

“SURRENDER AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE”

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Sermon

I googled "surrender" and "Unitarian Universalist" to see how many sermons popped up. A few scattered sermons showed up, including one that had the line "Surrender, Dorothy" in it. I'm guessing that sermon was not necessarily about surrender as a positive spiritual practice. It didn't take much scrolling down before I got to our Fellowship's website with its promotion for today's sermon. Not shockingly I suppose, surrender is not a frequent theme of Unitarian Universalist sermons. I'm sure if I googled "interdependent web" and "Unitarian Universalist" or "compassion" and "Unitarian Universalist," I'd be scrolling for days through the sermons that pop up.

Next I checked "surrender" in the index of our gray hymnal. Nothing. Time to broaden my search. I checked the index of *Cries of the Spirit*, an anthology of feminist spiritual poetry with a pretty extensive index. It didn't have anything listed for surrender, either. I opened *Spiritual Literacy*, a book by a couple of liberal Christians with an amazingly detailed index. I almost never strike out there. I struck out. I turned to the index of liberal Christian writer Kathleen Norris' *Amazing Grace*, a book with short essays on different Christian theological themes and spiritual practices. Nothing.

All this leads me to a conclusion: surrender is not something Unitarian Universalists or feminists or liberal Christians like to talk about. I get why. Surrender deservedly has a badly tarnished reputation as a spiritual practice, especially in Christianity (from which our faith after all evolved). The virtue of surrendering was a message pious Christian slaveholders preached to their captives. In the Jim Crow South of the century following the Civil War, the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist oppressors preached the same message, still demonically leavened with the vocabulary of Christian virtue. The virtue of surrendering is a message over the centuries that oppressive and abusive Christian men have preached to women. The woman's traditional wedding vow to be submissive to her husband (which still survives in some Christian circles) is a manifestation of this message. Oppressors use the spiritual practice of surrender—on the part of those they oppress, of course, not themselves—as a potent weapon in their arsenal of domination. This week we're seeing this idea play out—minus the religious glass—in Putin's saber-rattling and land grab in Ukraine.

So there is not necessarily anything virtuous or healthy about practicing surrender. Being a perennial quitter is not usually a good thing. It can lead to self-doubt, shame, and self-loathing. At its most potent, it can contribute to the ultimate "I give up" of suicide. This is why oppressors recognize surrender as such a powerful tool. So surrender is emphatically NOT a practice I want to suggest you use indiscriminately. There are plenty of times in life when spiritual practices

like perseverance and nurturing the small streak of steel within that I talked about last week are much more helpful and healthful practices than surrender.

But there are also times when surrender can be enormously helpful. It can be spiritually liberating—yes, even for Unitarian Universalists. It is for these moments in our spiritual journeys that I want us to have surrender available in our spiritual toolbox.

One such moment is intense grief. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's stages of grief have sometimes been taken a little too literally and a little too linearly, but there absolutely is validity in her naming denial of what is as an aspect of the grief journey. When we get stuck in denying what is, our journey back to healing and wholeness stops. In the midst of grief, we wish and sometimes even believe that the story of what happened can be changed, the loss reversed. Maybe, somehow, there will be a Lazarus-like miracle! We'll just wake up. A few years ago, Joan Didion wrote a memoir called *The Year of Magical Thinking* in which she explores how she was stuck in this place for a year after her husband's death and her daughter's brush with death. A crucial moment in the grief journey is when we accept at a soul-level the truth that the death happened, that the reality cannot and will not be changed. Mythically, this moment of surrender ends our wandering among the dead in the Underworld. We finally can turn back and re-enter the real world of the living.¹ We surrender to what is. We let it be.

Another time when surrender often is the perfect spiritual practice is when an addiction has broken us. This is the famous story of Bill W., the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous. Because of his addiction, his life spiraled out of control. He could no longer manage even a basic level of existence. At last, he realized that he could not control the demon of addiction on his own. Not now. Not ever. He surrendered to this reality. Then he surrendered to a higher power, to something greater than himself. He turned his life over to his higher power. For Bill W., "I give up" wasn't a doorway to shame and self-loathing and self-destruction; instead, the doorway to healing and recovery swung open with "I give up."

Millions of addicts ever since have come to this same point in their journeys and, with the help of AA and other Twelve Steps programs, walked through the same open doorway. Every time this happens, it's a miracle. And it's a miracle that begins with "I give up." "I can't control this." "I surrender." For someone in recovery, this act of surrender becomes a daily practice because the reality of not being able to control the addiction will never go away.

My favorite literary rendering of finding this doorway to recovery by surrendering comes from Anne Lamott in her book *Traveling Mercies*. She describes her descent into substance abuse and self-loathing. At rock bottom, she is alone, drinking and popping pills day after day, night after night, hoping that perhaps one morning she won't wake up at all. Out of nowhere, she suddenly has the sense that Jesus is crouching in the corner of her bedroom, watching her with unending patience and love. Raised in a secular family, she's naturally appalled. "I'd rather die" than let you in, she says out loud to the apparition. She continues on her path to self-destruction, but she can't shake the Jesus figure.

¹ <http://fvuuf.org/podcasts/grief-one-year-later/>.

She goes to a church service, so hungover she can't even stand up for the hymns. The sermon strikes her as completely ridiculous, "like someone trying to convince me of the existence of extraterrestrials." Then the interwoven, raw sorrow and joy of the congregation singing a hymn cracks her open. She falls apart, bolts from the church and races home, Jesus running along-side her like a cat at her heels. Rather than slamming the door of her house to keep Jesus out, she stops at the front door, hangs her head, and finally says, "Screw it: I quit. All right, you can come in." (Okay, she uses a somewhat more colorful phrase than "screw it." I'm trying to keep this sermon PG.) "So this," she writes, "was my beautiful moment of conversion."² With her complete and unconditional surrender, the door to healing and recovery miraculously swings open. She's reborn to a new life.

