

LIVING RESISTANCE



*An Indigenous Vision
for Seeking Wholeness Every Day*

KAITLIN B. CURTICE

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INTRODUCTION

Were you born to resist
Or be abused?

The Foo Fighters,
“Best of You”

Dear Reader, Feeler, Explorer, Un-learner, and Friend,

I want you to remember something really important as you read this book: you are a human being. You have not yet arrived, but you are continually arriving. The thing about being human is that we are born, we live, we grieve, and we celebrate, and one day we pass on, becoming ancestors and guides to those who come after us.

One of the most painful things I notice in my work is that people are scared to start the journey of transformation because they don't know when they will be done. They think a week of reading the right books will get them there, only to find out that is not enough. They believe that following the right people on Instagram and Twitter will alleviate them of ignorance, but it doesn't. So they give up. They stop reading the books and they go back to whatever status quo they held on to, assuring

themselves that change isn't really possible or that the effort isn't worth it in such a hopeless world. We forget that living is our actual adventure, the flesh and blood and spirit with which we journey the Earth together into the life that waits after this one. It all matters. So take a deep breath as you read this next line:

You are a human being. You are always arriving.

The timeline of your life is not a straight line, after all; it is a series of ebbs and flows, backs and forths, heres and theres. You are nowhere and everywhere all at once, and that means that most of the time, the best you can do is be present to the moment, be open to the unlearning and the learning, and trust that you're doing the work of Love.

*As you read this book, you may get overwhelmed. When you do, come back to this page and read these words again. Repeat them to yourself as a kind of medicine: **I am a human being. I am always arriving.***

Now, let's get started.



Today the old one inside you is collecting bones. What is she re-making? She is the soul self, the builder of the soul-home. *Ella lo hace a mano*, she makes and re-makes the soul by hand. What is she making for you?

Clarissa Pinkola Estés, *Women Who Run with the Wolves*

Where does resistance begin, and where does it end?

Perhaps we need to stop thinking of our processes as linear and embrace them as a journey that is at best cyclical and often labyrinthine, with twists and turns, entrances and exits. Maybe resistance overlaps in the different realms of our life, realms that are real and connected to one another.

This book is titled *Living Resistance* for a number of reasons. First, resistance itself is a living, breathing being—when we enter

into the flow of resistance, we enter into a sacred, embodied, connected way of being that brings freedom and wholeness.

Second, living is an active, ongoing, cyclical embodiment. When we choose to live resistance, we are choosing to practice it with all that we are and all that we have. This is what it means to be human. This is how we understand stories and histories. This is how we hold space for one another and for Mother Earth.

I encourage you to mark up this book, if you're reading a print version. I hope you'll doodle in the margins, highlight and underline, ask questions. And if you're listening to the audiobook, I hope you'll keep a journal on the side or take mental notes in some other way. This book is meant to be a journey, and I've included places throughout the chapters where you can stop and process, take a breath, and answer a few questions as we go.

The subtitle of this book, *An Indigenous Vision for Seeking Wholeness Every Day*, reflects what I've already tried to convey—we are seekers, grabbing at wholeness, digging deeper, looking for magic, and asking what it all means.

This book is grounded in my own visions for a better world, both as an Indigenous woman and as someone who is constantly searching my personal world and the world outside of myself for evidence of God or the Sacred. Indigenous realities, visions, and practices all over the world have led people throughout history, just as they lead us today, toward kinship and belonging with Mother Earth and with one another. My hope is that this book tethers us to that conversation and to practices that help us understand how the world works in those cycles and seasons around and in us—awakening us to ourselves, one another, and this sacred world.

It's true that many of us are awakened out of a kind of deep sleep to our need to seek wholeness in the world. Our children get bullied at school so we fight the toxic forces of racism and patriarchy; we leave the fundamentalist upbringing we grew up in because we come to honor the integrity and humanity of our

gender-nonbinary and trans friends; we attend our first Black Lives Matter protest and realize that we haven't done enough to actively fight against systems of white supremacy and to see white supremacy's legacy lived out in ourselves; we are made aware of our ableism and begin to dismantle the systems and very staircases that aren't accessible to everyone.

