

The Revolution *Will* be Televised. . . and Tweeted
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This is not the first time in America that has seemed angry, frightening, and dangerous. We have faced such times before, and we have survived and even moved forward as a nation. We have recovered, and we have progressed. Slowly, haltingly, with one step backward for every two steps forward, we have progressed in equality, in inclusion, in justice, in compassion.

And yet—this *is* an angry, frightening, dangerous time in our country. Some of us believe that much of the progress we have made may actually be at risk now.

Let me share this description of our current situation from an April 28th statement signed by a multi-racial, multi-denominational group including dozens of influential Christian ministers, scholars, and denominational leaders: “We are seeing the very worst values of our nation and its history on display with a vulgar message and style. A direct appeal to the racial, religious, and gender bigotry that is always under the surface of American politics is now being brought to painful public light. The ascendancy of a demagogic candidate and his message, with the angry constituency he is fueling, is a threat to both the values of our faith and the health of our democracy.”

It seems there’s another revolution underway, and it’s a revolution of backlash. This one *will* be televised, and tweeted, and posted and shared. Gil Scott-Heron’s great 1970 jazz poem says “You cannot stay at home, brother,” but the backlash revolution *wants* us to stay at home, because the backlash revolution *depends* on us staying at home—watching it unfold on MSNBC, or CNN or Fox or PBS, or the Daily Show if we need a laugh, commenting about it on Facebook or Twitter; expressing our steadily growing horror and disgust, but not doing anything.

We have been here before. This is not the first time a strongman with a lot of followers has threatened the foundations of democracy, while a nation watched and people of integrity seemed paralyzed and helpless.

That group of ministers, who wrote that they are “called to resist bigotry,” see themselves as following in the footsteps of German Lutheran ministers who were part of the resistance to the rise of Nazism in the 1930s. Those pastors formed what was called the “Confessing Church,” declaring that their confession, their faith in Christianity, must come before loyalty to the State. Their first protest was against the government’s demand that Lutherans of Jewish ancestry must be purged from the church, but gradually they came to see that the abuses and persecutions went far beyond the state exercising undue control over religion.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, after spending several years teaching in the Confessing Church’s hidden seminaries, took a post with German Intelligence, from which he secretly but actively rescued Jews, and even joined in plots against the life of Adolf Hitler. Arrested and imprisoned in 1943, he wrote before his execution that the church must not simply “bandage the victims under the

wheel, but jam the spoke in the wheel itself." It was Bonhoeffer who said: "Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act."

Martin Niemöller, another Confessing Church founder, was the author of a famous poetic statement that has been much paraphrased recently:

"First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me."

Some of our direct spiritual forebears were engaged in that struggle as well. You heard a few weeks ago about the Rev. Dr. Norbert Capek, leader of the 3,000-member Prague Unitarian Church, arrested and executed because the Nazis thought his faith in reason, in the worth of every human being, and in the goodness and beauty of God's creation was a danger to the state. There were also Martha and Waitstill Sharpe, early leaders of the Unitarian Service Committee, who throughout the war smuggled refugees and Jews out of danger.

Another Unitarian, a young minister and scholar named James Luther Adams, visited Germany in 1927, and had a terrifying experience of being rescued barely in time when an argument he was having with some Hitler supporters at a Nazi rally was about to turn violent. In the 1930s Adams visited Germany again and taught in the Confessing Church's seminaries. He later wrote: "In Nazi Germany I soon came to the question, 'What is it in my preaching and my political action that would stop [Nazism from coming to America]?' " He went on to say, "It is a liberal attitude to say that we keep ourselves informed and read the best papers on these matters, and perhaps join a voluntary association now and then. But to be involved with other people so that it costs and so that one exposes the evils of society . . . requires something like conversion, something more than an attitude. It requires a sense that there's something wrong and I must be different from the way I have been."

I'm not going to try to prove in the next two minutes that our present political situation is like Germany's in the 1930's. Others are making that comparison, and I think they're right, but that's not the point, for me.

If we have even the slightest sense, right now, that our nation is at risk of electing a demagogue whose appeal is fueled by bigotry, fear, and contempt for the limits of constitutional government, then it doesn't matter whether or not we think he's "as bad as Hitler." What matters is that the values of our living tradition call us to respond, and to resist.

