



## Putting up resistance

Clay Nelson © 27 August 2017

It is always good to be back after a break in one's routine. As healthy as that is, I do like my routines, especially being here worshipping with you each Sunday. As some of you know, the reason for the break was to help celebrate our granddaughter's first birthday. This occasion disrupted everyone's routine. Waldo spent his first two nights away from home. I told him he was going to camp. Isobel's parents had to rearrange their cosy home to fit in two more adults. A cake had to be baked and decorated; a birthday party had to be arranged. Isobel got a day off from kindy to entertain her grandparents and let them practise their reading skills with Hairy Maclary and, of course, there were presents to unwrap, drip fed through the day so she would not be totally overwhelmed. By day's end all the adults were exhausted by a routine-free day. Isobel seemed to handle it well, even without a nap, but we all know children need routine. They've got lots of them. Routines around bath time and bed time and meal time. Just a small departure from a child's routine can result in a total breakdown of world order, or so it seems. Kids don't have the coping mechanisms to make adjustments when something, like the presence of grandparents, disrupts the routine of who gets kissed goodnight and in what order.

While we adults tend to have "filters" and some degree of restraint, most of us respond poorly when our own routines are disrupted. Consider how we react when we find that the 7:40 bus is running 15 minutes late. Or that our partner decided, without consulting us, to try a different brand of coffee. How do we feel when we encounter an unexpected detour late at night on the motorway for road maintenance when all we want to do is get home to bed? I don't know about you, but when these kinds of things happen, I can feel my inner toddler fighting to get out.

Routines are important to toddlers and grownups alike. One of the primary purposes they serve is to relieve us from the pressures of decision-making. When we follow a routine, we give our conscious minds a break and let our subconscious take over. If we had to do every single thing in the course of a day with thought, awareness, and intention, we'd be exhausted and ready to go back to bed by noon. Routines enable us to relax and to focus on the more important stuff. Routines release us from the humdrum and provide space for our creativity to be unleashed. Think about a simple daily task that you engage in, like making your morning pot of coffee or showering. You don't have to put much thought into those things, right? You can let your mind wander. Perhaps you're thinking about an important meeting that's coming up later in the day, or recalling a dream that you had the night before. There's a reason that many of us have great, creative ideas in the shower or that we simply can let ourselves sing like no one is listening. These routines create the "head-space" we need to let our minds take off into flights of fancy. Neuroscientists tell us that our brain is constantly looking for ways to be more efficient, and habits and routines are one way of achieving that. While following a routine is somewhat antithetical to the idea of being present in the moment, of "being here now," it does allow us to be in the present moment in a very different way, with a different consciousness, a different awareness.

It's mind-boggling to consider everything that we do each day with little or no conscious thought. Each of us is a creature of habit and our habits coexist with one another's. Every day we engage in

an intricate dance with those around us – others who have their own routines and habits that are interdependent with our own. It might be the morning “get out the door” routine of you and your partner and/or children. Perhaps it’s how we interact with our boss or co-workers. Who makes the coffee? Who replaces the empty toilet paper roll? Who locks up at the end of the day? All these things are governed by routines, and routines create expectations. When you arrived this morning did you gravitate to where you usually sit on Sunday? Most of you do. I can look out from here and quickly know who is here and who isn’t. Consider how you feel when someone new to the church comes in and sits where you usually sit, and you’ll realise what a creature of habit you are.

And here’s where the concept of resistance comes in. We have a natural inertia in our lives. We are, by nature, resistant to change. It’s kind of the “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” response to our habits and routines. They seem to be working just fine, so please don’t make me change them. We resist change most fiercely when it’s imposed on us from the outside. Like when we are made to detour late at night or we find someone sitting in our usual seat on Sunday morning. We also resist change most strongly when we can’t or don’t anticipate it. When our habits and routines are disrupted unexpectedly or suddenly, well, that’s when our inner toddler is most likely to show up. There’s an expression in the business world that says “surprised people react poorly.”

