

"Fighting Monsters"
Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
First Church in Boston
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By the time David arrived at the front line, the warring sides had been entrenched on opposing hills for forty days. On each of those days, a warrior of enormous size came forward. Sheathed in bronze armor and carrying a spear in his hand the warrior, Goliath, shouted across the valley, "This day I defy the armies of Israel! Give me a man and let us fight each other." (1 Samuel 17: 10) In response, the army of Israel fled . . . again and again for forty days.

Until David. David had been away tending his father's sheep but was sent to check on his brothers at the battle camp. He watched as Goliath made his daily challenge. He watched as the Israelites fled in fear. He asked around and learned about the enormous rewards on offer for anyone who could stop the warrior. Then, David said he would fight Goliath. Ignoring the scorn of his brothers who dismissed David as full of conceit, David approached Goliath. Having rejected the armor offered him, David brought only the tools he knew well as a shepherd—five smooth stones and a slingshot. With these he had confronted lions and bears. Now he planned to topple a giant.

Which he did. With the first stone.

By the time Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus, she was practiced in defiance. As a child, she witnessed her mother politely refuse to move when the bus driver told her she could not sit next to a white passenger. And, when a white boy on roller skates pushed a young Rosa in the street, she stood up and pushed him right back. At age nineteen, shortly after her marriage to activist Raymond Parks, she began attending strategy meetings to help free the Scottsboro Boys—nine Black teenagers falsely imprisoned by all-white juries in Alabama.

Starting in 1943, Rosa served as secretary for the local branch of the NAACP for fourteen years. Throughout her 20's and 30's, she engaged in multiple meetings and actions across the state in pursuit of civil rights for Black folks. Then came 1955. In the spring of '55, 15-year-old Claudette Colvin, whom Rosa mentored, refused to give up her seat on a bus and was arrested. That summer, Emmett Till was kidnapped and brutally murdered in Mississippi. His grieving mother chose to hold an open-casket funeral so that the world would see what had been done to her son. After bearing witness to the widely circulated image of Till's mutilated body, Rosa did not forget.

In December of 1955, when a bus driver told Rosa to leave her seat and move to the back of the bus, she chose to defy that order. She later explained, “I thought of Emmett Till and I just couldn’t go back.” In her autobiography, Rosa wrote:

“People always say that I didn't give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn't true. I was not tired physically, or no more tired than I usually was at the end of a working day. I was not old, although some people have an image of me as being old then. I was forty-two. No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in.”

Refusing to comply, Rosa defied.

In the book *Defy*, from which I drew much of Rosa’s story, author Sunita Sah describes Rosa’s refusal as “textbook defiance: principled, high-stakes, and an effective catalyst for change.” However, Dr. Sah takes issue with how often people depict Rosa’s act of defiance as “accidental”—a sudden reaction to circumstances. Rather, Sah insists,

“Her dissent wasn’t a reaction; it was an *action*. It wasn’t an impulsive response, but a decision decades in the making, the end result of a lifelong practice. Whether she knew it or not, Rosa Parks had been practicing for that day all her life.”

Defiance is not a simple, singular act, argues Sah. Rather, defiance is a process. And it is a process that we can practice.

Sah defines defiance not simply as disobedience, but rather as: *acting in accordance with your true values when there is pressure to do otherwise*. Defiance is about living our values. She proposes a five-stage process of defiance which begins with a sense of tension between our values and what is expected of us. It’s that little inhale of breath or clenched muscle when we find ourselves within an uncomfortable situation. Then, when we acknowledge this tension to ourselves, we capture some sense of agency in the situation—recognizing we have not simply acquiesced to the situation but retain a critical distance in our uneasiness.

Sharing our discomfort and concern out loud to others moves us further along the process of defiance. In a way, yesterday’s massive “No Kings!” protest was a shared action in the process of defiance. Sometimes I hear people question the point of such rallies—big or small. In Sah’s framework of defiance as a process, telling others that you’re not ok with a situation matters because it both reduces the chance you’ll rationalize your complicit actions at a later point and increases the likelihood you’ll move to the next stages of

defiance. In other words, sharing your self-awareness that what's happening does not align with your values can change how *you* will respond in the future.

You are more likely to escalate the tension you feel by threatening to not comply—a threat that Sah says often precedes the final stage in the process of defiance: an *act of defiance* like refusing to stand, like throwing a stone to stop a threat.

By the time David stepped onto the battlefield across from Goliath, he had experience fighting “monsters”—felling both lion and bear. He also had not rushed into confrontation with Goliath, but gained information about the situation, learning about the potential cost and positive impact of risking defiance. When offered the armor of the king, he declined. He knew who *he* was and what *he* needed for this fight. Defiance is living *your* values against the pressure to do otherwise.

