught in a

way that focuses on a few major turning points and leaders instead of trying to trace the **ten thousand or more people and events that are the messy, complex reality behind any event.**

When many of us remember The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., for example, some of the first events that come to mind are often the ways he helped lead the Civil Rights Movement to great victories in Montgomery and Selma. But celebrating only the highlights covers over all the **years of organizing in between, when success was far from assured.**

For instance, in March 1965, the Selma to Montgomery marches catalyzed the Voting Rights Act in the following months. But **if we turn back the clock a little more than two years, the path to victory was not yet in sight:** “In January 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. had just turned thirty-four. It had been seven years since the success of the 1956 Montgomery Bus Boycott.” Moreover, they had just received a demoralizing defeat in Albany (Engler x-xi).

So one lesson is **perseverance.** We need resistance and resilience for the long haul: the struggle for peace and justice is often measured in years, not hours or days. At the same time, we should keep in mind the saying that, “One definition of insanity is to keep doing the same thing and expecting a different result.” We should continually discern the best methods for our time, energy, and resources.

Two major categories of social change are (1) **community organizing**, which is focused on building long-term institutional structures that can leverage their constituencies to create change and (2) **disruptive uprisings**—short-term mass protests demanding immediate change (Engler 47). We are open to using both of these methods at UUCF. I’ve already talked about our participating in the #WomensMarch. And some of you have heard me say that one of my dreams for this congregation is partnering together with a number of other faith communities to hire a full-time congregational-based community organizer to help us work together on issues like affordable housing, racial justice, and more.

A prime example of the long-term, network-building approach is Saul Alinsky (1909 – 1972), as represented in his classic book **Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals**. It was written in 1971, the year before he died tragically of a heart attack at age 63, but it contains much hard-won wisdom from his years of experience. “Like organizers in the labor movement, Alinsky’s approach focused on person-by-person recruitment, careful leadership

development, and the creation of institutional bodies that could leverage the power of their members over time” (Enger 32). He was always looking for the next step in achieving concrete, measurable change.

The other major type of short-term mass protest and disruptive uprising is embodied in examples like the #WomensMarch — or even more extended examples like the Arab Spring and #OccupyWallStreet. Each of these uprisings were inspiring, but it is also important to consider the longterm results:

by summer 2013 it had become evident that **the Arab Spring uprisings [which had begun in December 2010] had failed to produce democracy anywhere except where they began, in Tunisia**. Egypt’s first democratic government had been overthrown in a military coup that was ostensibly popularly supported. Syria had descended into a brutal and protracted civil war.... And Libya has simply fragmented; it has two mutually hostile elected governments, one in Tripoli and one in Tobruk, while various militias control different sectors of the country.

Or to consider #OccupyWallStreet, there were some positive unintended consequences, but it did not achieve its original goals:

Occupy demonstrated the efficacy of using social memes to quickly spread a movement, shifted the political debate on the fair distribution of wealth, trained a new generation of activists who went on to be the base for movements ranging from campus fossil fuel divestment to Black Lives Matter.... But **Occupy did not bring an end to the influence of money on democracy, overthrow the corporatocracy of the 1 percent or solve income inequality** (White 26)

The overall lesson is not the false dichotomy of choosing between either short-term mass protest or long-term community organizing, but strategically using the various available methods. So if you are interested, consider attending one of the upcoming mass protests in D.C. Links to buses from UUCF to either the #ScienceMarch or the #ClimateMarch are on our homepage (frederickuu.org). But I also encourage you to consider getting involved in a movement networking for longterm change on an issue or issues you are passionate about.

Overall, in working for social change, one crucial principle to keep in mind is from the

second sentence of Thomas Jefferson's *Declaration of Independence*—that governments are not naturally occurring. We created them, and we can change them. In Jefferson's words: "Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." This view is sometimes called the "**social view of power.**" **The whole paradigm can begin to shift if people in a society begin to *withdraw* their consent to be governed:** "if civil servants stop carrying out the functions of the state, if merchants suspend economic activity, if soldiers stop obeying orders" (91). In the case of extremely repressive regimes, you know the dissidents have won when the police and soldiers are given orders to shoot at civilians, and they refuse to shoot. Ultimately, a dictator is merely a single person, who is generally giving orders not personally carrying out orders. Their power can begin to rapidly disappear if people disregard, delay, or sabotage an order's implementation (Engler 91). That is what Dr. King meant when he said that "**non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good.**"

To say more about what forms "civil resistance" might take, allow me to introduce you to Gene Sharp for those of you who don't know him already (Engler 8). Through extensive study, reflection, and research, Sharp put together the handout on **198 Methods of Nonviolent Action**.

Part of his inspiration for compiling this resource was his experience serving a little more than nine months in prison for being a conscientious objector to the Korean War. He later came to believe that his noncooperation with the draft system "did nothing to get rid of the war system" and served only to keep his "sense of personal integrity together." **Following your conscience is important, but Sharp wanted to take the next step of changing the system long term.** Over time, his research and writings have helped inspire and equip democracy movements around the world, earning him the nickname the "Machiavelli of nonviolence" (Engler 2). He is best known for his short book From Dictatorship to Democracy, which weighs in at a little more than 100 pages, is available free online, and has been translated into more than twenty-eight languages.

