

Just Comment

Resist yes! Despair is not an option. Building a culture of active response to injustice

Resistance as a response to injustice and social inequities is not new. It is part of the experience of many religious and secular groups. It has received a boost as people protest top-down abuse of power: women's rights and domestic violence; rights of asylum seekers, Indigenous people, climate justice, gay rights and racism. Social media has put resistance on the radar. It occurs within a particular social context and requires navigating various social, political, and economic relationships. For example, these relationships confronted ordinary people who resisted the extremes of the Nazi Holocaust. Acting from within their own spheres of influence, they often paid with their lives. Adolf Hitler's regime was supported by many. Others sat on the sidelines. Crucially, many people carried out meaningful acts of resistance to protect the life and dignity of their neighbours and strangers.¹

Effectiveness?

The effectiveness of protests in the immediate moment or over the long haul is often questioned when nothing seems to change.² The true impact of activism is often not felt for a generation. But, despair or neutrality are not options in unjust situations. To be neutral is to collaborate with the powerful against the powerless.

It is necessary to build a culture of active response in the face of injustice. It is built when the voices of those committed to exposing injustice are shared. Even highlighting the thoughts and actions of people dedicated to confronting injustice can build courage.³ Myriad small, incremental actions matter even when the consequences are not immediate or obvious. Even failure in an immediate objective may result in a change to the whole framework that makes broader change inevitable as the story is changed, future activists encouraged, and persistence is made possible.

Social Analysis

Kristine Renwick Monroe⁴ has analysed the experiences of rescuers/resisters, bystanders, and supporters of the Nazi regime concluded that moral identity - how one sees oneself in relation to self, other, world, and agency - affected the response to social evil moves one beyond thoughts and feelings to action. Resisters saw themselves as connected with others and able to effect change because they had integrated the value of human life into their world view.

Experience and religious tradition teaches us that resistance is possible and serves to affirm human dignity and the integrity of creation, even if we do not always *seem* to end injustice or social wrongs.⁵ The most important effects are often the most indirect.⁶ Actions often ripple far beyond their immediate objective.

In the 1980's and 1990's as people lived with and died of AIDS, organisations such as Act Up changed the way people thought about AIDS. Many Act UP activists did not see the final outcome of their work, but they accepted that the consequences may be immeasurable or still unfolding, or indirect, as poor people on other continents got access to medicine because some in another country refused to accept things as they were.⁸

In 2016, at Standing Rock, North Dakota, the gathering of tribes and activists was not measured by the defeat or not of a pipeline. Initially, it was delayed and cost investors a fortune. Though the pipeline went ahead, the gathering, the largest of Native North Americans ever seen, wrote a radical new chapter to a history of over 500 years of colonial brutality, loss, dehumanisation and dispossession. Thousands of veterans came to defend the people. In one ceremony, many apologised and sought forgiveness for the army's long role in the oppression of Native Americans in an affirmation of solidarity and interconnection. People with little knowledge of native rights and wrongs educated. It inspired and informed young people of good work yet to do.⁹

Actions often ripple far beyond their immediate objective, even when results are unlikely to be immediate or obvious. Many of our greatest victories are what does **not** happen: what is not built or destroyed, deregulated or legitimised, passed into law or tolerated. Even losing can be part of the process of change. Attempts to abolish slavery failed repeatedly but the ideas behind them spread until they were passed.

So, repeated small, incremental actions matter even when the consequences are not immediate or obvious. The true impact of activism may not be felt for a generation. That alone is reason to struggle, rather than surrender to despair.¹⁰

Obstacles to action

Impartiality or hiding one's values are obstacles to action. They buttress oppressive systems.