When a political candidate who might become President of the United States declares that a massive new immigration police force needs to be created so that 11 million people can be rounded up, detained in camps, and then deported, it doesn't matter whether we think he could

really do it. What matters is whether our faith in the inherent worth and dignity of every person is strong enough to lead us to speak out in public and in private, and to make plans for resisting, refusing to cooperate, and protecting the potential victims when they come for the undocumented immigrants, should this idea ever become public policy.

When someone who might become President promises to fight terrorism by torturing suspected terrorists and killing them and their families, by barring Muslims from entering America, and by treating American Muslims as potential terrorists, it doesn't matter whether we think this idea might lead to another Holocaust. What matters is whether we have enough faith in justice, equity, and compassion, and in religious freedom, to publicly and privately denounce this horror, to declare solidarity with our Muslim neighbors, and to make plans for actively resisting when they come for the Muslims, should these policies of religious bigotry become law.

If a candidate for high political office, as the new "confessing pastors" summarize, "promotes racial and religious bigotry, disrespects the dignity of women, harms civil public discourse, offends moral decency, and seeks to manipulate religion," it doesn't matter whether we think it could be worse. It's bad enough. "Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act."

How are we called to speak and act as a religious community? Martin Luther King wrote, "The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state." A religious community like ours is not a political organization, nor should we ever become the spiritual wing of one political party.

As the Rev. Dr. William Barber likes to say: These are not Republican issues or Democratic issues. These are not Donald issues or Hilary issues or Bernie issues. These are moral issues. Our faith calls us to stand for justice; our faith calls us to speak for what is right.

There are practical things congregations can do, like taking part in voter registration drives. Congregations can advocate publicly on issues. Some of our sibling U.U. congregations have hung "Black Lives Matter" banners, anti-HB2 posters, and signs proclaiming support for Muslim neighbors. Some have already given sanctuary to people at risk of deportation. Others have held community events like Interfaith Ramadan Iftar dinners, or hosted public forums, or worked directly with refugees and immigrants, both with and without legal documentation. I'll be looking for ideas at General Assembly next month, and I'd like to have a conversation, perhaps after a Sunday service this summer when I return from vacation, about what the best actions for a congregation like ours in a community like ours might be.

But I think the most important thing congregations can do is empower, encourage, and equip each and all of us to find *our* ways to "jam the spoke in the wheel" of the backlash revolution. James Luther Adams came to believe that the "costing commitment" for each of us was best made in the context of groups of people. What are your groups, and what are their parts in the face of the danger ahead?

Perhaps for you it's the League of Women Voters, or a political party, or the NAACP or another advocacy organization. Perhaps it's a community or professional organization, a Chamber of Commerce, or a board you participate in that doesn't usually talk politics, but might need to risk

it when we're on the verge of an upheaval that will have practical implications for everyone. Maybe you're part of a book club that could take on a more challenging read than usual and see if it leads anywhere; or maybe your recreational or social club—or Ministers' Association—could stand to have a careful, gentle yet honest conversation about the world outside and what you fear, want, and hope for it.

Joanna Macy, the environmental educator and climate change activist, points out that activism does not necessarily mean protests and campaigns, although those are certainly needed. You might have a gift for compassionate, persuasive conversation with someone whose views are opposed to yours; or you might have a gift for encouraging and sustaining weary organizers. Perhaps your best work is in energizing people to go out and take on the public square, or in creating spiritual refuges where those who do the more visible work in the world can restore their hearts and nourish their souls.

Maybe creating one-on-one relationships of trust with people who are likely to be targeted if the demagogue comes to power is your best role. Think how important those relationships will come to be, if the time should arrive when frightened people need support and protection against unjust policies.

Above all, here in our spiritual community, I believe our most important work is to express, and as best we can to *live* the values we hold in faith. Here we can imagine together what it means to live in an interdependent web with all of existence, and to experience what it feels like to do that intentionally. Here we can learn how to protect the right of conscience even when we disagree, and use the democratic process to respect each other's dignity as much as to advance our own goals. Here we can learn the challenges and the immense gifts of living in a community that values the *whole* lives of *all* people, so that we can offer that knowledge back to a world which so desperately needs to learn how to live as an undivided human family.

Here we can provide healing for the brokenhearted, rest for the weary of spirit, comfort for the suffering, courage for the fearful, and wisdom for the struggling. Here we can remember and celebrate that life has beauty and joy, meaning and purpose, no matter what happens in our country.

Here we can remind one another that we must take up the work of bending the moral arc of the Universe toward justice, but that we do not ever face the task alone. Like the birds in our story, we know that we are stronger together, better together, that we can lift each other up against the nets of injustice, and that only together can we be free.