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A SPIRITUALITY *of* RESISTANCE

Finding a Peaceful Heart and Protecting the Earth

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How are we to live with the truth? When we do move beyond avoidance and denial, how are we to retain any sense of joy in life? How can we keep from succumbing to dread or despair?

In essence, I believe that only if we become increasingly aware of the resistance of others and resist ourselves can we regain the sense of peace that necessarily leaves us when we end our own flight from reality. While a more developed answer to this question will be offered later, a few thoughts are relevant here.

First of all, from the point of view of a spirituality of resistance, it is necessary that we not be afraid of the depths of our feelings about the environmental crisis. While these feelings are painful, they also reveal the depth of our connections to the rest of the world. As sources of precious information and measures of our love, they deserve to be honored. They teach us that despite everything we can still care for the world and mourn the many deaths around us. In directly experiencing our feelings about these matters, our souls may recover some strength and vitality: qualities that are very much essential to any real spiritual growth and that have been eroded by avoidance and denial.

To realize these qualities anew we may need to go through a period, which in fact may recur, of focusing on the desperate, terrifying truth.

I remember, for instance, what happened to me when I was doing the detailed research for the Holocaust presentation I mentioned earlier. Immersed in historical material about deportations and mass killings, I began to see boxcars carrying Jews when I took the subway, and to think of SS vans when I heard sirens in the night. I had entered an-

other world. Similarly, when years later I focused my attention on the environmental crisis, I would bore people at parties and give my wife nightmares, compulsively sharing the latest ecological horror story just before bedtime. Walking among beautiful birch trees, I thought of what the ravages of acid rain were doing to the forests of New England. A trip to the beach reminded me of the tumor-afflicted whales in the Bay of Newfoundland. I was shot through with grief and anger.

At this point I, and perhaps anyone else who goes through this process, faced, paradoxically, two more temptations to slip into denial.

The first temptation is that of despair. So much has been lost forever: so many people and animals poisoned, so many beautiful places turned barren. Once the denial and avoidance recede, a tide of hopeless gloom naturally starts to inch forward. While a temptation to conscious despair is inevitable at this point, it can be resisted. For what despair obscures is that the matter at hand is not closed, not finished. It is, in fact, still in doubt. The attraction of despair is that we no longer have to make the effort of hope, an effort which could give rise to further pain and disappointment. In despair, after all, we need care no longer because everything has been settled. As deeply as such despair might be felt, it too is a kind of denial. For while the environment has suffered greatly, there is still much to treasure and protect. Grief can legitimately become despair only when there is no hope left: nothing, that is, which is still worth saving.

A spirituality of resistance can build here on the countless spiritual teachings from a variety of traditions which have told us quite simply: there is no grief which cannot be endured, no loss that need become the sole meaning of our lives, no emotional pain that will not heal if it is entered into fully. We can feel the fear and grief and still do what needs to be done. Despite our losses, we can still resist — if, that is, we do not succumb to the rejection of hope which is the hidden message of despair.

From a spiritual point of view the steadfastness of hope is essential, just because it expresses our capacity to think beyond the pain we ourselves are experiencing in any particular moment and to delight in the prospect that someone, somewhere, can still find some happiness. The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci coined the telling phrase "pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will." He meant by it that we must seek to know the bitterest of truths but can embody in our actions our continuing commitment to create new, and different, realities. If we can

still mourn, then we can still act. And while there is the capacity for action, there is the possibility that what we do will bring some happiness to some of our fellow beings. The persistence of this thought is the essence of hope, even in the darkest of times. We do not have to believe in some power greater than ourselves that is overseeing what is going on. To have hope we need not have faith. All we need is to admit that despite all the pains of the present, the future is still in doubt. That ignorance may be our greatest source of hope.

The second temptation is a kind of suppression of the self. We adopt a purely factual, business-like, pseudo-rational approach to the crisis. We accept the facts but start to deny the emotional pain by pouring everything we have into information, information, information and action, action, action. We focus on facts and figures, policies and procedures. We make a lot happen and fight the good fight. For a while this type of denial is quite useful. It helps us Get a Lot Done, wins us a lot of (well-deserved) admiration, and seems to keep the demons at bay.