But even when we’re warned well in advance of a disruption to our routines, we can still find that we’re resisting the change. That resistance comes, in part, from the fact that we haven’t made the change by our own choice. It’s being imposed on us by others. And, so, resistance can be compounded by resentment. Even if we’re able to let go of our need to control our lives, changing a habit or routine can feel uncomfortable and challenging. And that’s because those habits are doing exactly what they’re supposed to do: helping us get through life more easily. We resist change because change is hard. It requires us to find a new way of doing and being, a new way of navigating in the world. It takes something that we’ve been doing unconsciously and forces us to actively think about a new way of doing it, and developing a new habit or routine. It’s one of the hardest things we can do in our lives and one of the most important. It is a spiritual quest, an inner journey, that empowers us and can transform the world.

The fact is routines and our resistance to change predispose us to accepting a world that is “broke” and badly needs “fixin’”. However, to acknowledge that can so overwhelm us we want to go “bush”. That instinctual response may not be such a bad choice.

There seems to be a recurring half-truth among people of faith that the highest form of religion and spirituality is some sort of mystical aestheticism or monastic retreat from the material world to focus on the sweet nectar of solo divine communion. Unitarians are by no means free from this misconception. Henry David Thoreau is remembered fondly for his retreat into Walden. His theology of self-reliance and freedom of conscience is highly revered among us. Thoreau’s reverence for nature, his self-sufficiency, and insistence that everyone march to the beat of his or her own drummer, his severe distaste for organized government and distrust of authority, goes to the heart of many Unitarians. Thoreau poses an odd mix of retreat and engagement, but both actions are a form of faithful resistance!

On the fourth of July, 1845, Thoreau moved into his rough-hewn cabin on Walden Pond on the outskirts of Concord, and he wrote what one colleague has called “his immortal apologia for retreating into the sanctuary of Natural surroundings far from the madding crowd.”

Thoreau explains, “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.”

And two years later, when he came out from Walden, he wrote:

“I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spend any more time for that one.”

Thoreau would recount his time on Walden Pond, but it would not be published for several years. What he presented to the world first was his short essay on “Civil Disobedience.” It was received with great acclaim. Dr Martin Luther King kept a dog-eared copy of that short essay on hand for sustenance and encouragement. The common thread between his book *On Walden Pond* and his essay “Civil Disobedience” is the faithful resistance to conformity, the commitment to one’s own conscience. Resistance is not isolation; it is engagement with a vision toward justice and a better tomorrow.

Perhaps you are thinking you came to this faith to retreat from the madding crowd, to restore your soul, to find a deeper spiritual connection with God; you didn’t sign-up for the resistance! Well, first I will say “OK, that’s fine; but you know of course that your retreat is a form of faithful resistance.” Resisting the subtle and pervasive pressure to conform! And second I will say, at some point you must come out from retreat and engage the madding world in active resistance, at some point you must leave Walden for we are in a time of great need for justice and resistance. It is time for you to leave Walden for you have “several more lives to live, and cannot spend any more time for that one.”

Alice Blair Wesley wrote, “What all the kings, presidents, generals, CEOs, mafia dons and celebs put together do, is ultimately far less important than what people in free churches do, when the people faithfully seek together to find and to live out the ways of love.” That is why we are here, that is the grand purpose for which this and any other free church exists: to grow and to serve; to faithfully seek together to find and live out the ways of love; to be a community of resistance.

When you joined this congregation, you signed up for the resistance. Dr King wrote: “we are called to be people of conviction, not conformity; of moral nobility, not social respectability. We are commanded to live differently and according to a higher loyalty.” As Unitarians, we too are called in this way. We are not called to be respectable among the other religions; we are not called to be palatable or popular or within any proximity of prevailing opinion. We are called upon to be radical, to be a community of resistance, to be the light of the world, the salt of the earth. Indeed, most churches are somewhat counter cultural, much of what goes on is against the grain of the pervasive culture: loving one another rather than competing with one another, giving yourself away rather than spending money to gather things to you, *the first shall be last and the last shall be first*, and all that sort of thing. But Unitarian churches are both counter to the pervading culture as well as counter too much of standard protestant “church” culture, too. Here we strive not only to be counter cultural but to be radically transformative of culture as well.

Welcome to the resistance: here we insist that all are welcome, all are inherently worthy and equally filled with human dignity. Here we buck conformity and call each to live as a human being not as a market niche, not as a label, not as an illness, not as a stereotype. Welcome to the resistance. Stand up and be counted among those who are human in community. Together we can change the world.