If you are here, reading this book, you may have had one of those moments, or maybe you're in the middle of that moment right now. So how can we embody the work of resistance on physical, spiritual, socioeconomic, mental, and political levels? How can we embody solidarity not just with one another but with all the creatures of this earth, human and otherwise, and with Mother Earth herself—with, as we call her in Potawatomi, *Segmekwe*?

This book is organized into four parts, a framework I call the “realms of resistance.” They are connected but separate; they overlap to make us whole as people. These four realms are the personal, the communal, the ancestral, and the integral. As I stated earlier, this journey is not linear. So, too, the realms in which we practice and embody resistance are not linear. We can move from realm to realm, we can inhabit more than one space, and we can journey back to a realm we thought we would never again visit—it is supposed to be this way, the way of being human.

So why *realms*? Traditionally we think of a realm as either a kingdom or a geographical area. I mean something closer to the second idea. I want us to think of these four realms of resistance not so much as kingdoms but as spaces and places that we might inhabit or, in a more spiritual sense, embody. We live and exist there, always, in one realm or another, or in the overlap of many.

The realms are arranged by color, season, and other characteristics. On the cover of the book, you can see the realms of resistance in their full beauty, and I hope you'll linger with that illustration as you ask yourself how you have moved among the realms in your own life.

Here is a brief description of each realm:

Personal Realm: This realm's color is red, to represent our lifeblood, the connection to our *dé* (heart center). It is the season of winter, the time when we go inward to understand, ask questions, rest, and process.

Communal Realm: This realm's color is brown, to represent *aki*—dirt or earth. It is the time to honor our connection to the land and each other, and the time to plant seeds and make changes on the communal level. It is spring, the time of planting and waiting.

Ancestral Realm: This realm's color is blue, to represent *mbish* (water), fluidity, movement, and the space we inhabit as we interact with our ancestors. Resistance is fluid, moving work. It is the season of summer, when we notice what grows and blooms for future generations, what comes out of the hard work of planting that we did in the Communal Realm.

Integral Realm: This realm's color is yellow, and it is at the very center of who we are, our *shkode* (fire). In this realm, we integrate all the embodiment, presence, and work of the other realms. The Integral Realm, the season of autumn, is the time to harvest, to gather in all that we've learned, unlearned, and embodied in the other realms.

It is important that these realms reflect the gifts of Mother Earth around us. As we move between the realms in our daily lives, let's remember to honor the gifts we've been given along the way, honoring one another, ourselves, and the journey toward wholeness.

Religions and spiritual backgrounds around the world and throughout time have held core values that tethered them to Earth and to one another. As humans, we are to practice kinship, belonging, and love—we are wired for resistance, for activism, for

the work of shaping spaces and movements that ask for peace and hope.

In Judaism, the values of lovingkindness, of respect for one another's humanity, and of shalom, or the pursuit of wholeness in the world, are widely held as tenets of the faith.¹ Sikhism values things like equality between men and women, community service, and diversity.² Humanists gather their values from love and hope in humanity itself, not by following any supernatural being but by being present to the life we have on Earth.³ Christians hold to the value of loving neighbor as self, a command given by Jesus in the New Testament Gospel of Mark (12:31). My Potawatomi ancestors believed in the Seven Grandfather Teachings—love, respect, bravery, honesty, truth, humility, and wisdom—among other things, and we follow these teachings today to know what it means to live in a good way, to honor ourselves, our ancestors, each other, Earth, and all who come after us.⁴

These are just a few of the many ways we understand The Sacred in our lives. When we draw from the richness of others' practices, we learn more fully what it means to be human.

Our inner work is connected to our outer work, so resistance requires great care for ourselves to feel connected and whole. When we learn to care for and consider our own spiritual values, we will learn to value what others hold important as well. I value what my Sikh, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Animist, Atheist, Humanist, Indigenous, Christian, and Jewish friends bring to the table because we, all of us together, have created the world we live in today. We are a product, and we are producers at the same time. If we can learn to look critically yet lovingly at our own contexts, to ask hard questions and challenge ourselves, we will learn to do the same for one another, and the Seven Grandfather Teachings will find space in our relationships and in the work we do.

