

Today's sermon, "[Resisting Tyranny](#)", (see the link for his version) was originally delivered Sunday, April 16, 2023 at First Unitarian Society of Milwaukee, WI. by Rev. Jim Foti. Rev. Foti is the assistant sabbatical minister for the First Unitarian Society of Milwaukee. He received his Master of Divinity from Meadville Lombard Theological School after a 20-year career in journalism. We have modified the sermon to give a more current political context and additions to his message.

Whenever I give a sermon about something like death or grief or authoritarianism, I feel deeply grateful toward anyone who knows the title in advance and still comes to church. Maybe this morning you figured, "well, it's already cold and dreary; bring on the tyranny." But truly, I do thank you for being here. I've been giving sermons and presentations about rising authoritarianism since the summer of 2016. And I've been surprised by how thankful people have been to me for bringing the topic up, for naming what was and is still going on, for affirming their sense that our democracy and civic institutions are at risk. Talking about it has value— it can help those who have been paying attention to feel a bit less alone in their concerns. And talking about it can help us figure out, together, what we can do.

And church is a good place to have this conversation. Church— a good church, an honest church— is a place to talk about the hard stuff, the real stuff of this world. To look at big questions about life and power and oppression. To examine questions through the lens of our most deeply held values. And to seek and hold the answers in community, where we can find support, and figure out actions to take to bring about the world we wish to see.

Our present concern with tyranny is Donald Trump's flurry of executive orders and actions, reminding of us of his promise to be "a dictator on day

one.” The pardoning of ALL of the January 6th defendants has sent a message to his followers that loyalty to Trump is more important than the rule of law and protecting the police from political violence. His executive order declaring that the federal government will henceforth only recognize two sexes, male and female, throws over the existing science demonstrating otherwise, and puts all transgender people at risk. Threatening to deport undocumented immigrants has struck fear into millions of immigrant families. We could go on.

Despite the flood of recent dictatorial actions and threats, normal daily life has gone on for most people, unless you’re transgender, an undocumented immigrant, or worried about what a 25% tariff on avocados is going to do to the cost of your Super Bowl guacamole. Offering a veneer of normalcy while the foundations of democracy are being eroded is a tactic straight out of the authoritarian playbook.

There are of course countless crises a minister could choose to focus on, but to my mind, very little else will matter if we become more of an authoritarian country. Every one of our Unitarian Universalist values is under siege, from the inherent dignity of all people, to the use of democratic process, to the interdependent web of life that sustains us. And our shared Unitarian Universalist values such as pluralism, equity, justice— would be difficult to live out in a less free society.

Before I go on, let’s go over a few definitions. I know some of these phrases are increasingly familiar in everyday language, but just a quick review so we’re all on the same page. The first word I’d like to define is *authoritarianism* itself. Put simply, authoritarianism is a system in which the authority, the power in a nation, lies with an individual leader, rather than with

any constitution or laws. There are no checks and balances in authoritarianism— the courts and the legislative branch are neutralized to be in lockstep with the leader, or they are eliminated altogether. The executive role does not adhere to boundaries, and its power is constantly expanded until the leader becomes a dictator or an autocrat. With the 6-3 conservative majority in the Supreme Court, and Republicans in control of both the House and the Senate, there are few structural checks on the power of the current President. We are witnessing a huge, attempted expansion of the power of the Executive Branch, one of the principal goals of Project 2025.

Nationalism is another word we're hearing a lot lately, and I find this definition from Ronald Tiersky of Amherst College to be helpful: "*Nationalism is patriotism transformed into a sentiment of superiority and aggression toward other countries. Nationalism is the poisonous idea that one's country is superior to somebody else's. Nationalism is intrinsically a cause of war and imperialism.*" Trump's comments that the U.S. should own the Panama Canal and Greenland, and suggesting Canada could be the 51st state, is nationalism gone wild.

Then there's *white Christian nationalism*, which adds another layer. White Christian nationalism is the idea that our country was created by and exists to benefit a certain class of white Christians, who not only believe themselves superior but also believe that God finds them superior. They are the supreme group in a supreme country, with all the disregard and danger that comes with such attitudes. The nomination of Russel Vought, a white Christian nationalist and one of the architects of Project 2025, as head of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), is concerning.