But how long will it be until we become shrill and a little crazy, burn out, or lose any sense of joy? How long can we ignore the feelings that got us here in the first place? The simple truth of the matter is that we are human, and human beings have feelings about their lives: about their families and friends and about the world in which they live. We cannot separate the facts of the matter from what we feel about them. Quite simply, the feelings we have are part of the facts: that we feel this much grief and fear about what is happening is something which needs to be attended to, just as much as the DDT level in the Arctic snow or the decline in water quality. We need to share our sadness and rage, to get some solace so that what we know doesn't eat away at our souls. Once we face the truth of what humanity has done to the world, we carry a permanent grief. This grief will not cripple us if we honor it, but it will poison our hearts if we pretend it is not there.

My times of being overwhelmed by the environmental crisis passed. I survived, none the worse for wear and in fact basically happier, more alive, and more in touch with the world and my feelings about it. If we open up a dam of feelings, is it surprising that a great rush comes forth? Rather than avoid this rush and keep the best parts of ourselves suppressed, we can ride it — knowing that a much healthier balance will surely follow. In this balance we will not forget about what acid rain

is doing to forests, but will find a newly fresh joy in the trees around us. We will savor the birds before our eyes, even as we grieve for the ones dying because their meadows have been turned into parking lots. We will feel, and this may be the greatest blessing, a new and profound connection to nonhuman nature in all its brilliant diversity, and to our comrades and partners in the struggle to turn things around. Putting aside our own denial and avoidance, we can sense much more clearly the greatness of those who — from the Brazilian rainforest to the Afro-American factory towns to the California redwoods — have fought back to protect themselves and this earth on which we all must live.

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Is it a kind of sacrilege to be fully happy with the world? To accept God when this world is the way it is?

A story, from the Hasidic tradition:

Rabbi Levi Yitschak of Berdichev asked an illiterate tailor what he did on Yom Kippur since he could not read the prescribed prayers.

The Jew reluctantly replied: "I spoke to God and told Him that the sins for which I am expected to repent are minor ones. I also said to Him: 'My sins are inconsequential; I may have kept leftover cloth or occasionally forgotten to recite some prayers. But You have committed really grave sins. You have removed mothers from their children and children from their mothers. So let's reach an agreement. If You'll pardon me, I'm ready to pardon You.' "

The Berdichev rabbi angrily rebuked the unlettered Jew: "You are not only illiterate but also foolish. You were too lenient with God. You should have insisted He bring redemption to the entire Jewish people."

We have the right, that is, not to let God off the hook! We can demand as well as supplicate, stand back and let the universe know we want some answers (which we probably won't get) as well as feel at one with it all. The anger does not interrupt the prayer, but is at times essential to it.

But the anger with God or the deep unease we feel about the universe as a whole does not end the story. Strangely, even magically, there is something more. Once again the Holocaust has a lesson for us. Consider the following statement by concentration camp survivor Sara Selver-Urbach, remembering her teenage years in the Lodz ghetto during the Holocaust:

> Sometimes I was seized with shame because I felt happy. Happiness! How could it have entered my heart? From where came this tiny seed which longed to burst into ringing laughter, this urge in my soul and in my hands and in my arms to love, to embrace.... Today, when I think back to my long-lost youth in the Lodz ghetto, I must note that no matter how utterly illogical it seems, those were indeed the best and most beautiful years of my life. Neither before nor since have I been able to penetrate so deeply into the meaning of my existence, never again have I been capable of such profound and sincere faith, of such perfect unity with the universe, and this despite the daily deportations and relentless death that surrounded us.

What can be made of this wonderful and puzzling recollection? Completely aware of the bitter truth, she nevertheless experiences the "best years" of her life. In reality and in memory, "the daily deportations and relentless death" are with her just as much as happiness. She knew at the time that her reaction was strange, or else she would not have remembered the "shame" she felt for her happiness. Somehow, when least expected, when it makes no sense, the full beauty of life is felt. (I recall, in the months immediately after our son's death, my wife saying that despite the grief she felt sometimes the wonder of life filled her with joy. "I feel a little ashamed of it. How can anyone understand that I love him and miss him and my heart is broken — and yet I feel so happy?")