Storytelling is key to this work. Storytelling flies in the face of a Western, colonized mindset that says we must get the work done *now or never*. When we slow down and engage in the work

of storytelling and story sharing, something sacred happens every single time. We are more fully prepared for wherever our own journeys take us, and along the way we are considerate of one another, holding kinship at the forefront of our minds and hearts. Never underestimate the ripple effects even one relationship can have on your own world and the world outside of you.

My hope is that this book provides a space for us to examine this journey together.

I believe that at the core of the human soul we are called to be liberators and resisters. We are called to fight systems of oppression that make life harder for our human and nonhuman kin. Some of us lose our path along the way and knowingly or unknowingly uphold the status quo of empire only to meander our way back again, but there are also those who spend their entire lives doing the hard and beautiful work of wholeness-making in this world, through decolonizing and fighting against systems that oppress. This is not a shallow book on hobby resistance that requires little from us yet gives us the chance to say that we resisted something. This book is a call deeper in and also forward, toward liberation, and if we let it, this movement toward liberation will become the very rhythm of our lives.

In an era in which “activism” and “resistance” are tokenized hot topics, I want to restore these ideas as a basic human calling, one that each of us lives into every day that we fight for Love. Activism and resistance are not fads; they are lifelong embodiments, a lot like decolonization, which is about reclaiming and proclaiming belovedness alongside those who have been abandoned and dismissed by empire. No matter who you are or what you “do” in the world, you have a role to play in finding, understanding, and sharing sacredness, and your acts of extraordinary resistance are the truths that hold us all together.

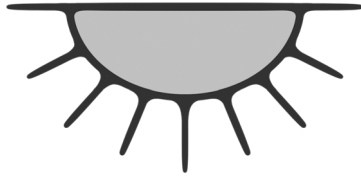
In this book, we will take a journey to discover that oppression in history repeats itself, but it doesn’t have to. As regular people, we can make everyday choices that are the work of liberation not

only for ourselves but for all our kin. And we can trust that every move we make, whether on the micro or the macro level or somewhere in between, has ripple effects that will bring nourishment to the world.

This is Living Resistance.

PART 1

THE PERSONAL REALM



I'm my own soulmate.

LIZZO, "Soulmate"



THE PERSONAL REALM

is the color red, to represent our lifeblood, the connection to our *dé* (heart center). It is the season of winter, the time when we go inward to understand, ask questions, rest, and process.



What is a poem?
It is the quietest,
softest part of you,
held to an invisible microphone,
held up to the light,
held up beyond the
hustle and bustle of the day
and the groaning aches of the night.

A poem is the anger
that releases itself
in your time of greatest need,
when you are ready to fracture
before you believe again,
ready to break open
and receive yourself
to yourself.

A poem is the whisper
that tells everything,
the secret that cannot be denied:

You are exactly as
you've always been—
Beloved Word,
Spoken Self,
Relieved Ache,
Tender Child.

The poem is you.
It always was.

1

WHAT IS RESISTANCE?



Resistance always begins with curiosity, with questions. We often do not ask our questions, not because we are afraid of the answer, but because there might not be a clear answer waiting, or because our communities have taught us that questions are a sign of weakness.

So what is resistance?

The scientific term *resistance* refers to a force, such as friction, that operates opposite the direction of motion of a body and tends to prevent or slow down the body's motion. It is a measure of the degree to which a substance impedes the flow of electric current induced by a voltage.

Resistance is measured in ohms, named after German physicist Georg Ohm, who studied the relationship between voltage, currents, and resistance.

For the purpose of this book, I'd like us to understand resistance as the way we use our everyday lives to exert energy against the dangerous status quo of our time. But resistance cannot only be about what we are against. When we choose to resist something or someone, we are also choosing something else on the other side. Perhaps we are choosing ourselves; perhaps we are

choosing an inclusive love or a more just society. We resist ableism or racism because we know there is a better way—this is the way resistance works, and we must both find and create that better way together.