The bishop of San Diego, Robert McElroy, recently called on community organisers to become disrupters and rebuilders of society. 'We must disrupt those who would seek to send troops into our streets to deport the undocumented... We must disrupt those who portray refugees as enemies..... We must disrupt those who train us to see Muslim men and women and children as sources of fear..... We must disrupt those who seek to rob our medical care.....'¹¹ He said, 'We must make the issues of jobs, housing, immigration, economic disparities, and the environment foundations for common efforts, rather than of division. We must seek prophetic words and prophetic actions which produce unity and cohesion.....'.¹²

The true political spectrum in society ranges is about right and left, from top to bottom. Left and right have to do with political theory. Top to bottom is the daily reality in our lives. In most towns and cities small groups and coalitions come together to find ways of stepping over the blockages to democratic aspirations created by corporations and big money. These groups, in the process of organising, strategising and mobilising are building relationships and creating something positive from a negative¹³ as happened at Standing Rock.

The media would have us believe that protest is ill-informed and futile; that the status quo cannot be changed. But, protest begins with, and gives hope. As Joan Baez said, 'Action is the antidote to despair.' Despite an uncertainty of the future, hope acknowledges that we can impact future outcomes.¹⁴

Many people have embraced the term being a 'voice for the voiceless'.¹⁵ This can be another excuse to place ourselves at the centre of the story and disempowering or marginalising people already oppressed. To speak for people who can speak for themselves reinforces their 'voicelessness'. They have something to say but are often not heard. "*The problem isn't their 'voicelessness,' but that we are not listening.*" We need to amplify their voices so that they can take centre stage and be encouraged. Whilst acknowledging the pain and suffering endured, we also highlight their resilience so as not to paint them as helpless victims. Calling them voiceless when not reinforces the narrative that they can do nothing.¹⁶

Dissent and political engagement go together. Dissent is from something. Political engagement is to be for something. It is not simply to protest negatives that ought to be denounced but seeking ways to make the lives better.¹⁷

¹ Susan Francois, CSJP *Resistance LCWR Resolutions to Action* Spring 2017.

² Adam Johnson *5 Simple Rebuttals to the Common Arguments Against the Value of Protesting AlterNet* February 2, 2017 <http://www.alternet.org/activism/protests-against-trump-are-effective>.

³ Drew Serres *Here's How Desmond Tutu, Elie Wiesel, Paulo Freire, and MLK Approach Neutrality* **Organizing Change** <https://organizingchange.org/here-is-how-moral-leaders-approach-neutrality/>

⁴ *Ethics in an Age of Terror and Genocide: Identity and Moral Choice*, Princeton University Press, 2012

⁵ The Second Vatican Council recognized the moral importance of everyday ordinary actions. *Gaudium et Spes* (no. 34) claims that human beings, created in God's image, have a mandate to 'rule the world in justice and holiness.' We do this through 'the massive endeavour of humanity,' both at the individual and collective level. Yet, as the Council reminds us, this mandate 'also applies to everyday activities.'

⁶ Rebecca Solnit *Protest and persist: why giving up hope is not an option* **The Guardian** March 13, 2017

⁷ 'Do not depend on the hope of results . . . you may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps results opposite to what you expect. As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results, but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself. . . you gradually struggle less and less for an idea and more and more for specific people . . . In the end, it is the reality of personal relationship that saves everything.'

Thomas Merton, Trappist monk, writer and peace activist

⁸ Solnit *op.cit.*

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ 'Brian Roewe *In powerful speech, San Diego bishop challenges organizers to disrupt, rebuild* **National Catholic Reporter** February 19, 2017.

¹² Roewe *op.cit*

¹³ Jim Hightower *Populism is Not About Mobs, Anti-Government Rants or Opinion Polls* www.creators.com May 3, 2017 <https://www.creators.com/read/jim-hightower/05/17/populism-is-not-about-mobs-anti-government-rants-or-opinion-polls>.

¹⁴ Jeffrey Iovannone, PhD *The Value of Protest* **The Radical Notion** November 25, 2016.

¹⁵ Craig Greenfield *Are we really called to be a 'voice for the voiceless'?* craiggreenfield.com March 15, 2017

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ Mitchell Cohen *The Values of Dissent* **Dissent** Winter 2014

Resources

Mitchell Cohen *The Values of Dissent* **Dissent** Winter Issue 2014

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Timothy Snyder *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* London, Penguin, 2017

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