Has Selver-Urbach offered us a different model of spiritual growth and fulfillment? We might not call it peace, but perhaps it is a kind of communion. She lived in "perfect unity" with a universe that was out to destroy her, ready to embrace in a world that sought nothing so much as to degrade her capacity to love and her will to live. She was aware, at all times, of the forces arrayed against her — forces that day by day claimed the lives of friends, family, and community, forces that threatened the entire world and seemed invincible. This spiritual communion has none of the comforting guarantees of cosmic order that soothed Ram Dass. It flowered without a confident belief in an unseen future and an unfelt power.

Could it be that the very source of Selver-Urbach's joy lies in the knowledge that she must resist, and that she is resisting, the forces that would destroy her? Could it be that the source of her love is her pure knowledge of just what is at stake and her clear understanding of the

sacred goal of survival against all that is arrayed against her? Could it be that a fierce will to live, to love, and to embrace provides its own pure happiness?

We have found here the beginning of a spirituality of resistance, a spirituality in which evil is not avoided, wished away, or neutralized by a metaphysics that promises that it will be All Right in the End. In this spiritual realm we can fully experience the deepest of joys because we engage directly with unjust suffering by opposing it. In the act of resistance, our acceptance of cruelty, injustice, and unnecessary death is made complete: we embrace them by seeking their end.

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A Zen Master was once asked: "How do you show compassion — that universal Buddhist value — to Hitler?"

"Compassion for Hitler," he answered, "is simple. You kill him."

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The Warsaw Ghetto revolt, which began April 19, 1943, was the longest sustained localized military resistance to German forces throughout the war. Although over 80 percent of Warsaw's Jews had been deported to death camps, the remaining inhabitants of the ghetto mounted an uprising. Weakened by four years of merciless occupation, starvation, and disease, facing a trained army and air force, the resisters were armed with a pathetic handful of pistols, ancient rifles, and Molotov cocktails. Nevertheless, the Germans sustained serious losses and it took them longer to conquer the Jews of Warsaw than it took them to defeat Czechoslovakia or Poland. They triumphed only when the German air force leveled all the buildings with bombs, and poison gas was pumped into the sewers, where the last of the resistance fighters had taken refuge.

The leader of the revolt was Mordechai Anieliwicz, a twenty-three-year-old Socialist-Zionist. Shortly after the uprising began, he sent word to a comrade hidden outside the ghetto. "Greetings to you who are outside. I hope that we shall see each other again. But I doubt it. The last wish of my life has been fulfilled. I am happy to have been one of the first fighters in the ghetto."

Anieliwicz's happiness is not one he would have chosen for himself. No twenty-three-year-old wants to see his community slaughtered and know with almost complete certainty that he will be dead before long.

It was, rather, the happiness that can come from the full embrace of what God has given us. The fear of death, which had constrained a subject population, was thrown off. A world shaped by oppression could be accepted just because the oppressors were being completely resisted.

This acceptance, however, was not that usually described in spiritual literature. For one thing, it does not have even the slightest hint of passivity about it. What makes it peaceful is that by the act of resistance all the psychic energy that had been trapped by denial, avoidance, hopeless despair, untrammeled grief, or submissive waiting was liberated. The full reality of what the Nazis were could be squarely faced: they had to be opposed, even if that meant a fight with no hope of success. The signal of happiness was not quiescence but action, not calm but a fierce resistance.

Why is resistance so powerful? Because in the act of resistance we fully engage that which frightens and depresses us the most. What we would avoid, deny, submit to, or go along with is brought into full reality. We no longer have to feel that it is too much, that we cannot tolerate a world in which this exists, or that we have to let it command our obedience. We can open our hearts in full acceptance of the world, but not by telling others or ourselves that there is some cosmic meaning for all this pain.

Instead, we find that the only way to fully take in what surrounds us, to be fully at peace, is to resist. And in resistance there is not only acceptance, but also happiness.

