

Resistance and the Art of Freedom

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If we were each invited to bring our own 'Disobedient Object' to the exhibition of social movement innovations currently at the V&A Museum in London, what would I offer? Would it be the broadfork our resident permaculturist had custom-made for the self-organised community orchard in Poole last year, or the collection of queer badges from my out, loud and proud days of the mid-1990s? I don't think so. It would have to be a six foot long sheet of purple rubber.

Is it used for some sort of queer pleasure? A way to defend myself from police? The answer to both is yes. It is my yoga mat.

Yoga, for me, is not a straightforward pleasure. I wasn't sure I liked it the first time I tried it. I was embarrassed and self-conscious that I could barely touch my knees, much less my toes, and by the way my arms shook in the 'downward dog'. Even though it triggered feelings of inadequacy, I stuck with it. You see, I was desperate. I had been resisting listening to my body for too long. Here I was writing about love while hunching my shoulders to protect my heart and fighting for sexual liberation while my pelvis was locking up from too many hours staring at a computer, attempting to summon forth freedom from my mind.

That's where I thought I would find it. If only I could intellectually work out all that I found most painful in life, perhaps then it wouldn't hurt so much. The trauma and domination I saw in the world mirrored my own experience. It became all I could see. But somehow I knew there was something else, something more. I thought that to find it I would have to change the entire world.

I came to believe that to be radical is to resist the *world as it is* and to dream of the *world as it should be*.

While I thought I was resisting the hetero-patriarchal, white supremacist, environmentally rapacious capitalist state, it seems to me now what I was resisting was my own experience of being alive. My overcommitted activism was part of a panoply of strategies cleverly designed to keep pain at a distance. Instead of being with the direct experience of pain, I was telling stories about the sources of the pain. Look, I said, to what is happening here or there. See these patterns or those structures. Look outwards, I said to the world, to myself.

Through yoga, despite myself, I began to look inwards. How embarrassing to discover all the same patterns, the same structures. If effective political resistance is about undermining structures of domination and unravelling patterns of control, to contribute meaningfully to that I need to overcome my emotional resistance to also doing that inner work. Like the wise Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldua, I see this inner work being just as important as public acts for the process of social change. Both bring rich insights. Both change the world. How that happens, in either case, is not always obvious.

On the yoga mat, I learn to let go of my need for protection, to surrender to the truth of my experience. I sidestep arrest by the policeman in my head who attempts to fix my body, my identity. Fix because of a belief that I am somehow broken or wrong. Fix because fluidity frightens that which desires certainty. Rigidity, the policeman imagines, brings safety. Being right, he believes, is better than being open.

How do I disarm the policeman? He changes tactics, shapes, always trying to convince me he is acting in my best interests. (He imagines I am separate from the rest of life, that I have my 'own'

interests.) Which is very kind of him, really. I know he's trying to protect me from pain. Whenever there is tension in my body, I know I'm giving him work. I know that I'm resisting life as it is. On the mat and off, I learn to give my attention to observing his presence and gently inviting him to take a break. When he does, the feeling is blissful and I grow stronger, more open to life. I intend to keep welcoming him to take more and more breaks, longer and longer holidays, until he learns to love them so much he wants to retire permanently.

Those who either resign themselves to the inevitability, or even defend the necessity, of borders and policing, governments and wars, greed and theft, declare this police state of mind to be the truth of human nature. Those of us who have always felt sure there is something else are drawn to various paths, both spiritual and political. I find it hard, these days, to draw a line between the two. I'm inspired by the great anarchist feminist Emma Goldman who declared, "Freedom, expansion, opportunity, and, above all, peace and repose, alone can teach us the real dominant factors of human nature and all its wonderful possibilities."¹

Peace and repose. The fullest expression of the art of freedom is not just finding peace and repose on the yoga mat, the meditation cushion, the beautiful holiday or some time after the revolution. It's being at peace everywhere, regardless of what is happening. This is what makes space for the wonderful possibilities of human nature. For the *revolutionary* possibilities of human nature. Of course, expressing the fullness of any art requires devoted practice. It involves inner work. When this has occurred, others cannot help but be moved, even if they don't show it at the time. Even if they still seem to be acting as police.

Writing about the art and power of writing and speaking, Ursula Le Guin draws on the physics of influence. "Any two things that oscillate at about the same interval, if they're physically near each other, will gradually tend to lock in and pulse at exactly the same interval. Things are lazy. It takes less energy to pulse cooperatively than to pulse in opposition. Physicists call this beautiful, economical laziness mutual phase locking, or entrainment."² [p 195] An engaging storyteller, she goes on to explain, draws the reader into the story with the rhythm of her words. The listener or reader becomes entrained with the telling. The question remains, is the story captivating or liberating?

The Yoga Sutras say something similar about the art and power of *ahimsa*, non-violence. "In the presence of one firmly established in non-violence, all hostilities cease."³ In other words, when one's pulse of peace is strong, other beings nearby also grow peaceful. Perhaps you've had a taste of this yourself. Have you ever been around someone so relaxed yet still lively, that you also became more at ease? Perhaps there is something very appealing about the person and you would like to spend more time in their company, to let their good qualities rub off, to entrain with them?

In any encounter with police or anyone else attempting to claim authority over others, it takes a lot of energy to pulse in opposition. Either we will be pulled into their mode or they will be pulled into

¹ Goldman, Emma (1996) "Anarchism: What it Really Stands For" in AK Shulman (ed) *Red Emma Speaks: An Emma Goldman Reader*. Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, p73.

² Le Guin, Ursula (2004). "Telling Is Listening" in *The Wave in the Mind: Talks and Essays on the Writer, the Reader, and the Imagination*. Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, p.195.

³ *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali: Translation and Commentary by Sri Swami Satchidananda* (1990). Yogaville, VA: Integral Yoga Publications, p130.

ours. If the inner policeman is strong in me, I know I will quickly be pulled into the mode of also trying to be an unquestionable authority. I know from experience, things are quite likely to go badly for me. If I have learned to resist the temptation of the inner policeman, to instead be at ease with things as they are, including pain, fear and desire, then I'm much more stable in my own oscillation. If I'm firmly established, I would even draw into my peace those who are acting as police.

A fellow student of Integral Yoga was once walking down a street in New York City when a group of men with knives leapt out of an alley. They expected to use his fear to control him, to make him obedient to their authority. However, he was feeling so peaceful that he simply said, "You should be careful, you might scare someone like that!" and kept walking. Several minutes down the road, it hit him what had just happened. Non-violence is not just an abstract ethic, it's a source of power. While not yet firmly established in peace myself, I have also experienced numerous potential conflicts with various forms of authority figures, including police, soldiers and bosses, melt away when I was able to be steady in myself.

Yoga is just one of the arts of freedom. Do you practice an art that gives you steadiness in yourself for the public acts of social change, whatever they might be for you? Is there a Disobedience Object which symbolises that? And if you don't have an art of freedom, would you like to?



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