

## “Responding to Anguish”

By Rev. Arlin Roy (9/28/25)

This is not a political sermon. This is about a storm sweeping through our society and is not dependent on particular politicians. I am speaking today about destructive acts supported by a large portion—although not the majority—of Americans. Nobody is **making** Americans tolerate oppression.

My response, and perhaps yours, depends on the day. Sometimes, I severely limit my exposure to toxic news. That advice is abroad in the land, ironically often spread by newspapers. It is OK advice, in the sense that if a stimulus is overwhelming your sense of equanimity, dial down the input into your psyche. But then, ignorance creeps up on us and our access to reason is impaired. Realization that we know too little also causes anxiety.

I recently recognized an increased use of the word “fraught,” as in “The times are fraught” and—in describing the recently politically cancelled Stephen Colbert at the Emmy’s—“he went with graciousness and a recognition of the fraught political moment.” (New York Times, 9-16-25, pg. C6) I researched “fraught” and found that it means “filled with, full of, or likely to result in something undesirable.” A secondary meaning is “causing or affected by anxiety or stress.”

“Fraught” refers to the dark shadow of authoritarian oppression, which operates through a precise and brutal calculus: it seeks to dominate not only the body but also the mind. An oppressive political milieu uses fear, isolation, misinformation, and the systematic erosion of human dignity to silence and isolate people. Yet, history and human experience show that even in the most suffocating circumstances, the human spirit finds ways to nurture an inner light. Staying centered and positive in hostile circumstances is not a passive state of blissful ignorance; it is a conscious, courageous, and often collective act of resistance.

I sometimes feel exhausted, despairing, and enraged about Hamas invading Israel and killing and capturing not just Jews but also Bedouins and people from various religions and ethnicities. That horrific Hamas incursion unleashed a vicious assault by Netanyahu’s far-right Israeli government that—so far—has resulted in 68 thousand men, children and women dying and many more wounded or permanently scarred by malnutrition. Netanyahu’s far-right government is inflicting horrific damage on Gaza with American aid, and blocking many thousands of trucks loaded with food from getting into Gaza. Note: I draw a clear distinction between Israel and Jews vs. Netanyahu’s government. There is vociferous Jewish opposition, both within and outside Israel, to Netanyahu’s ferocious assault on Gaza. There is also a useful distinction between people who live in Gaza and Hamas. Innocents are being slaughtered on all sides.

It pains me physically when an American president echoes a Russian president's lie that Ukraine started the war when it actually stems from Russia's brutal invasion some 2 ½ years ago.

When masked and anonymous paramilitary soldiers grab people for deportation because of how they look or sound, regardless of their legal status and regardless of whether they have committed a crime, I feel sick to my stomach.

When I consider the terrible risk to our children of vaccines withheld, diversity, equity and inclusion in education severely limited, student loans restricted, LGBTQIA+ people fired and assaulted, and cancer research defunded, I feel dismayed and furious. These actions were done self-righteously and cynically without regard to reason and care for the body politic. When willful ignorance is a virtue, we all suffer. You probably have your own list of offenses, renewed and expanded daily.

As I mentioned, I sometimes limit my exposure to toxic news. Other times I meditate, because to get in touch with who I am, and how I feel and think in the here and now, temporarily frees me from oppression. I assume it can do the same for you. Several weeks ago, speaking here, the Rev. ReBecca Sala spoke of conscious, walking meditation while striding down a hospital corridor to an emotionally fraught encounter. She also spoke of sitting peacefully. As a manager

of hospital chaplains, she finds meditation has great usefulness for centering down. I have meditated for decades, and it sometimes enables me to regain my emotional balance and put the day's events in some sort of relative order. I just sit—or, often, I run through the woods—and breathe deeply. I let thoughts come in and go out, not attaching particular importance to any of them, just affirming my inner life. We have meditation groups available in this congregation. I recommend that you visit them.

Sometimes, I read. Our second “living tradition” says: (and I quote)” Words and deeds of prophetic people which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love.” I try to find those memoirs and theories which describe that compassionate dialogue—a form of love—is possible in dire times. Seeking out suppressed histories and independent thought is also an act of resistance to oppression. Our Black Lives Matter book group nurtures that search for the real truth in a long-term perspective. I recommend participating with that group as well.

