

2023 Skinner Sermon Award Winner

“Resisting Tyranny” by Rev. Jim Foti

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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. Seven years on, things are still not well, but the picture is less dire and more mixed than many of us were expecting, and awareness is much broader. And 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.

And Wisconsin is a good place to have this kind of conversation. You-all have been involuntary participants in a 13-year experiment to permanently establish authoritarian rule across all three branches of government, with increasing restrictions on voting and [a not-at-all representative state legislature](#). The people of Wisconsin are a complicated mix, as many of us know from our own families – there are those who adhere to conspiracy theories about stolen elections and “woke” takeovers, and these folks might actually welcome an autocratic leader. At the same time, there are many who believe in secular government, fair electoral maps, the rainbow of human diversity, women’s bodily autonomy, and the common good.

And throughout this trying time, with authoritarian maneuvers finding some success at the state and local levels, daily life has gone as normal for most people. 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 principles has been 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 the values highlighted in the proposed [Article II](#) revisions – 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.

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."

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.

Another term that's in the news 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.

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.

Now, 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 desensitization, 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 actually 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 (and we can find out at coffee hour who's an authoritarian):

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

- To have independence or to have respect for elders?
- To have obedience or self-reliance?
- To be considerate or to be well-behaved?

- To have curiosity or good manners?

These simple questions have turned out to be remarkably good at predicting authoritarian tendencies, and they've been in use 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 as is obvious from current events, from the Tennessee State Capitol to the Texas courts, 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 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, 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.

So 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 of 2016; 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

America's 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. This is something this church is doing, by continuing its social justice partnerships in the community, by centering stories of the marginalized, and by listening to our BIPOC members.

Outside this church community, we can see around our country how people of color, often younger people of color, are making bold statements resisting the forces of authoritarianism. I think of [the two newly famous Justins](#) in Tennessee, [Justin Jones](#) and [Justin Pearson](#), both under 30, helping to lead protests against the needless carnage of gun violence, and then being expelled from their legislative seats. As you probably know, they both have been propelled right back into office to keep fighting the tyranny of their [gerrymandered, one-party state](#). And last Sunday morning, Mr. Pearson, the son of a pastor, was the featured speaker at the Church of the River, Memphis's main UU congregation, in a profoundly moving and raucous [two-hour service](#). This was a great example of a more privileged church making space for and amplifying voices that are frequently marginalized. 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 of Tennessee 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 Wisconsin a functioning democracy and a place where women have determination over their own bodies.

And 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](#).

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, as we all well know right here. You can also take part in protests, particularly well-organized, tactical ones that have specific goals around turnout and visibility, like what we saw in Tennessee.

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 have 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 shootings 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 actually 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 if you like to help with campaigns here in Wisconsin, where you-all seem to have an election every ten minutes. 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.

BIO

Rev. Jim Foti is a Unitarian Universalist minister focusing on short-term ministries in the Upper Midwest, and he serves as a Congregational Life adjunct with the UUA's MidAmerica Region. He is pursuing a Doctor of Ministry degree in creative writing and public theology at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, and he previously served eight years as an assistant minister at the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis. He and his partner live in Minneapolis.

ORDER OF SERVICE

HYMNS

Opening: "My Life Flows on in Endless Song" (108)

Closing: "This Is My Song" (159)

STORY FOR ALL AGES

"Desmond Gets Free" by Matt Meyer and Khim Fam

PERFORMED MUSIC AT FUS MILWAUKEE

"People Get Ready" -- The Impressions

"What's Goin' On" -- Marvin Gaye

"Anthem" -- Leonard Cohen

OPENING AND CLOSING READINGS

via Soul Matters

Opening Words by the Rev. Gretchen Haley:

Although there remains
too much evidence
of the world
breaking apart
at coastlines
Congressional hearings
and

kitchen tables,
Inside the quiet places
of your heart
and mine
there reside still
the seeds
the longing
to return to this
knowing
that we belong to each other / this earth / this life
To re-member ourselves
and all of our lost pieces
Beloved in ways that cannot be
undone
To dwell here in this healing
This hope
This wholeness
is our practice
of resistance
Even in rage we refuse
to relinquish gratitude
or joy
Come, let us worship together.

Closing words by the Rev. Joel Miller:

Let our lives be a prayer
That waters dry souls
Mends broken hearts
Refuses to be terrorized
Seeks this world's beauty
And carries us through its storms.