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# Fight Back Without Empowering What You're Fighting Against

We should always fight for what's right. But when we're on the defensive, our brains contract around that feeling, and that affects how we respond—with more reactivity (we've all seen our friends Facebook updates lately), which can stifle skillful action. How do we let go, and still keep going?

By Stephany Tlalka | February 23, 2017



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Mindfulness is often described as an internal resource—for [healing](#), for [navigating change](#), and as a [compass](#) that helps us get curious about our passions and drives.

But when we're clear on our core values, and they appear to be under attack, what role can our [mindfulness practice](#) play?

Judson Brewer is Director of Research at the Center for Mindfulness at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. His forthcoming book, *The Craving Mind* (Yale University Press, March 2017) explores how our impulse control often takes us off course when we participate in addictive behaviors—everything from smoking to binge-watching Netflix.

Resistance is also like a craving: We get pulled in to our reaction—perhaps excitement over disagreeing, feeling the need to claim our



territory in particular divides. Anger, resentment, or fear can be intoxicating feelings. At the same time, when United States' leadership attempts to put forward policies entrenched in these sentiments, it's essential to communicate where we stand.

Brewer suggests that if we put too much stock in resistance as a response to injustice, we risk syphoning energy away from a just response. "Every moment we're resisting, we're creating a sense of self around that," he says. Instead, letting go of resistance helps us choose the most efficient way to communicate our needs and act (daily Facebook rants about Trump exhausting all of your friends versus the Women's March). This kind of letting go is the opposite of complacency.

Brewer has seen evidence that approaching events through the lens of equanimity eases resistance, and helps put us on a path to constructive action. When we stop holding tight to thoughts of "things need to be *this* way" or "this is *my* view, and yours is wrong," there's an opportunity for something different to happen—beyond fuelling a flame war. Both sides can start to do what they desperately need to do: communicate across the divide.

**Stephany Tlalka:** *What is equanimity?*

**Judson Brewer:** We take mindfulness, *awareness*, where there's no push or pull. That no push or pull—that's the definition of equanimity. Where we're not being pushed, we're not being pulled. There's an "even keel"-ness.

This is like in the Tao Te Ching quote where he talks about the mark of a moderate man is freedom from his own ideas, supple like a tree in the wind, steady like a mountain. Anything is possible from him because he has let go. That's equanimity—the tree that bends in the wind, it's not rigid. And then it pops back up, unharmed.

**ST:** *I'm thinking of tough conversations people are having right now with friends, family members, and on social media—people want to communicate what's important to them, and get the message across about things they think are wrong and need to change. There's this need to solidify one's position—and make it known. But I also imagine the tree is you with your values. You're able to be flexible in the face of opposing value systems, uncertainty, or chaos—you're able to be resilient.*

## **Resistance = Reactivity**

**JB:** If we get too attached to our views, then we're going to lose sight of how to live them out. Because when we resist—when we're not the supple tree that bends in the wind—we're not able to deal with what's actually happening right now. We say, "I don't want this to be this way." It's like one of those blow-up clown punching bags that's supposed to pop back up after you punch it. Each time we reject what's happening, we add sand to the doll, making it heavier. Then, we're no longer able to pop back up. Then what happens? I knocked myself out because it's so heavy. I've exhausted myself.



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Every moment we're resisting, we're creating a sense of self around that. Reactivity is resistance is attachment to views.

**ST:** *So you can't actually live out your values when you are resisting. You're actually working against yourself.*

**JB:** Right. And you're putting a ton of energy into building that up when in reality it's like building a wall in the middle of a river. The water is going to find a way to flow around it. And we just waste our time building that wall.

**ST:** *What about individuals who are firmly entrenched in a value system that excludes others? How can we approach hate with equanimity?*

**JB:** Curiosity can help support equanimity. When we're resisting something, we're contracting. And that contraction creates a sense of self. "This is my view," creates a sense of self. *Curiosity* has the opposite quality—an opening up, expansiveness.

When we're approaching someone who holds an entrenched view, we put up a curiosity which naturally leads us away from initiating one of those "I hate you, you're stupid" wars (those "you're stupid" "no, you're stupid" debates people can get into when tempers flare). So we dive in and we're suddenly curious: *What is it about you're conditioning?* We don't want to say it that way, but really that's what it is. *What is it about your conditioning that leads you to have that view? Isn't that interesting? Why are you so...* and then suddenly we totally want to understand where they're coming from. And usually this is some sense of inadequacy, trauma, feeling insufficient.