This chapter is about questions as resistance, which leads us to ideas of deconstruction and evolution. We begin to recognize these currents in our lives, not by ohms, but by the change we notice in ourselves as we choose love and solidarity, as we *resist hate*. But it must begin with us, in our Personal Realm of resistance. It must begin with our questions.

The fear is in that in-between space of not knowing, the emptiness where we have to wait for an uncomfortably long time to come to any sort of conclusion about who we are or what sort of world we live in. Often, it's not at all about the answers but about our willingness to step outside of what we know and ask the question in the first place.

This first realm we find ourselves in is an important one—foundational even. That doesn't mean we always live in the Personal Realm, but this time of going inward, of showing love for ourselves, saying as Lizzo sings, "I'm my own soulmate," takes a lot of courage and a lot of time, and our questions are always a part of that resistance work.

Think of five questions you are holding inside yourself right now. They can be about anything. Here are a few of mine: What does true solidarity require of me? How can I make my front porch more welcoming? How should I navigate social media in a healthier way? What plants do I want in my spring garden? How can I tangibly let my kids know I love them?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

4.

5.

In the past, I had questions like, Why am I so scared all the time? Is God really this patriarchal guy with a gavel and a list of my sins, waiting in heaven to damn me to hell? What lies have I believed about my body? (I am *still* asking these questions! That is the journey.)

Curiosity takes root in us as children; I truly believe that. But as we get older, we are taught to trade curiosity for security, and often that security is baked into the status quo of society, of capitalism, which in reality is anything but secure for many of us. Instead of engaging with Mother Earth and the creatures around us, we are taught to commodify the land. We are taught to trust our religious leaders, parents, and teachers more than our own sacred instincts. As a result, we stop listening to our gut, to our hearts, to our own knowing. As Sadhguru writes in his book *Karma*, “We have frittered away our freedom, bartered and sold it to external authorities, whether parental, religious, cultural, or political. Instead of exercising the freedom of consciousness, of choice, we have bought into the voices that have told us that to be human is to be limited, even sinful.”¹ I learned in sixth grade how to balance a checkbook, but I was never truly taught how to speak with our nonhuman relatives in a sustainable and relational way.

So as adults, many of us on the path of healing are realizing that we must reclaim our curiosity toward ourselves and the land around us; we must start asking questions we didn’t ask before. As we do so, things begin shifting, and, naturally, resistance follows. For many of us, this is also where we begin the journey of deconstruction. This questioning and deconstruction journey can be difficult and messy, but it is a start, and it is holy work, even if in the end we no longer believe what we believed before.

I have experienced different seasons, different layers of deconstruction throughout my life. In college, I took a world literature class that burst the small evangelical bubble I'd experienced growing up and helped me (painfully) realize that the holy texts I took literally are not holy to everyone but are complex works of literature to read, examine, and critique when possible. My Jewish friends have taught me that their sacred texts also matter to them *because* they can fight with the texts, ask questions, and go on a journey with themselves and the Sacred. But because I did not grow up knowing much about critique or critical thinking, I was scared of opening up my worldview in some ways. But once I did, I found it liberating.

Later, I began a major in social work that forced me into powerful, nuanced conversations about culture, trauma, belief, sexual orientation, poverty, and so much more. The questions that had been buried deep inside me began to rise to the surface and ended up becoming the beautiful beginnings of my deconstruction journey, the chance to ask questions and along the way to critique my childhood faith and my experiences in America, and to ask what my story means to me.



The word *story* is defined as “an account of past events in someone’s life or in the evolution of something.”² I think about this a lot when I travel and speak: How does our story evolve, change, and become? How do we ask questions, and what happens when our questions change over time? If a story is meant to evolve, then so are we. We get to examine our own stories and ask those questions; we get to acknowledge the ways we’ve changed over the years.

But often, this can be painful. The pain is why many of us choose not to go deeply into the work. If we understand how we got here, then we understand all that went wrong. We understand how people who should have loved us well didn’t. And we understand how institutions that should have protected us chose not

to. It's why so many of us go to therapy or find chosen family in order to love and be loved out in the world. I think of my queer kin, who fight again and again to exist in spaces where they are loved just as they are.