Given that vulnerability is our worship and learning theme this month, I should probably share one of my own moments of surrender. It's not as dramatic as Bill W.'s or Anne Lamott's, but hey, a surrender is a surrender. It was probably the first conscious act of surrender in my life. As a kid, I placed a lot of pressure on myself. Remember when I showed you my sixth grade report on England a few months ago—a 75-page typewritten document plus a bunch of pictures and graphs and maps that I had to put in a large box because it was too thick to staple or put in a binder? Among other things, that report was a sign of the intense pressure I put on myself. Every time I failed to measure up to my impossible expectations, I'd feel a crushing burden of failure, shame and self-loathing. A side-product of all this was anxiety. I've since figured out that being hard-wired for anxiety is a family trait.

Throw adolescence into the mix and a year or two after that sixth grade report I found myself suffering frequent migraines and a chronically stiff neck. What's going on? Must be something physical, I assumed, so I saw a bunch of medical doctors. The low point of that was getting a neurological test that was just this side of torture. No physical cause of the pain turned up. So the anxiety ratcheted up. The neck pain and the headaches got worse. The pain and the headaches and the anxiety were feeding on each other in a downward spiral.

Finally my pediatrician gently concluded that perhaps this wasn't as much a physical issue as a psychological issue. Maybe, he suggested, I should see a counselor. What? My first response was more shame and self-loathing. But I was desperate. I wouldn't have called it surrender at the time, but that's what it was. I cannot control this on my own, I realized. I'm not going to fix this. Medical doctors aren't going to, either. If I stay on this path, I'm going to suffer a lot, maybe even self-destruct. Screw it; I'll go see a counselor. And with that, the doorway to healing swung open and I walked through. I still carry a lot of tension in my neck and shoulders. I still experience anxiety on occasion. But it's not chronic and debilitating like it was during that mini-dark night of the soul.

It's interesting to note that many of my ministerial peers would say that my greatest strength in ministry is my non-anxious presence. Sometimes that's accomplished through burying some of the anxiety inside, but mostly I've learned to let the anxiety slide off me. An area of struggle for me has been transformed into a strength. And it wouldn't have happened if I hadn't surrendered—to the reality of my situation, the reality that I couldn't fix it on my own, the reality that I needed help. I don't think I'd have survived this ministry work for long if I hadn't seen that

² Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), pp. 48-51.

counselor in high school. Maybe I wouldn't have survived at all. An occasional counseling tune-up since then has kept that door to healing open.

A consistent theme in my sermons over the years has been that there is a lot in life we cannot control. This is the nature of being a human. We have a culture increasingly built on denial of this basic human reality. We want to control everything, make the world safe, banish suffering. As the Buddha learned long ago, we can't. That's the reality of the matter. A healthy spiritual person knows this. She knows when to let go of the need for control. He knows when to just let it be, or, to use more theistic language if that floats your boat, when to "Let go, let God." The spiritual person knows, as my colleague Mark Belletini (one of the few Unitarian Universalist ministers who has done a sermon on surrender) puts it, the spiritual person knows when to "surrender to Reality."³

Now surrender in my understanding is not about becoming complacent or stopping to function or ceasing to think. Bill W. in recovery didn't become complacent. He didn't stop functioning or thinking. In fact, he had to work hard every day of his life to stay on the path of recovery. He had to work the step of surrendering on a daily basis. He had to use his mind. Same with Anne Lamott in her recovery. Same with a grieving person who finally leaves the Underworld of magical thinking and returns to the realm of the living. Same with me when I walked through the door of healing from my debilitating neck pain, headaches and anxiety.

So what happens when we surrender? "Surrender," Oriah Mountain Dreamer writes, "is not a giving up but a giving over to what is true in the present moment. And the moment I accept what is, something begins to shift within me."⁴ That's it! It's that shift that can be the doorway to better health and wholeness. The shift inside that happened when they surrendered helped Bill W. and Anne Lamott stop drinking, one day at a time. The shift inside when she surrendered to what is helped Joan Didion take the next crucial step in her grief journey. The shift inside that happened when I surrendered as an adolescent allowed me to get the help I needed. "When we choose to let things be, surprises can happen," writes the commentator on the story Be Alford shared in the Call to Gather. "A failed sponge cake can perhaps become a trifle."⁵ Yes: amazing and completely unexpected things can happen when we just let it be. When we remove surrender from our spiritual toolbox because of all the ways it's been misused over the years, we miss all these possibilities of turning the failed sponge cakes in our lives into delicious trifles.

So keep surrender in your spiritual toolbox, right alongside courage and perseverance and compassion and love and prayer and meditation and gratitude and all the other fine tools. Get in touch with your deepest self and with fellow travelers in community on a regular basis. When you find yourself in times of trouble—which you surely will—use your solitary and communal spiritual life to discern which tool in the spiritual toolbox might be the right tool for the job. Then try it. If it doesn't work, maybe it's not the best tool. Our tools are fallible and so is our discernment about which tool to use. So if the first tool doesn't work, pick another tool and try

³ Mark Belletini sent me a copy of a sermon he did on surrender in 2002.

⁴ Quote shared with me by Be Alford, the Worship Leader for this service.

⁵ Florence Caplow and Susan Moon, editors, *The Hidden Lamp: Stories from 25 Centuries of Awakened Women* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2013).

that. Keep reaching within yourself and reaching out to others. Keep working a spiritual program. And sooner or later, oh yes, there will be an answer.

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