Another term that's being discussed is *fascism*. And fascism is authoritarian nationalism. Under fascism, you have an autocrat who believes in the cultural superiority and political supremacy of the country he leads. And he believes in the use of his concentrated power and in unlimited violence to uphold the country's supremacy and its purity against perceived internal and external threats. In 1930s Germany, the made-up threat was the Jewish community; right now in our own country, transfolk are the made-up threat of choice. It is no accident that the percentage of Jews in Germany in 1933 and the percentage of trans-identified adults in the U.S. today is nearly identical. The strategy of demonizing a tiny, often misunderstood minority, and using religion to do so, is another tactic right out of the authoritarian playbook. Tyrants always punch down for political gain. Shadow president Elon Musk's unmistakable fascist salute at an inauguration rally and his comments about Germany should move on from guilt over the Holocaust demonstrate that the current risk of fascism is real.

One more term, to add to the pile of long words and phrases: *Authoritarian capitalism*. I mention this because, for a long time, there seemed to be an American belief that the arrival of capitalism in a country would lead to more democratic societies. As it turns out, many Western corporations love authoritarian countries like China, with its huge, extremely unfree and low-cost workforce. From slavery to sweatshops, captive labor is a tradition that capitalism just can't quit.

History has generally not been kind to congregations and ministers and everyday people who have faced authoritarianism and fascism. First there's complacency, then looking away, then de-sensitization, and then voluntary or forced collaboration— all these things have tended to happen in reliable

succession. But the present-day United States has some advantages that have made authoritarianism less of a slam-dunk here: a diverse population, no one dominant church, still-independent journalism, and strong civil institutions. But with autocratic and theocratic leaders taking brutal aim at these strengths every day, it's still important for each of us to remain vigilant.

The flow of events can make us forget that a lot of what we are actually seeing isn't new. In the words of Adrienne Maree Brown, the African American author and activist: "Things are not getting worse, they are getting uncovered. We must hold each other tight & continue to pull back the veil." The underlying American values that are allowing current events to go as they are going are the same values that have existed for a long time. The storyline of domination of the powerful, taking what and who they want, is how our country was founded, built, and expanded, and that storyline continues to this day. So it is both painful and beneficial that things are getting uncovered.

Americans with authoritarian tendencies have always been with us and are likely to always be with us. Globally and nationally, authoritarian citizens can be found across the political spectrum. While autocracy seems to lean right, as it has in recent years in places like Hungary and Brazil and India, there are also left-leaning people who would welcome, and have welcomed, a dictator who thinks like they do. Maybe some of you have heard of this, but there's a simple test that can predict whether an individual is likely to favor authoritarianism. It was developed in the early 1990s by a professor named Stanley Feldman. It's four short either/or questions about parenting. Parenting— not politics, because researchers discovered that

authoritarianism is actually more related to personality than to political preferences. I'll read these, and you can take the quiz yourself if you like:

Please tell me which one of the two choices you think is more important for a child:

1. To have independence or to have respect for elders?
2. To have obedience or self-reliance?
3. To be considerate or to be well-behaved?
4. To have curiosity or good manners?

These simple questions have turned out to be remarkably good at predicting authoritarian tendencies, and they've been used in research ever since. The respondents who choose the more hierarchical, rule-oriented answers— obedience over self-reliance, good manners over curiosity— these people are more likely to be authoritarian. And because parenting perspectives are passed down in families for generations starting at birth, you can see why this kind of thinking might be challenging to dislodge. And it might be immune to political arguments entirely. It's a primal way of knowing. An estimated 30 to 40 percent of Americans have authoritarian tendencies. And it's obvious from current events, the presence of those tendencies is going to be with us for a while. It's been a little daunting for me to realize in ministry that I expect to be keeping an eye on authoritarianism for the rest of my life.

But I know that change for me is a sign of the privilege I'd enjoyed prior to the events of the past several years. I'll never forget the sentiment— the "words of welcome," if you will— that a Black social media commentator who

now goes by the handle “Absurdist Words” offered to white people late in 2016. I didn't find these words absurd at all:

“This feeling you have right now. Amazement that the country could be so shortsighted, that it could embrace hate so tightly? Welcome. This despair and dread you feel. The indignation, the bewilderment, the hurt, the powerlessness, the fear for family and livelihood? Welcome. That knot in your stomach, that feeling of heartache? That uncertainty about your safety? The deep sense of fundamental injustice? Welcome. I do not say this to diminish what you feel today. What you feel is real and valid. I'm giving you an opportunity to truly empathize. For it is the lack of that empathy that allowed America to shrug as the marginalized shouted warnings”.

I've read similar thoughts from other African-Americans and Native Americans— welcome, white folks, to this messed-up country that we've already been living in, this country that has felt to us like a dictatorship for quite a long time.

There are plenty of people in America who have felt powerlessness, who have had to learn resilience and resistance, who have planted a garden in the backyard when it wasn't safe to sit on the front porch, who have had to ceaselessly work for freedom. What has been happening to America as a whole has always been happening to some of its people. American authoritarianism was not invented in November 2016 or in 2024; it was revealed anew.

