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A
SPIRITUALITY
of
RESISTANCE

*Finding a Peaceful Heart and
Protecting the Earth*

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Just what is resistance?

To begin with, to resist is to oppose superior and threatening powers, in a context of injustice, oppression, or violence. When we resist we cannot be neutral or tolerantly accept that everyone's viewpoint is

equally valid. When we fight back against rape, or concentration camps, or environmental ruin, the lines are drawn.

Nevertheless, while resistance means we take a stand in the face of a painful reality, it is not always clear exactly what should be done. Nor does it mean that the people we oppose are unredeemably evil (though they sometimes are). People may take part in unredeemably evil activities, even though they are more frightened, numb, or weak than they are outright ethical monsters. What this does mean is that in answer to the question my students sometimes ask — “But who is to judge what is right or wrong?” — my answer is, “We are, each and every one of us.” We make the judgment, even though the situation may be (as the Ethicist found) terribly complex. We oppose the evil, even as we try to have compassion for the evildoers.

To resist is to act with the aim of lessening the collective injustice, oppression, and violence we face. We are not resisting if all we are trying to do is get the pain shifted somewhere else. Working to have the toxins stored in the next town over, building the smokestacks higher so that the acid rain forms over someone else’s forests, buying a lot of sunblock for my kids when the thinning ozone makes the sunlight dangerous — these things might be prudential, or good for my health, or clever. But they do not really count as resistance to the massive forces of environmental destruction. Individual self-protection poses no threat to the powers-that-be, but seeks to accommodate those forces, to coexist with them.

Because the engines of environmental destruction are strong, entrenched, and often mighty rich, and because, as we saw in the Ethicist’s case, we carry conflicting obligations, time pressures, and simple fatigue, it often seems easier or safer not to resist. Thus if we are to act, we will need to overcome the temptations of fear or laziness, of complacency and habit. These temptations, as I know very well from my own life, are continual. Unless we are in the throes of some extreme situation — the Oil Company at the gates of our little village, as it were — or unless we are heroes, or just plain tirelessly devoted, we will give in to those temptations.

But that is not what we always do. For while the dominant social forces make it ever so easy to go along with business as usual, a realization may arise that these same forces are controlling, constraining, and limiting us. To “oppress,” in this context, is related to the word “press” — as in to press down, to keep under control. To resist is to

break out from under that pressure, to liberate some energy previously restrained. "I will resist" is a cry of freedom.

Since resistance involves throwing off limits, there can be an element of gladness, even joy, when we engage in it. Instead of conforming to the ways things are, living day to day with the gnawing feeling that something is not right, we refuse to go along. We attempt to halt or slow, if only in the most minuscule ways, the machinery of ruin. And when we do so we often experience the rush of feeling which comes from liberating the energy long buried by our suppressed awareness that we have been part of something we know to be wrong. In this light, the deep satisfaction recorded by Holocaust resisters makes perfect sense. They had chosen to resist — and to just that extent, no matter what the forces arrayed against them, they had become free. Their actions teach us that despite all the pain inflicted by violent oppression, freedom is always possible. Not freedom from the situation, but freedom within it.

With that freedom comes a unique and pure happiness. It may last for only a short while before it once again gets clouded by regrets for losses, confusion over strategy, and fear for the future. But for a precious time we are at one both with ourselves and the world. Life, usually so flawed, has become perfect. Feeding the world as it has fed us, we are at that moment like a bee pollinating an apple tree, like the salmon struggling upstream against the rapids to lay its eggs, like the hawk bringing back fresh kill for its chicks, like a maple tree offering soft red buds to the warming April sunshine.

