

We Are the Ones We've Been Waiting For
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January 31, 2016

Each person who comes into my office -
to talk about life, to ask questions -
they come by themselves.

Maybe a couple. Sometimes a family.

But usually, one person comes in.

They make an appointment.

They come in, we talk.

They share what's going in their life,
and what they want to be different.

They want a better relationship with their parent, child,
spouse. They want to get out of the rut of their work
life and do something that matters more. They want to
control their addiction and get into recovery. They
want to learn to thrive despite whatever health
challenges they might be facing.

There is something going on, a system or a pattern
they feel caught in, and they want to change things.

I say "they" but I mean "you" -

you come in and we talk.

And you each come, mostly, by yourself.

Sometimes I want to put you in the same room
together. I want you to see how much you are not
alone. How much you have in common with each other
How much of a resource you could be to each other on
these journeys. How the questions you are asking are
not just yours; the grief, the hope, the frustration, the
longing, the doubts, the possibility isn't just yours;

that you could learn from each other and be strengthened by each other.

I'd love to put you in the same room. And we could talk about the strategies and the ways that we can make change in our individual and familial lives. What it takes to make a successful intervention into a system. What it takes to open the window and let the dove fly in.

I'd love to put you in the same room — and not just those of you who are in that place of trying to figure out how to overcome resistance, how to effect and manage change — I'd love to bring in those of you who have done it a few times.

We all have right? Most of us at least - we've overcome resistance, we've figured out how to change something in our personal lives.

Maybe it wasn't easy, but we did it. And we could reflect on what that was like - not to tell the others how to do it, but to just say, it can be done. Here's what helped me.

Those of you in the midst of the challenge,
and those of you who've done it a few times,
are not the only ones I want in the room, though.

See, people don't just come to my office.

I go out. I go to meetings.

I go to a lot of meetings.

I go to meetings about education,

and meetings about racial justice,

and meetings about Rockford,

and meetings about Unitarian Universalism,

and other meetings I can't even think of right now.

I got to a lot of meetings.

I go on your behalf to these meetings, and I try to make a contribution. Sometimes I hold people's feet to the fire and try to hold them accountable to a larger sense of justice. Sometimes I try to make connections and bring together things that are separated.

Sometimes I'm not sure why I go, but I've been invited, and so there I am.

I go to meetings, and even though the content of each meeting is different, I find that that the general question is almost always the same:

how do we overcome resistance, change the way things are, so that things will be better?

How do we get people to work together instead of apart?

How do we get people to confront the reality of white supremacy and make the emotional commitment to justice?

How do we get people to care more about results than prestige, and more about changing the world than keeping their power?

How do we get people to be more generous with their money and their time?

How do we get people to build institutions that are more nimble, more diverse, more powerful?

How do we overcome institutional resistance to change?

That's the question: whatever the topic, that's the question.

In the workplace, in city hall, in the school, in the church, in the nation.

So I want to bring some of the folks from these meetings into the room too. Bring them in.

And at first, it'll be weird.

Here's Sally, describing her desire to make her marriage better, but not sure how to make a change. And here's John, talking about how to help his teenager deal with school more effectively.

And here's Claire, wondering "now what?" after she lost her job.

And here's Tom and Ray, planning to get married and wondering how to merge their lives together and keep their love strong.

And then, here's Bob, wondering how to create a cultural arts program for everyone, not just some.

And here's Luis, thinking about reforming the tutoring program to include more STEM support.

And here's Peter, working on how to serve churches so they can be more vibrant.

And here's Lois, raising money for hunger.

And here's Sam, trying to teach the world to face facts about war.

And they would all say, why are we in the same room together? Our problems are so different.

But if they kept talking, and listening, I don't think it would take long for them to see:

actually, their problems are exactly the same.

At the heart, it is the same:

how do you intervene in a stuck system in a way that actually works? How do you have the courage, the support system, the wisdom, to open the window,

to follow the prophetic voice,
to turn the world around,
to be the change you wish to see in the world,
to live the life you long for?

How do you do that?

Whether the change you are trying to effect
is personal, familial, organizational, political, civic —
how do you do it?
What are the key lessons, as you try to overcome
resistance?

So I want you to come with me into that room.
Into the room with Sally and John, Claire, Tom and
Ray, Luis and Lois, and Sam and all the rest.
We're sitting around a circle, just talking and listening.
And some have shared what they are going through
and then a few folks in the room,
they start talking about what they've done before,
things they are reminded of.
Again, not to give advice, or say "here's how you do it"
in a kind of lecture-way, but just to share.
Think about this, is what they mean.

There is the educational advocate. She tells a story:
We identified the problem - kids didn't feel like school
would get them anywhere. What does this have to do
with getting job? Or living a good life?
And employers kept saying, we can't find folks that
understand the work world. So they went and looked
around. Has anyone figured this out?
And they found a model.
Used in Nashville, among other places.

And people got on a plane, and they went and looked for themselves. Are we there? No.
But we're headed in the right direction.
Attendance is up, dropouts are down, discipline is down, students are engaged, more prepared.
Identify the issue. Find a solution.
Don't reinvent the wheel. Be persistent.

There was a minister in that room.
The church was doing ok, but it felt like there was no depth. No connection.
What happened in worship didn't have anything to do with what happened in Sunday School or small group discussions.
And they went to a continuing education week, and there was this workshop:
how to do more by doing less.
Aligning your church through theme-based ministry.
So they came back. Asked, shall we try this? Sure.

A willingness to learn. A willingness to experiment.