Mordechai Anieliwicz says, "I am happy. . . ." Happy! Have we really heard him? "Happiness," says Selver-Urbach, "how could it be possible?" Because at last we are fully open to what is, an opening which takes the form not only of a flower opening in the morning sunlight but of a fighter in the ghetto.

We may well take inspiration from the Jewish resistance, which occurred not only in Warsaw but also (in a story seldom told) in every ghetto and every death camp, and throughout partisan groups in all of occupied Europe. We can find a similar inspiration in the living stories of ecological resistance. From Chico Mendes, perhaps the best known of local people who fought the mad burning of the Brazilian rainforest, to Ken Saro-Wiwa, who resisted the oil industry's poisoning of tribal lands in Nigeria. Each gave everything he had; and both were murdered for what they did.

Yet for most of "us" — the author and the audience of this particu-

lar book — the situation is considerably less dramatic. In the immediate sense, we do not face a kill-or-be-killed situation. Rather, we exist somewhere on what might be called a spectrum of assault. At one end of that spectrum are the poor and often Afro-American, Hispanic, or Native American communities victimized by environmental racism. Toxic waste dumps, incinerators, polluting mining operations, and so forth are disproportionately located in their communities. At the other end of the spectrum lie the privileged and protected, whose immediate surroundings are much less polluted. Yet all of us, regardless of where we reside on this spectrum, face certain universal problems: increased vulnerability to sunlight from holes in the ozone layer, air quality problems which frequently permeate an entire region, the shared loss of biodiversity and wilderness, a vulnerability to global warming, the widespread toxins in water and food. All these conditions are a threat. Collectively they constitute the many facets of an environmental crisis.

What is the spiritual meaning of resistance to this crisis? We might begin by remembering the statements by Sara Selver-Urbach or Mordechai Anieliwicz and realize that there can be great joy and feelings of tremendous liberation in confronting that which fills us with so much dread. Yet a simple acknowledgment will not be enough, because it is likely that the psychic stress of denial will then be replaced by overwhelming despair, grief, and rage. As we study texts like *The Last Forest, Scorched Earth,* and *Planetary Overload,* face the corporate polluters' high-priced lawyers, and watch the colonels burn the rainforest, the scope of the crisis appears so overwhelming, the odds against us so unequal, and the temporary victories so limited.

It is then that a turn of the mind and a turn of one's life — a real *tshuvah* — become necessary and possible. In this turning we can once again derive inspiration from the Holocaust. I believe that our sense of the spiritual meaning of that dreadful time is profoundly changed when we think of it not solely as the history of how the Jews were slaughtered but of how they fought back. The reality of the event is not wished away, but transformed. The images of victimization remain but are joined by images of Selver-Urbach, Anieliwicz, and countless others. Along with the piles of dead bodies we see images of resistance fighters. Auschwitz becomes identified not only with the millions who were gassed, but also with the organized network of inmates who blew up one of the crematoria. Poring over the historical record, we see that the Jews not only died by the millions, but sang songs to celebrate their

survival, smuggled forbidden food into the ghettos, blew up Nazi troop trains, and at times expended superhuman courage and determination just to stay alive. When we think of the Holocaust we can remember all those moments of resistance alongside all the murders.

In the same way the despair engendered by the wholesale destruction of the environment can be redeemed by our knowledge of the people throughout the world who are resisting that destruction; and our own spiritual life can reach its most profound point when we join our energies to theirs. Our sense of the ultimate meaning of the environmental crisis may change if we see it as a time of joyful resistance, a time when we can, as Selver-Urbach did, deeply penetrate the meaning of our existence.

What is that meaning? It is, simply, to be here and to be fully a part of what we have been given. Yet being a part does not mean smiling with detached cosmic patience when we see that the rivers of Poland are so polluted they can't be used even by industry, or beaming with serene confidence that God has it all under control when we see that in the little town of Casmalia, California (home to a 250-acre liquid toxic waste dump), nearly 80 percent of the town's schoolchildren suffer from chronic respiratory illness. In such cases to be fully connected, open, and at one means to sense how wrong such things are.

What has fighting back got to do with spirituality?