There are now neuro-correlates of contraction versus expansion. When we've done these real time neurofeedback [studies](#) on meditators, it's that contracted quality of experience that activates the posterior cingulate cortex (PCC)—a core region of the [default mode network](#) in the brain involved in memory and emotion. And it's the "letting go"/expansion aspect de-activates the PCC.

**ST:** *So curiosity allows you to explore how peoples' vulnerabilities can motivate them to resist, which can lead to toxic viewpoints—which we may hold in our own selves, too.*

**JB:** Right, so we can let go of our own toxic viewpoints and then suddenly try to put ourselves in the other person's shoes. And if we can do that then we can start speaking their language and if we can start speaking their language then they're going to feel heard. And suddenly we're having a conversation as compared to a yelling match. How can we start to approach any major issue without understanding where the other is coming from? If they need something and we don't know what that need is we're not going to get anywhere.



## Can (and Should) We Be Even-Tempered When Our Anger is Justified?

*ST: Where does an even-tempered, equanimous response fit into a scenario where you see people in positions of power shirking their responsibilities? Is there room for just anger in an equanimous response?*

**JB:** I think the first step here is being able to see clearly the results of our actions. We're not skillful if we're not efficient with our energy.

An angry response may seem justified—somebody acts in a misogynistic way, for example. So what arises from that? That's causing suffering—and then there's an added piece to that, which is: *I'm super attached to that view. I'm going to get really angry and then my ego can kind of slip in, thinking, I deserve to be angry. I deserve to be angry because this is a correct view.* So at that moment we can step in and ask ourselves, *How does foaming at the mouth actually help us change anything?* Your foaming at the mouth will cause the other side to put up their defenses.

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It comes back to skillful action. The real question is what does resistance get us. If we puff up our chest, and affirm ours is the right view and yours is the wrong view, we're creating boundaries and separation. We're not understanding the other side. We're engendering resistance on their side because we're modeling it—that doesn't help anything, it doesn't change the fact that the injustice caused suffering—we're just causing more suffering on top of this.

There are many examples of injustice. But the critical piece is how we relate to those. If we puff up our chest, this is a contraction around pride. *This is the right view and yours is the wrong view.* Suddenly we're creating boundaries and separation. We're not understanding the other side. We're engendering resistance on their side because we're modeling it—that doesn't help anything, it doesn't change the fact that the injustice caused suffering—we're just causing more suffering on top of this.

So it comes back to skillful action. The real question is what does resistance get us. It's not to say that we can't stand up and say this is not right. But the resistance is that suffering—we're adding suffering on top of pain. I'm not sure that that's the most skillful way to proceed.

That's not to say "don't resist" because that might suggest we should be complacent. It's really about seeing where we're taking something personally and thinking that because it feels exciting to resist and engendering a personal view of "I am"—whereas to flow in the world, to be most connected, we have to break down those barriers of "I am" as in "I am better than you."

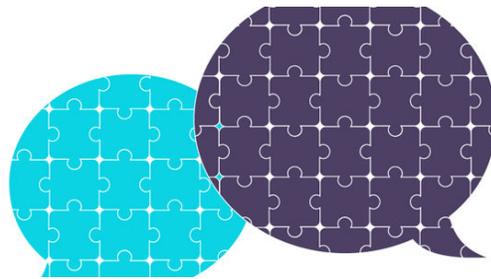


**ST:** Do you think the Women's March on Washington added to suffering?

**JB:** The march was an important way for one side to send a message to the other side: we're not happy with what's happening, we're not okay with this. That's an important first step. If there was violence or anything like that, it would have sent the same defensive message back. And the go-forward from the march is to engender a skillful grassroots movement for people to come together to work at local levels to influence what's going on at the federal levels. This is a great example of efficient, skillful communication.

**ST:** Do you think hosting protests the day of and after the inauguration could be seen resistance of the sort you've been describing—reactive, attempting to rile up the other side?

**JB:** I don't know how else one can convey the message that this is an important issue to so many people than having many, many people gather and speak their voice so they can be heard. And so we can understand clearly what the issues are. It might rile up an empowered group. But if I were the empowered group I'd want to know: 1) How big of a deal this is and 2) If it's a big deal what they're talking about [what their needs are] because if I can't speak to those then I'm going to get voted out if it's a big enough movement.



## The Mindful Guide to Straight Talk

Nine tips for keeping it real while engaging in meaningful communication.





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