And then there are times that I share my anguish with others, seeking not to bring them “down” but to give and gain validation. IS the militarization of our cities, the wholesale deportation of residents, and the disdain for climate justice really terrible? IS there hope for change? I look to online newsletters that suggest hopeful signs of resistance to authoritarianism so that I feel reinforced, and I can

see people living their best lives freely. I ask others: “What brings you peace?” We will soon be offering something called “Heart Circles,” designed simply for people to share how they feel and recognize that they have been heard.

I also championed a resolution before the FUSW Board that was recommended by the last UU General Assembly: Faithful Defiance of Authoritarianism: A Call to Action. Your FUSW board approved a vote on it at an upcoming congregational meeting. The resolution affirms a commitment to democracy, condemns efforts to subvert democratic institutions, commits to nonviolent action, supports voting rights, encourages education and civic engagement within and beyond our congregation, partners with other faith communities, and creates a task force to promote UU values abroad in the land. Enough food and shelter to live well--enough resources for advancing education and health--are things that everyone should have available. That laudable goal also means more time from us, more energy put into social action just when we are getting established in a new place and experiencing pastoral care needs. That’s a lot of wear and tear on the soul, in one respect, but it also affirms our spirits that we care and are doing what we can.

Other times, I write my sign and assertively show up at demonstrations in my black clergy shirt. My latest sign says:” TAX THE RICH for Education and Healthcare.” The UUA claims that a 2024 United Way survey found that 51% of

Gen Z had participated in demonstrations. Laura, the head of the Mamaroneck protest movement introduced herself to me recently at the Labor Day demonstration and April Castoldi, a former FUSW member, greeted me with a hug. Having the support of clergy is apparently valuable; when someone wants to take my picture I give them a flyer describing FUSW. I don't particularly like demonstrating, but I do it because it is one way to express my commitment to free speech. This is not to disparage other encouraging efforts, like writing your elected representatives. We all do what we can when we have the strength. I have never before put stickers on my car's bumper, but recently I put the bold yellow and blue equal sign sticker from the Human Rights Campaign on the back of my car because I want a permanent signal to others that my values are aligned with compassion and equality.

We must dedicate ourselves to a compassionate dialogue that reaches those who passively collude or helplessly allow oppression, for the sake of ourselves and others. We must dedicate ourselves to nurturing a loving attitude in the search for truth. Love, in this context, is closer to tolerance and compassion than marzipan sweetness. Nonviolence, or—as Gandhi termed it—“Truth force,” is simply recognizing that if we respond to violence with violence, we have degraded our own humanity to the lowest common, unthinking, brutal denominator. We have given up our persuasive power to say: We have a better, more peaceful, way of life.

Compassion is a virtue of attention. Rather than allow myself to respond to callous authoritarians in likewise, knee-jerk manner, I remind myself to be loving, even toward people whom I think do things that are mean-spirited. I am committed to compassion for how they try to be good in **their** definition of good. This is the central focus of nonviolence according to Gandhi and King—search for truth with an attitude of love. Commit to compassionate dialogue. Meeting violence with violence, even just violent rhetoric like what we hear almost daily, brings everything down to the level of hate-filled brutality. Focusing on truth, lovingly, can eventually reach more people than responding in kind to arrogance. Plus, it helps preserve my peace of mind.

Faithful to our traditions and principles, I have a guide for how I respond to those around me. My last sermon was about spirituality, and I said that it is not something separable from one's culture and religion. Spirituality is not simply an individual pursuit. Attending a religious congregation like this reinforces my ability to know consciously what I believe and to readily tell others. As anthropologist Margaret Mead said: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

You might have noticed that I have segued from the purely individual responses to anguish—limiting my exposure to painful news stories, meditation, and reading--into responses that consider my relationships with others. Humans

are social animals and as such we are not isolates but live in a vast network of social relationships. Of course, I support this congregation's togetherness, because I know that we are unusual in our level of acceptance. We are committed to an ever-widening, inclusive circle of welcoming acceptance. There are many fewer communities now than forty years ago, and still fewer that are spiritual. In these fraught times, we need each other recognizing that there is more than hate and brutality in the world. By holding onto our humanity today we preserve the seeds of a more just society for tomorrow.