In that room, there were a bunch of folks who had changed careers, or picked up new hobbies. One had been a banker, then a teacher. Another had been a teacher and became a nurse. There was the call-center associate studying to be an aviation tech. And the retired manager who had joined the choir. The billing clerk who was working on a novel in her spare time. They started talking. What did it take to overcome the inertia of one path and choose another?
They said: at some point, your dissatisfaction with what is, is high enough, and your longing is large enough, that you are ready.

You think about it, you think about it, you think about,
and finally you say, I'm doing it.

And boy, some people were pissed off!
Spouses — but, we had a plan!
People who expected you to live a certain way.
So it took courage.
The willingness to disappoint others to be true to
yourself. Vision, persistence.
And they said, an example was so helpful.
Someone who had done it, who inspired them.
But in the end, they had to do it themselves.

You can't just wait for the barbarians. Wait for them to
show up and storm everything, and wash away the old
order. In the end, you have to do it.
There isn't somebody else.
We are the ones we've been waiting for.

That's a tough thing.
Because wouldn't it be great if the barbarians stormed
the gates? Washed away the old order, and we could
start again?
But we didn't have to do it? Wouldn't that be great?

Doesn't work that way.
External shocks to the system can provoke change,
but the change has to come from within.
Systems have external shocks all the time -
and then they revert to how things were.

Think about it.
You have a close call, a car accident, cancer,
and you say, I'm going to live my life differently!

But a year later, how different are things?

The couple goes to therapy. And things are better for a while. But then they stop, and over time, things go back to the way they were.

A consultant comes in, make a report. It sits on the shelf.

A tragedy happens - 9/11, Katrina, shootings in Columbine, Newtown, and we say, oh, we will change things. But we don't. Not really.

External shocks to the system are not sufficient to make change. It has to come from the inside.

No one knows how to get Prince Bertram to stop being horrible. You ever in a situation like this?

Someone - adult or child - is causing trouble, and you can't figure out how to fix it. And so everyone just lives with it. What are we supposed to do?

The witch doesn't know that, she just reacts.

Poof. You're a dragon.

External shock to the system.

Intervention by an outside consultant.

But you can imagine, can't you, two different versions of how the story goes from there?

There is the story we have:

Bertram must learn to face himself, to deal with how he has been, and in this introspection, this self-awareness, makes a change. Overcomes resistance within himself.

But there's another version:

that he grows bitter and self-righteous.

Engages in confirmation bias - the problem wasn't that I hit that witch with a rock, the problem was that I

didn't hit her hard enough. Then she would have respected my authority!

Or . . . just as likely — the witch returns him to the boy, and he thinks he is better, but he gets home, and everyone expects him to be mean, and they keep forgetting that he's nice now, and after a while, it is easier to just be the person that people expect. So he starts being mean again.

The well-worn pathways of habit are hard to overcome - in systems of people and in our own souls.

We need an intervention into the system - to get on the balcony, we call it, and see the pattern, learn from others, ask some disruptive questions - we need an intervention, but the intervention by itself isn't enough.

The barbarians, if they did come into the city, soon enough they would start wearing the garb of the Roman authorities, or create their own - new habits, a new system that everyone would follow. And pretty soon it would be like they never came. The revolutionaries become the new dictators.

We are the ones we've been waiting for.
We are the ones we've been waiting for.

You want to overcome resistance?
Make a change in your life, in the world?
Name the problem. Learn from others.
Embrace experimentation. Be persistent. Do it.

Most of all, remember that you are the one you've been waiting for.

That line comes from a poem by June Jordan,
entitled "Poem for South African Women" -
women who marched against apartheid,
who did not let someone else fight for them,
but spoke, and sacrificed, together, for their own lives.

"Our own shadows disappear as the feet of thousands
by the tens of thousands pound the fallow land
into new dust that
rising like a marvelous pollen will be
fertile
And who will join this standing up
and the ones who stood without sweet company
will sing and sing
back into the mountains and
if necessary
even under the sea

we are the ones we have been waiting for"

Leadership is dangerous. Change is dangerous.
When you seek to overcome the habits and patterns
which do not serve love and beauty, you will upset the
apple cart, disrupt the powerful.
Some will say, sit down and be quiet.
Don't you know, don't you know, resistance is futile?
Just go along with it.

You didn't think we were going to make it through
January without me uttering the line resistance is futile,
did you?
You know me better than that.

And, as any Star Trek fan knows, the Borg are wrong.
Resistance is not futile.

Victory doesn't come from conquering the Borg from the outside, from defeating them on the battlefield, but from the inside: by inserting into the system the idea of uncertainty, of doubt, of individual choice - and disrupting the way things have been.

The dream of change, of meaning, of a life of purpose, of a thriving, justice-centered community, these things can happen.

Remember the room?

Plenty of folks in that room -

plenty of folks in this room -

have overcome those habits that don't serve.

People make changes.

People stop drinking.

They get out of unhealthy relationships.

They reform organizations so they thrive.

Good policies do sometimes get passed into law.

People find things that matter to them, and do them.

It happens.

It happens from the inside.

So, if you are in that room of folks striving, of thinking what it will take to overcome their own resistance, or the resistance of others -

if you are in that room -

and you are, I'm sure of it,

I hope that you hear the wisdom of one another.

You are not alone.

That first.

Whatever your longing, you are not alone.

I hope you hear that it can be done.

That it is hard, but it can be done.

I hope you hear that you will need to get outside the system - learn some other ideas, see how others do it.

I hope that you come awake to the possibility of change, that you know that you are the one to change - no barbarians await to do it for you.

I hope that you take courage, have hope, and I hope that you begin today.

May it be so, and may it be well.