Perhaps, at least at some times, they will not be connected at all. We can turn the institutions of resistance into (yet another) occasion of ego-gratification: trying to get the credit for the successes, avoiding any blame for mistakes, and above all looking to get power in our group. We can fight back with desperation, bitterness, or guilt that we are not fighting back hard enough. Since there is never a guarantee that a spiritual practice won't be used wrongly, these possibilities do not distinguish resistance from any other spiritual practice. Meditation can lead to selfish self-absorption, prayer can produce self-righteousness, and yoga can support arrogance about how fit and attractive we are. Even reading the Bible too much has been known to cause eyestrain and unjustified theological smugness.

Resistance, while often a lot more socially useful than other spiritual practices, is no exception. We can find countless examples of political activity that combined an overtone of resistance to oppression with

an unpleasant undertone of self-interest, violence, and power seeking. We might think of revolutionary groups who fought for themselves and thought little of other oppressed communities. For example, women's interests were sacrificed in the attempt to get Afro-Americans the vote, white feminists initially took little note of the specific concerns of black women, liberal environmental groups ignored the "environment" of the inner city, and male radicals wanted their women to take orders and make the coffee. We can think of how Lenin, whenever his fellow leaders disagreed with him on important policy decisions, threatened to quit the group or have his opponents expelled.

Yet there are also examples in which the struggle to resist evil embodies a real spiritual grace. We can contrast Lenin to Gandhi, who typically counseled dissenting comrades to obey their own deepest sense of what was right rather than side with him out of a mistaken sense of loyalty. We can think of Cesar Chavez, who devoted his life to using nonviolent social action to better the life of farmworkers, trying to protect them from poverty and pesticides alike. We can think of numberless ordinary activists who reached out to form a union, resist apartheid, open a battered women's shelter. We can see efforts to remake a painful world stemming (at least in part) from compassion rather than hate, from a loving indignation which is not seeking to replace the old oppressors with new ones, or from an authentic anger that is a necessary stepping-stone to authentic self-respect and compassion.

In this effort, perhaps surprisingly, some of the spiritual attitudes and practices that are essential to the search for a more personal peace can be quite helpful. And this aid is necessary, just because politics, along with its insistence on collective liberation, has too often been the scene of highly individual competition, greed, and violence, or a setting for some particular group to try to advance its social position over that of other groups. Further, even the most principled of political settings can be the scene of desperation, burnout, and an egotistical attachment to one's own position.

There is, unfortunately, little that can be done "spiritually" about people who are not committed to a moral pursuit of political change. However, for those people who are so committed, and who would like to do it better, spiritual resources can provide some real assistance. Consider prayer. Authentic prayer need not, in my view, require a belief in God — though such a belief can help! Rather, prayer is a way of focusing moral intention — articulating to ourselves and the cosmos our

commitment to selfless love, concern for the world, and longing for positive self-transformation. We pray for good things, it is true, but good things that make ourselves *and* others happier, ourselves and others better people. (The simplest Mahayana Buddhist prayer is: "May all beings be at peace; may all beings be happy.") We don't legitimately pray for vengeance or to win the lottery — because each of those requires that others suffer or go without. But we can pray for a peaceful heart, for an increase in compassion, for the ability to listen openly to criticism. Political settings are necessarily places of struggle, fear, anger, and aggression — all so inevitable in the contexts of oppression and resistance. Those of us who function in them would do well to pray for an openness, for patience, for the ability to get along with people who irritate us, for humility when we don't get much applause and acceptance when we get voted out of office. If our efforts at resistance are supported by a quiet sense of devotion as well as our outrage at God and the universe and the polluters, we are more likely to stay sane while we struggle to produce love rather than violence.

Or consider the Jewish concept of Sabbath — understood as a time of rest when we are to accept the world as it is. Of course the moral dimension of such acceptance is problematic, and we need not understand it as including an embrace of oppression and unjust suffering. But, as Michael Lerner suggests, we *can* see the Sabbath as a regular period of time when we will not work to make money (for our employers or ourselves) and during which we "celebrate the grandeur and mystery of the universe and recall and honor the struggles for liberation of past generations." This notion of Sabbath, derived from an ancient spiritual tradition, would do wonders for the personal lives of those involved in political resistance. It would also broaden the typical discussion of "rights" and "equality" to include a gentle appreciation for the simple and wondrous fact of being alive.