Julie Rodgers writes about this so viscerally in her book *Out-love*. She asks, "What's a queer person to do in that situation, when the only people we've ever known and loved believe our love is disordered and our bodies are broken?"³

What do we do when we realize that the status quo of our religion, our country, our families, or our institutions is to shame those who are queer, trans, Indigenous, Asian, Black, Latinx, poor, Jewish, Sikh, or anything else considered "other" to them? Either we disappear into the toxicity of assimilation completely (or as much as is allowed by society), or we begin to untangle the horrible webs of hate that have for years made us hate our own beloved bodies and experiences.

So we take a step back and ask what our stories mean. We ask how we must now evolve to get to the heart of who we are. We ask what resistance feels like for us. Often, it is through deconstruction. For some, it is through decolonizing. It means taking a look at the systems, and sometimes the people, that would not acknowledge us as fully human and saying that there is a better way to be in this world. It means saying that we are willing to dream and fight for that better way. It means that white folks step back and learn how to listen to those who have been marginalized by our society at every level.

For author and activist Austen Hartke, deconstruction and decolonization involve helping the church understand how it can value and love transgender people. Austen writes, "When a church is trans-affirming, transgender Christians can show up as themselves, unapologetically. By doing that, they show everyone else in the congregation that it's all right to bring their whole selves into the community, that nobody has to 'fake it 'till you make it' as a perfect Christian."⁴

Deconstruction, through honest questions and critiques, is resistance because it not only involves our stories but actually involves *us* and the ways we hold space for our own sacredness. For many queer, nonbinary, two-spirit, and transgender individuals, American and Christian institutions are not safe places, so they know they cannot show up fully as they are. A 2021 report by the Human Rights Campaign found that “fatal violence disproportionately affects transgender women of color—particularly Black transgender women—and that the intersections of racism, sexism, homophobia, biphobia, transphobia and unchecked access to guns conspire to deprive them of employment, housing, healthcare and other necessities.”⁵


These acts of violence toward transgender and gender-non-conforming people are to the detriment of us all—when our spaces limit us, we cannot practice our humanity fully. We are colonized and trapped in cycles of oppression, and the way out is through storytelling and love, through those who, as Austen reminds us, show up fully as themselves until we all learn to do so. People who have been forced to the margins of our society are so often our prophets and theologians, the ones who point us toward God—the Sacred—and toward a better way of being human. In the Personal Realm, let’s remember those who have helped us ask difficult questions, who have helped us love ourselves well.

What I have come to realize is that theologians—people who are looking to understand God or the Divine—are people who have been asking difficult questions for years and grounding themselves in the reality that it is both lifelong work and fully sacred. They also happen to be great storytellers. So when I am confused about what part of the journey I am on (Am I deconstructing or decolonizing? Am I reconstructing or floating about in space?), I look to the storytellers to remind me that it’s okay to be wherever I am. I write this book to remind you that it’s okay to be wherever you are. As Mia Birdsong writes, “All of us have something to shed,

something to purge, so we can make room for the reclamation and reinvention of community and family.”⁶

Every few years, it seems there are folks within Christianity who rise up and declare that deconstruction is harmful and only leads people away from their churches into an unsafe world. First, this puts a substantial emphasis on the church’s success at helping people navigate the world in a loving, kind way, which is not often the case. Second, folks who say this have little faith in those of us who have left the institutional church to find Creator where Creator has always been—*everywhere, especially in the places the church told us God was not.*

My experience with deconstructing the faith I grew up with and examining my own story and evolution has led me to more questions, to more love, and to a fuller experience of the Divine. Has it caused me to question and distrust powerful people and institutions? Yes. That’s why it’s so scary for those institutions. And yet so many of us who are asking deep, difficult questions about the ways in which we grew up find that, yes, the world can be scary, but it can also be beautiful. And journeying out to find it all, to break free of the barriers set on us by institutions, governments, and religious leaders, *is* resistance.



RESISTANCE COMMITMENT: Examine your own story. Where, when, and how have you deconstructed? Name some ways that you’re still questioning something today, and give yourself permission to ask those questions for however long you need to ask them. This is your life you’re dealing with. Deal gently.