Sharp is clear that both he and many other proponents of civil resistance are not idealists. Rather, they have found nonviolent activism to be the most effective method in advancing democracy in the face of authoritarianism. In most cases around the world, authoritarian regimes

have superior military power, so violent insurrections are usually put down with quick, brutal, and deadly force. But nonviolent approaches have the potential to win the hearts, minds, and consciences of the powers that be (Engler 5). Indeed, political scientists have found that **“nonviolent movements worldwide were *twice* as likely to succeed as violent ones....** Over the past fifty years, nonviolent campaigns have grown both more numerous and more successful, even under brutal authoritarian regimes. Violent insurgencies, meanwhile, have grown increasingly rare and unsuccessful” (Engler 109).

As I said last week, there is a lot of bad news these days: the growing threat of climate change, the undermining of human rights, and a global tilt away from liberal democracy and toward authoritarianism. Two days ago, on the 100th anniversary of our country entering World War I, our military bombed Syria. Speaking for myself (without making any claims about the varieties of pacifist positions), I am not a pacifist, and I honor the men and women who choose to serve in our armed forces. but I also believe that **we should follow Just War theory, respect international law, and use both diplomacy and civil resistance to the greatest extent possible before considering the use of lethal force.**

But even when political situations seem intractable, a study of the great historical movements for social change reminds us that often **“the next great social movement is always invisible moments before it erupts.”** Along those lines, I invite you to hear an excerpt from a powerful speech from a Sikh-American civil rights advocate in response to such a time as this. (I encourage you to listen to the full six minute speech.) Speaking about her fears around raising a brown-skinned son in this country, she challenges us:

The future is dark.

But my faith dares me to ask:

What if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb?

What if our America is not dead but a country still waiting to be born?

What if the story of America is one long labor?

What if all the [parents and grandparents] who came before us, who survived genocide and occupation, slavery and Jim Crow, racism and xenophobia and

Islamophobia, political oppression and sexual assault, are standing behind us now, whispering in our ear:

You are brave.

What if this is our Great Transition before we birth a new future?

**Remember the wisdom of the midwife: “Breathe,” she says. Then: “Push.”
Because if we don’t push we will die.**

So what, then, might it mean to *breathe* and *push* within your spheres of influence? This might mean

- *lawyers* taking on *pro bono* work for a cause they believe in,
- *musicians* writing songs that celebrate protesters in the streets,
- *teachers* bringing lessons on the cause into the classroom...
- *professional athletes or celebrities* being spotted in T-shirts that express their beliefs, or
- *store owners* putting signs of support in their windows. (Engler 111)

What are your social and professional spheres of influence? What next actions might we take—individually or together—for peace and justice. I invite you to carry your discernment into our practice of Flower Communion. This annual UU tradition reminds us of both the importance and risk of the struggle to build a world with peace, liberty, and justice, not merely for some, but for *all*.

Flower Communion originated in 1921 in a Unitarian congregation in Prague, which at that time was the capital city of Czechoslovakia (now called the Czech Republic):

Under the leadership of its minister, Norbert Capek (pronounced “Chah-Peck”), it grew into the largest Unitarian congregation in the world with a membership in 1932 of [more than 3,000]. In 1941, Capek was arrested by the Nazis on charges of treason; a year later he was executed at the Dachau concentration camp in Germany.

Capek was martyred for standing up for individual liberty in the face of fascism. And the continuation of Flower Communion today affirms the heart of the original ritual that,

as no two flowers are alike, so too no two people are alike, yet each has a

contribution to make. Together the different flowers form a beautiful bouquet. Our common bouquet would not be the same without the unique addition of each individual flower, and thus it is with the Beloved Community of this congregation: it would be lessened if any one of us were absent.

In a few moments, we will sing together a hymn of resistance and reliance, #1028 “Fire of Commitment.” We will then continue with singing hymn 305, “*De Colores*,” including the Spanish verse, which we will sing as the equivalent of “verse 4.” Once we start singing, I invite you to begin coming forward row-by-row — starting at the front and moving toward the back. Don’t be shy. There’s a lot of you, so once the singing starts, go ahead and start coming forward.)

During the singing, each individual is invited to take a flower that is different from the one you brought. Select a flower that particularly appeals to you. And as you take your chosen flower, note its particular shape and beauty. (If you didn’t bring a flower, feel free to come forward and take a flower anyway. Some folks brought a bouquet so we would have extra.)

If we get through both hymns, we’ll continue singing “*De Colores*” until everyone has come forward.

As we practice Flower Communion, I invite you to continue discerning what part you individually or we collectively are called to play in acting for peace and justice that we might do our part to help ensure the continued blooming of abundant, diverse life on this planet.