

Turning Away from Resentment (Pat Wictor, 2/2/2025)

I'm going to share on a topic that I really struggle with. I'm sharing this because I have a set of values that are in conflict with some of my knee-jerk reactions. Some of what I have to say may speak to what you're going through yourself. For others, it may not be your cup of tea today, and I can understand and respect that. I hope you'll at least consider some of what I'm sharing, and turn it over in your mind, try it on for size.

I've been thinking a lot about resentment lately, and what to do about it. It's something that comes up in my own life repeatedly, being both on the receiving end and the "dishing it out" end. My resentments, in my personal life, tend towards the petty and fleeting, but I find that I sometimes direct them at people close to me, and that bothers me. But I'm going to focus today less on interpersonal resentment, and more on big-picture resentments - though I think the way to deal with both is almost the same.

When I read the news, if I'm really honest, I'm almost always fighting a sense of resentment in myself. We're now a nation whose politics are infused with resentment. We can each recall countless examples. Public servants shouted down and harangued by mobs. The last couple weeks, for anyone that isn't a fan of the current administration. Well, certainly many of us are struggling with resentment - of our fellow citizens for voting the way they did, of the billionaires who seem to be running the show, of the press for yet again failing to focus on the most important issues.... We could all fill in the list.

Years ago, I had a spirited dialogue about resentment with a dear friend, a guy with working-class roots. He felt resentful towards a mutual friend who had done him a good turn, a prosperous man who had done him a major favor and also asked for some things in return. My friend felt outraged - "How dare this man who already has everything ask me for anything?" It was straightforward class resentment, compounded by years of left-wing political activism. He lumped our

wealthy friend in with a class of people who he had already heaped plenty of scorn on over the years: "Those rich jerks are out to screw us. Again."

Fast-forward to now, it's not hard to find rich guys doing their best to act like jerks. It's awfully easy to find apparently deserving targets for one's resentment, if you want to be resentful. So, the question arises: after the first knee-jerk reaction, aren't there some choices being made here?

There is a level at which I feel ENTITLED to be resentful of "those people," the ones acting like jerks, hurting the country, hurting our fellow citizens with terrible policies, their prolific lying, their bottomless bad faith. Me being RIGHT entitles me to feel resentment, disapproval, and contempt for those who are "wrong."

The desire, the imperative to be right runs deep in some of the places many of us hang out, and in the institutions that have shaped us. It was related to my undergraduate and graduate school training in history, where factual accuracy and evidence-based thought were paramount. It's only a couple short steps from "check your facts" to "this is right, that's wrong," to "I'm right, they're wrong." If we care about science, we might again want to be right. Some liberal and left-wing political and cultural organizations are really dedicated to policing speech - again, it's two short steps from "this might be a more inclusive way to say it" to "this is right, that's wrong" to "I'm right, you're wrong." There's also a history of sectarian squabbling on the left, in which trivial differences are magnified into vitriolic condemnation of allies who agree on 95% of everything.

Here's the thing:

Progressives - I'll include myself - have made a crucial mistake that folks on the right haven't made. We think that our own resentments are virtuous - that resenting the rich (or Trump voters, or Republicans, or [fill in the blank]) is not only okay, but that it's a sign of our VIRTUE that we have those resentments. We think it's GOOD to resent those folks, because supposedly we'll channel that resentment into DOING something about the problem. Our resentments are

somehow elevated, because they're directed at the "right" people, and are supposedly a spur to virtuous action. But let's be real: there's no connection whatsoever between resenting and doing. (Maybe people think resenting is a good substitute for doing - sort of like posting on Facebook.)

The populist right understands resentment with a thoroughness that progressives cannot begin to approach, because resentment is the very foundation of today's right-wing politics. Without resentment, they have nothing. They've made a science out of it, with armies of high-priced consultants and researchers who study, catalogue, and quantify resentment, the better to manipulate it. The Trumpy right understands two things about resentment that progressives don't seem to have learned:

1) Resentment is NEVER virtuous. It is ALWAYS a base, mean, ugly emotion. It is the close cousin of fear, and as such is useful in riling people up for some short-term objective. But over the long term, you can't create anything positive or enduring out of resentment, because there's nothing virtuous about it.

Resentment might win you a battle - maybe even a few battles - but if you want to live in a society of mutual respect, inclusiveness, and decency, trying to achieve that through resentment will be impossible. It can't be done.

On the 50th anniversary of the voting rights marches from Selma, AL to Montgomery, there was a conference Called Marching in the Arc of Justice, organized by the Living Legacy Project. Reggie Harris played a major role in that. It brought together veterans of the first civil rights movement with newer leaders from Black Lives Matter, and Rev. William Barber from NC. One of the speakers, the Rev. C.T. Vivian, was asked how the civil rights activists managed to stay nonviolent in the face of such violence, threat, and insult, day after day. He answered, "We had great leadership, we were absolutely committed to non-violence, and everything we did, we did from the standpoint of love." They turned away from resentment, by turning towards love.

2) Resentment is TRANSFERRABLE. There is NO directing it at the "right" people in any sustained way, because it can be re-directed easily. The right has made electoral victory out of transferring resentment of the rich into resentment of "liberal elites" of all kinds (apparently, there are no conservative elites, in their world view).

They channel people's fear over the vulnerability of their families into resentment of gay and trans people. They transfer fear over crime into resentment of people of color and immigrants. They channel fear over unemployment into a hatred of taxes and regulations.

To paraphrase Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., resentment can never drive out resentment - only love can do that. This, I think, is what Jesus was talking about when he said to turn the other cheek. There is no "right" target for resentment. It is a cancer that corrupts any caring person. We need to be willing to change the world without resorting to resentment, stand up for our values without hatred for those we oppose, state our case over and over again without shouting, meet the violence of others' intentions with a firm but peaceful demeanor. Of course, we cannot change the minds of those who are beyond reason, and ruled by their own resentments, or profiting personally as apostles of fear and hate. But we can live as examples for the large silent majority who don't want either fear or resentment as the guiding forces in their lives. People can be effective and empowered without all that.

I want to invite you to catch yourself when that resentful feeling comes, and to make a choice. Turn away from it and turn towards love. When that feeling wells up from reading the news, put aside the news. No, you don't need to know every terrible thing going on, the instant it happens. Find humanizing stories about people who disagree with you. Strike up some conversations - not to tear at your differences, but to find what common ground you might have. I was talking with a friend yesterday, who lamented that he was often surrounded by people professionally, but that he still felt lonely. He said he didn't feel like there were many kindred spirits in his world, the business world. This is true - my friend is an

unusual guy, an outlier in that world, in his politics, values, and priorities. But I said, "So you can't have a whole loaf. Are you holding out for a whole loaf, or are you willing to have half a loaf wherever you can have it? A lot of half loaves start to add up to a lot of bread...." It's harder to resent people when you've built some goodwill with them, and they with you.

My short version of today's sermon: give up trying to be right, turn away from resentment and turn towards love, and accept all the half loaves wherever you find them.