

Laying Low & Laying Siege

by Rev. Luke Stevens-Royer

a response paper to
Here in the Heart of Empire
by Rev. Barbara Prose

*“Lay me low, lay me low, lay me low
Where the Lord can find me,
where the Lord can own me,
where the Lord can bless me.”
- Shaker Hymn*

For your testimony and witness, your insight and hope, Rev. Prose – I am grateful.

Most days, I find a cacophony of voices and images and callings filling my heart and mind as to how to heed the ancient religious teaching to live in a way that tears down the powers and principalities of the empire. Most of the language that comes to mind is *resist*, and *rise up* – a clear call to harness the anger or frustration or pain inflicted by the current political culture, one that is not entirely new, but seems quite different, into courage and action. Activists and artists, prophets and poets from every vantage point hold an active intensity that is, at times, filled with righteous indignation and prophetic zeal that is necessary and right.

*“[Forging a third way] will depend in part on our capacity and courage
as people raised in the Empire
to be creative instead of critical,
practical instead of prophetic,
joyful and humble instead of serious and self-righteous –
lest we take on too much responsibility for the woes of the world
and our future in or directing it.” – Rev. Prose*

I am grateful for the clarity and strength of the reminder for *joy and humility instead of self-righteousness*.

There is something about “the empire”, and its capitalistic focus on production and consumption that a highly active and at times frenetic response, at times, feels like the *master’s tools*.

I wonder, now aloud with you, if at least one way, among many important and necessary responses, is to *lay low*. Not in the colloquial understanding of a passive retreat or indifferent inaction “under the radar”, but to *lay low* and center down, in the Shaker and Quaker traditions; to practice mindfulness and non-attachment in the Buddhist tradition. To center down and sift through the frenetic-ness that empire creates to be able to pay attention to deep-down truths. This, of course, is a constant balance with action and work, as in the old phrase, *ora et labora*:

work and pray. It seems necessary, for my own soul, to center down, in core convictions, in a way that the distractions of a frenetic news cycle don't allow. To be able to notice and remember the deeper callings where we are not owned by empire, but owned, as in finding our identity with God and Love and Justice and the Spirit of Life - ancient teachings of *doing justice, loving kindness, moving and living and breathing humbly.*

Michelle Alexander, reflecting on the current political climate, shared these words in an interview,

"I have been having some trouble with the frame of "resistance" for some time. I understand completely why the term, the phrase, the rallying cry emerged following Trump's election -- it makes complete sense to me. But I think we've got to think beyond resistance. Resistance is inherently defensive..."

As I see it, we are part of a bold and beautiful revolutionary movement that aims to rebirth this country. This movement isn't new...we could go on and on, naming the incredible revolutionaries who have helped to remake America. As I see it, Trump is the resistance...wanting to take America back.

If we are going to do the work that is required to build truly transformational movements in which there is any hope of us building a multiracial, multiethnic, multifaith, multi-gender democracy, in which every voice and every life truly matters, we are going to have to connect and tap into, embrace that revolutionary spirit and the spirits of the ancestors, the freedom fighters who came before us, and say: "We're not about resistance. We're about building a revolutionary movement for the collective liberation of us all."¹

Instead of *wordsmithing the revolution*, in picking it apart to perpetuate inaction and indifference, a practice that shows up regularly in surface-level social platforms or from historically privileged individuals or groups, Alexander shifts the tone and widens the framework. The shift in tone and focus that Alexander provides pivots not only the mind, but the heart, toward a remembering and re-collecting of stories and narratives and actions that could be too easily forgotten. I believe Alexander is not so much offering a critique of the *resist* motif, but a creative widening of it, drawing in a wider circle of possible co-creators of a better world.

"It is about the heart because we live in the heart of empire. And empire lives in our own hearts." - Rev. Prose

Rev. Prose rightly points out that we live in the heart of empire, and it lives in our own hearts. I was struck, in her language about the new *Sanctuary* movement, the complications in balancing, in her words, the *practical and the prophetic*.

¹ Michelle Alexander in "People were resisting before Trump" found at <http://www.truth-out.org/opinion/item/40969-people-were-resisting-before-trump-michelle-alexander-naomi-klein-and-keeanga-yamahtta-taylor-in-conversation>

As both my previous and current congregations have become Sanctuary churches, I have always found a tension between public witness and the deeply anti-empire sentiment at the core of the movement. Like conversations in my own congregations, Rev. Prose lifted up the language of “*hardworking, tax-paying*” people. I have used this language myself in making the work marketable in the public square. This is the language of empire.

In this simple phrase, people are justified, seen as worthy, due to their productivity and their payment of taxes. I don’t disagree that these are relatable and effective communication strategies for the wider public, and that this may be the *practical* application of justice work as compared to *prophetic*.

To confront the empire, and not *use the masters’ tools*, it seems a wider approach is necessary. Sulak Sivaraksa writes, “*In standard, materialist development theory, one measures development in terms of physical results, such as increased income, etc.. It is assumed that since these are all beneficial things, as they increase in quantity, the quality of life will also increase. If one were to view development strictly qualitatively, however, one would look at human beings not only in relation to their material development, but also in relationship to the development of their full potentiality.*”²

I have felt that the impulse to use language to *make people marketable*, a disturbing phrase on its own, can make me lose focus on our larger vision of justice for all people simply because they are people (not because of their work or financial contributions to Caesar). I fear we inadvertently support the premises of a capitalistic structure. The phrase that has echoed in my own mind when using such language is from the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., that *the church should be the conscience of the state – never its tool*.³

Perhaps a way forward, in grounded humility for our work without *atrophying our will*⁴, we can heed the words from Indian activist Arundhati Roy:

“Our strategy should be not only to confront empire, but to lay siege to it. To deprive it of oxygen. To shame it. To mock it. With our art, our music, our literature, our stubbornness, our joy, our brilliance, our sheer relentlessness – and our ability to tell our own stories. Stories that are different from the ones we’re being brainwashed to believe. The corporate revolution will collapse if we refuse to buy what they are selling – their ideas, their version of history, their wars, their weapons, their notion of inevitability.

Remember this: We be many and they be few. They need us more than we need them. Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.”⁵

² Sulak Sivaraksa, *Seeds of Peace: A Buddhist Vision for Renewing Society*.

³ Paraphrased from the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in *Strength to Love*.

⁴ *Strength to Love*.

⁵ Arundhati Roy, *War Talk*

I wonder if the only way to hear it breathing, amid the distractions and frenzy of a crisis-level news feed, is to take at least a few moments to *lay low*. To dwell in a posture of humble strength and paying attention, listening; both for historically privileged individuals and institutions to pay attention to the stories of marginalized communities, as well as for marginalized communities to find solidarity and strength and nourishment of the spirit.

If we are to lay siege, to hear the possibility of another world breathing, we must first quiet ourselves. Perhaps such a sentiment can invite us to center down, where we focus not on *owning*, but what narratives, what values, what justice, *own us – whose are we* – so that we might live in such a way to be, together, the breath of a new world.