Considering *when* to act is part of the process of defiance. Sometimes we may choose to act, but sometimes we may choose to consciously comply and to live with the tension. We may consider the situation we are in and decide the cost is too high or the potential for impact too small to act *in this moment*. And, in a different moment, we may choose to act as Rosa Parks did on that December day in 1955 when she was tired of complying, “tired of giving in.” She paid a high cost. Not only was she arrested. She lost her job, faced public scorn, experienced tension in her marriage, and was forced to relocate to Detroit. But, in 1965, she told a reporter she’d do it again, explaining,

“We should all be treated as human beings and not humiliated or be made to feel inferior because of [skin] color, over which we have no control.”

Choosing when or whether to defy is an ongoing calculus as we aim to live our values in a complex world of impact *and* consequences.

The world wants us to comply. We are taught from a young age to follow the rules, to not make others feel bad by criticizing them, to respect authority. To accept we are too small to defeat a giant. To move when we are told because that's the law.

But sometimes, situations unsettle us. We feel a tension between what is expected of us and our core values. We acknowledge our discomfort to ourselves; we speak it out loud to another. We threaten to not comply. We defy.

We live today in deeply unsettling times. We may be deeply uncomfortable with what is happening in the world around us. And we may be deeply habituated to complying. By

redefining defiance as *acting in accordance with your true values when there is pressure to do otherwise*, Sah dares us to live our values.

Do you know your core values? Reading Sah's book inspired me to complete an [online values exercise](#). Perhaps like you, I have participated in such exercises several times throughout my life. And yet, in this deeply unsettled moment, taking the time to consider anew what matters most to me was worthwhile. I encourage you to do the same. Since taking the test earlier this week, I have been more likely to pause and consider just how I wanted to show up in a space—for example, asking myself what it would really look like to bring the spirit of Love into a meeting, a conversation? This is not always as simple as it seems. Not when I'm tired or grumpy. Not when another person has their own agenda that may conflict with my hopes and desires in a situation.

With family, friends, colleagues, staff, and strangers, we are repeatedly faced with the question of how to live in *this* moment. The pressure to comply with expected scripts of how to behave saturate the landscapes of our lives. And often, these expectations may be align easily with our values. But sometimes we may feel a sense of tension. An unease that what is expected does not fit with what we value most. A question begins to percolate—do we comply . . . or do we defy?

By the time artist Patrick Martinez created the neon work, *Cost of Living*, he had spent decades absorbing the landscape of his native city of Los Angeles. As Martinez explained in a recent [panel for the Boston Public Art Triennial](#), his entry point into painting was graffiti.

"I'm 45 now and I think back to that a lot, at 11 or 12 years old manipulating a medium that was sold at a hardware store to make a painting on a wall that didn't belong to you."

Criss-crossing the streets of LA as a 12-year-old graffiti artist in search of secluded walls to paint, he observed layers of color and texture in the landscape: painted murals, plants, tile, and neon signs would remain the medium and motif for his art.

Using neon echoes the proud signs hung in the storefronts of "mom and pop" business—laundromats, notary public, checks cashed. The bright, simple signs conveyed a direct message, even when the business was closed. As an artist, creating neon signs challenges him to redact text and graphically represent simple messages. Noting that people "have their own experiences with neon," he described using it to "push back" in spaces, seeing it as a kind of "warning sign" or "almost protest."

By the time five of Martinez's neon signs with their bright messages about the issue of homelessness were hung here in early September, First Church had decades of experience hosting artists. And, First Church had been involved for several years with GBIO (Greater Boston Interfaith Organization) in successfully advocating the state legislature for more funds and support for affordable housing. Supporting public art with messages about homelessness seemed clear.

On the day the signs were installed, pushback began. This is when I began to think more deeply about art as resistance, as defiance. Who or what dictates what we can say and how? When do we stay silent? When do we light up our message in the bold colors of neon? When do we defy expectations for what we say or how we say it?

At the No Kings protest yesterday in Boston, the Emcee Rahsaan Hall, President of the Urban League of Eastern Massachusetts, challenged the crowd that the event was not about one day, but about a movement. Make no mistake. Our Unitarian Universalist Association was a national partner of this No Kings mobilization because our religious values are under attack in this moment. Diversity. Equity. Inclusion. We include a moment to honor Diwali in our service today because we value the religious pluralism and ethnic diversity of this congregation, this city, this nation. We proudly hang a progress flag from our building because we hold Love as our central value—proclaiming Love is Love, supporting queer and trans folx as people worthy of freely loving and being their own beloved selves.

For centuries First Church in Boston has stood for freedom and love. Our ancestors did not always get it right—just as sometimes we fall short. And ours is a story of an ever-expanding Love, an ever-widening circle of inclusion, and an ever-deepening commitment to live our values even when there is pressure to do otherwise.

I am so proud of this church for hanging neon signs that made people think about homelessness. I am proud of this church for showing up yesterday at the No Kings protest. And I am proud of each of you for being here today, seeking to be part of a community where we wrestle together with what it means to live our values in this moment. As we face choices about how to act in the situations in which we find ourselves, I dare you to live by your values.