

Practice Resurrection
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Often when I'm in need of solace, or inspiration, or challenge, I've found the poet Wendell Berry speaking to me. A poem of his called "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer's Liberation Front" gave me a gem that I've been drawn back to again and again. The poem warns that a love for comfort and easy gains will seduce us into the control of those who will use our life for their own ends. To escape, to claim our life, he says, we need to cut against the grain of the culture around us. Here's a sampling of a few of his suggestions for liberation:

"So, friends, every day do something that won't compute. Love the Lord. Love the world. Work for nothing. Take all that you have and be poor. Love someone who does not deserve it.

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Say that the leaves are harvested when they have rotted into the mold. Call that profit. Prophesy such returns. Put your faith in the two inches of humus that will build under the trees every thousand years."

You get the idea. There's much more, but his final words of advice, the last line of the poem, rang me like a bell when I first saw them.

"Practice resurrection."

Practice resurrection.

What could that mean? We think we know what resurrection is, and it doesn't seem like something you can practice. It's a one-time event in the Christian Gospels, the story of Easter morning. Jesus, executed by the Roman colonizers and the Jewish religious leaders of his time because his movement and his teachings threatened their power. His body laid in a temporary grave, because it's Passover, just as it is in our world, in our time today, and it's forbidden to handle the dead during the sacred days of the festival. The grave closed with a massive stone because the authorities have heard that Jesus said the grave could not hold him, and they fear a trick. The women among his followers coming to the tomb the morning after the holy days were over, to find the stone moved, the body gone, a mysterious messenger telling them Jesus is living. And then suddenly he is appearing to his followers, teaching them again, promising, when he finally leaves them, that he will send a spirit to guide them.

That's resurrection, as we've learned to understand it: Jesus triumphs over death, rises from the grave, and promises his followers eternal life. That's what the word means, isn't it? You can't practice that, can you?

From the very earliest days of Christianity, though, there have been people who said that resurrection means something very different. For many of Jesus' earliest followers, and for mystics and scholars in the centuries since, including our own Universalist and Unitarian ancestors, the question of the resurrection hasn't been "What happened to Jesus?" As the

contemporary Christian theologian Walter Wink puts it, something very real happened in the resurrection, but that reality was in the minds and hearts of Jesus' followers.

Think about those followers. It wasn't only Jesus, their friend and teacher, that had died that dreadful day. They were left in the ashes of a hopeful movement. They had been filled with expectation; they were sure that the Roman invaders and the puppet Hebrew king Herod were about to be swept aside and Jesus would become the leader of a new Kingdom of God on earth. And suddenly that vision was gone, crushed in one terrible afternoon. Jesus was dead. Their hope and their expectations were dead. And then, somehow, they began to feel that he was alive and real and with them. Not in any simple or obvious way, as if he hadn't died after all, or as if he'd come back from a journey, but alive in some new way, alive in them and through them. In Walter Wink's words, "They continued his life by advancing his mission." That's the resurrection we can practice.

Maybe it's not too hard for us to imagine, these days, what it feels like to be left in the ashes of a hopeful movement. Many of us have felt in recent months that our expectations for what our nation and our world would be like in the next few years have died. Whatever happens, it is not going to look like we thought and hoped it would, as recently as this time last year. How much time and energy we have spent, so many of us, insisting that it's just wrong, that things shouldn't have turned out the way they did and should somehow be turned back, that we can't bear the thought that we have to fight so many old battles all over again?

And yet in the midst of grief and outrage and denial, something else is *already* happening. As we begin to accept the reality of the death of our expectations, everywhere you look, new activists and organizers are coming forward. New voices are being raised, new alliances formed; new commitments are emerging to protect the vulnerable, to guard the integrity of our public discourse, to rise up in defense of the progress we have made toward being a more just, inclusive, and compassionate society. The movement has taken on new life. That's what the practice of resurrection looks like.

It's not only in great public events that this happens. Maybe you've known a place in the story of your own life where the death of expectation or hope has left you in need of the practice of resurrection. Maybe even now, you're waiting for something new to happen.

Perhaps you've been through one of the bewildering array of life changes that come to all of us, sometimes more than one at a time—a new home, a change in our work life, a health challenge for ourselves or a loved one, a new relationship or a relationship lost, a change in physical capacity, or in our ability to live independently. Maybe you're in the throes of one of those passages right now.

Perhaps you've known that moment when you look across the table at someone you seem to have lost the knack for loving, and wondering which way life will turn. Toward restoration or a parting?

Maybe your life has come, sometime, to the point of utter ruin in a long battle with addiction, with mental or emotional illness, or with some behavior you couldn't quite let go of. Perhaps you're on the cusp of a moment like that even now.

Maybe you have lived in that time of desolation after the loss of a loved one, in the valley of the shadow of death, not sure that you could bear the loss.

We know this moment; it's impossible to live as a human being and never encounter such a moment. Whatever the situation, when we find ourselves at a moment of impasse and impossibility, it's time to practice resurrection.

It always begins with the death of expectations. We have to let them die, and oh, how hard that is. We are so certain that we know how things should be, or how they should have been, or what someone should have done, or what we should be able to do. We might even think we won't survive if things don't turn out the way we *know* they should. We have to let that go. We have to relax and release the part of ourselves that's clinging to the idea that we know what is supposed to happen, and that it *will* happen if we just cling long and hard enough.

It is hard to let expectations die, and yet the death of expectations might just be the birth of hope. As our denial and resistance and insistence pour out, the way is opened for the inflowing of life and love and healing, and the unimaginably infinite possibilities of a Universe that delights in interconnection and revels in creativity.

The heart and center of Jesus' teaching, the center of all wisdom teaching, was that he, and all of humankind, and all creatures and all of creation are infused with a Presence he called God, all of us kindled from within by a Power of creativity and compassion that overflows every boundary that separates us, and that never deserts us. Resurrection is what happens when we feel that Power move in us, when we let it turn us from despair toward healing, toward new hope.

Nothing exists without change. Death is part of life; disillusionment is part of dreaming; loss is part of loving. Despair is a land that no conscious person escapes visiting.

But today is Easter.

And the message of Easter above all is that there is a power of love great enough for us to rely on with absolute assurance, a power that never lets us go. To practice resurrection means to proclaim with all our beings that we will not allow fear or pain or loss to become an excuse for being unloving. We will not accept disillusionment as the final destiny of dreams. We will not recognize death as the final chapter of a life story.

To practice resurrection means to declare, with all our power and purpose, that the land of despair is not our home. We proclaim our citizenship in the land of hope and promise, the land that we will help to love into life. And that's good news enough to sing about, on Easter or any other morning.