At times, resistance may be the only way to make meaning out of the pain that surrounds our lives. In classic spiritual terms, it can be a "dying of the self." But what is dying is not simply possessiveness toward objects or some obsessively sought after social position. What we renounce is our blanking out, our inauthentic erasure of what we should not forget. The horror remains horrible. It is not transformed into something else. We recognize that this universe holds the ghosts of concentration

camps, the spread of environmentally caused cancers, local famines created by the commodification of agriculture, and local ecosystems trashed for the flimsiest of reasons. And we know that we can never really be a part of it or experience our deepest connection to its ultimate nature unless we oppose those parts that are evil. As with any other spiritual orientation or practice, we cannot be sure how this type of spiritual journey will turn out. Resistance does not guarantee bliss or spiritual advancement, but it does, in this dark time, make them possible.

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All religions have taught that we must respond to the suffering around us, even if only, as in Theravada Buddhism, by being models of how to overcome the ignorance that creates suffering. The Torah tells us to care for the "widow, the stranger, and the orphan." Christianity asks us to help the downtrodden. Islam makes giving alms to the poor an essential part of daily religious life. However, these traditions also include the belief that the universe is ultimately sympathetic to our moral concerns. God is not only the Source of our morality, but a Power who envelops our pain, promising that however bad things seem here, there is some compensating realm.

I am not able to share that faith, and for me a spirituality of resistance unfolds without it. My commitment is to the earth. I do not believe in guardian angels for this realm, nor that they are needed. And after the Holocaust, I do not trust in any saving Grace. Whatever the powers of God, I do not believe they will be used to stop human madness. The healing powers of nature, our own human ability to see the moral truth and act on it, these will — or will not — be enough.

For me God could be at best an inspiring partner in the healing of the world, one whose dominion is clearly so much less than infinite. At times God is simply an image of my hope that this universe is sympathetic to our collective struggles for wholeness, peace, and justice. To believe in God is to imagine ourselves, if only for a time, less lonely — and thus for a moment or two to be less lonely. At the least, a belief in God signifies that our lives — that all of life — matters. When I do pray to "God," then, I am seeking to remind myself of what is most important in life, to reorient myself to what I have learned (often kicking and screaming) about how I should live if I want to be truly happy (and not merely "successful") and truly good.

Further, all religious traditions, no matter how profound, are limited

by the particular view they take of the social reality in which suffering unfolds. The Sermon on the Mount, for instance, aims to give rise to respect and concern for the poor and meek, who deserve some sympathy, care, and help in their poverty. The compassion that is so strong an element in Mahayana Buddhism offers an image of numberless beings creating their own misery through various kinds of ignorance and delusion. This image applies with equal force to everyone who has ever existed, whatever their social position. From the Buddhist perspective, all of us — rich or poor, powerful or downtrodden — create our own misery by our attachment to our desires.

Over the ages, these teachings have been essential in correcting the self-centered, doctrinaire, and socially passive tendencies of mainstream religions and eclectic spiritual traditions alike. Yet they are not fully adequate to a time of Holocaust and ecocide. Here we might be much more likely to have recourse to the ideas of liberation theology, in which Christian moral teachings were adapted to the social struggle between the oligarchs who ruled Latin American dictatorships and the poor peasants and workers who were exploited and controlled by them. For liberation theology, the poor and meek deserve not just charity and care, but a fundamentally different kind of social order. We can also reach back to the ideas of the prophets of the Hebrew Bible. When the prophets call for justice — "Let justice roll down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream," cried Amos (5:24) — they are not just telling individuals to act rightly, but are driven by a sense that the unjust are actually running the show. A spirituality of resistance cannot rest with the ideas of compassion, charity, or care, unless those ideas are embodied in a social vision that includes some sense of how human suffering is the result of a relentless, highly organized, and immensely powerful social system. A spirituality of resistance, we might say, marries traditional religious ideas of moral concern with social awareness. In an ecocidal age, that awareness will see the suffering not just of my neighbor, but of the whole world, and will extend itself to the nonhuman as well as the human.

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.