So what do we do with this chronic illness our country has? How do we deal with the flareups, and the uncertain outlook? How do we live lives of resistance? There may not be a cure for an authoritarian streak, but there

are tactics and strategies and resources, and plenty of evidence of what works. One piece of advice I've already demonstrated is to listen to people of color, gay and transgender folks, and other marginalized people.

Good things happen when people unite across religions to resist tyranny. And, an important message that's been underscored the past few weeks, is that it's not too late. It's not too late to resist tyranny. It's not too late for the people to fight for laws that reflect their values. It's not too late to protect your local school board or library board from a white Christian nationalist agenda. It's not too late to make the City of Detroit a place where the municipal government does not cooperate with the federal immigration authorities.

Economist Robert Reich recently suggested 10 things we can do right now in response to Trump's actions. They include protecting the decent and hardworking members of our community who are undocumented, being vigilant about speaking out against hatefulness against the LGBTQ+ members of our community, boycotting any companies that are enabling the Trump regime, spreading the truth, and funding groups that are litigating against the executive orders and actions. And he also reminds us to find room in our lives for joy, fun, and laughter.

So there's a role for everyone. Some people may not think of themselves as activists, but being a citizen, being human, comes with obligations to fellow humans, to the whole world. Your neutrality will not be appreciated. You can take part in protests, particularly well-organized, tactical ones that have specific goals around turnout and visibility.

There are macro things you can do, like participate in electoral campaigns that speak to your values or work as a poll worker or an election judge to keep the machinery of democracy moving. As frustrating and constrained as they can be, elections still have huge consequences. The engagement and participation of every day citizens can make a difference. Here in Grosse Pointe, hundreds of folks participated in the campaign for a slate of school board candidates committed to our students, our teachers, and transparency. Concerned citizens banded together to canvass door to door and attend meet and greets with the candidates. These grassroots methods brought victory to the progressive slate and defeated an extremely well-funded slate of alternative candidates.

Another option for resistance is what Adrienne Maree Brown describes as small resistance. She writes:

“When those with power are doing inhumane, or anti-planet things, our choice to be disruptive, to be impolite, is one of the ways we wage small resistance that can become mass resistance and large scale cultural and political transformation. We learned this from ancestors in our lineages who helped expose and break massive systems like chattel slavery, or holocaust genocide... Small resistance these days looks like turning people who are supporting and promoting racist, transphobic, and inhumane policies away from your door. It looks like stopping next to police cars that have pulled people over and watching or filming them until the person stopped is allowed to leave. It looks like naming isms and phobias in real time and learning together. it looks like local direct actions at the homes of congresspeople who make decisions that harm humans or the planet”.

In addition to her advice, there are even smaller forms of resistance that involve only yourself. Like being well-informed, about current events and about the history of oppressions and authoritarianism. Like making sure you don't accept the normalization of anything that diminishes human flourishing, such as mass deportations or laws against trans people or women. Followers of the authoritarian playbook love this kind of normalization— they want you to feel confused, bombarded, and hopeless that things must just have to be this way. It's a strategy they employ, wearing people out. Your internal resistance is important so they don't succeed.

And your resistance relies on your resilience, and your resilience relies on rest. So be sure to take breaks— from the news and from the work. This can be hard for some people to do, given the scope of the challenges. And it can be especially hard to do when so many things are happening at once. So take the advice of Tricia Hersey, the self-appointed Nap Bishop who literally wrote the book on this topic, called "Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto." Saying no and holding boundaries is important, she says, adding: "To me, that's justice, that's liberation, that's freedom." So budget your time and energy for the long haul.

Before I close, I want to talk a bit about hope. Because when we're talking about the long-haul work of resisting tyranny, it can be helpful to remember the work of Joanna Macy, who wrote a book that some of you may have read, called "Active Hope." She defines hope not as something you feel, but as something you do. "Active Hope is a practice," she writes. "Like tai chi or gardening, it is something we do rather than have." She advises us to decenter our feelings, and center our intent. "Since Active Hope doesn't require our optimism," she says, "we can apply it even in areas where we

feel hopeless. The guiding impetus is intention; we choose what we aim to bring about, act for, or express. Rather than weighing our chances and proceeding only when we feel hopeful, we focus on our intention and let it be our guide.”

As we continue our work to resist authoritarianism, for the good of our country and everyone in it, may our intentions be our guide. May love be our guide. May we stay at each other’s sides, take care of the vulnerable, and listen to the wisdom that is all around us. Together, forward, is the way.

May it be so, and amen.