

Surrender: In Search of the Present Moment
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“Winds be still. Storm clouds pass and silence come.”¹ This is not the first time I’ve started a sermon with a quote from this particular hymn. Though it’s not one of those hymns I learned as a child, it has become one of those hymns I long to hear and sing in challenging times. If one takes these words literally, and if one doesn’t have the music to go with them, one could interpret them as commands: *winds be still! Storm clouds pass! Silence come!* But we know that’s not the intent. If nothing else, the music doesn’t allow for such an interpretation. There’s no demand being made here. These words are a prayer. They’re a request, a plea, an appeal, an ask; they express to the universe—to whatever the singer regards as most holy—a longing, a yearning, a desire that a quiet peace may arise in the midst of difficult times, even if only for a moment. They’re a prayer that in the midst of that quiet peace, clarity and understanding may come.

When I pray I don’t expect some all-powerful entity to answer my prayers in any way, let alone do as I say. The God I believe in doesn’t have the power to still the winds, be they real or metaphorical. They will still on their own when they are ready. The God I believe in doesn’t have the power to make storm clouds pass, be they real or metaphorical. They will pass on their own when they are ready. And the God I believe in doesn’t have the power to bring a peaceful moment to me. Such moments come when I make myself ready for them. I believe in the power of prayer, not because it gives me what I need and want, but because it reminds me of how I aspire to be in the world—loving and compassionate. It reminds me of how I aspire to feel in the morning when I wake, as I go about my day, and as I lay down to sleep at night—peaceful, serene, open. And it reminds me of what I aspire to achieve in my life and my work—a more just society, a more sustainable community, a more peaceful world. When I pray I am not asking for something magical to happen. I am simply orienting myself toward how I aspire to be, feel and act in the world. As I pray, I have a fighting chance of remembering these things. As I pray I have a fighting chance of getting there.

Except *fight* is the wrong word. It’s not a fight at all. If and when I try to fight my way through some turmoil, some pain, grief, anxiety, winds, storm—whatever it is—I rarely get there. That is, I might win the fight, but in winning I don’t necessarily gain any clarity about how I want to be, feel and act in the world. More often than not, fighting forces me to compromise those things. Getting to that moment wherein I can truly remember and orient myself toward how I want to be, feel and act in the world almost always requires surrender: Surrender to whatever fierce winds are blowing; surrender to whatever ominous storm clouds abound overhead; surrender to feelings of self-doubt and unsureness; surrender to pain, anxiety, grief, anger, being overwhelmed; surrender to forces larger than me; surrender to forces over which I have no control. It may seem counter-intuitive, it may seem weak, but surrender is often our surest path back to ourselves, back to clarity, back to wholeness. Surrender is often what saves us so that we can live the lives we aspire to live.

The theme of surrender appeals to me. It shows up in my preaching and writing regularly, though I may use other words and phrases like “letting go” or “falling” or “accepting things as

¹ Kimball, Richard S., “Winds Be Still,” *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press and the UUA, 1993) # 83.

they are,” or “embracing life as it is.” This theme really matters to me, perhaps because I’m concerned I don’t surrender very well. Like love, like apologizing, like offering forgiveness, surrender is difficult. I feel this poignantly. Our egos get in the way of our capacity for surrender, as does our pride, as does our fear of vulnerability, as does our unwillingness to change even when we know change is necessary. Sometimes we’re ashamed to appear weak. Sometimes we’re ashamed to appear as if we’re giving up. Sometimes the fight is so strong in us we don’t know when to quit. Sometimes we just can’t hear the good advice of our loved-ones telling us to *let it go, let it go, let it go*.

And of course, our culture—that is, our dominant, United States culture—is a fighting culture that frowns upon surrender. Our dominant culture values and rewards winning and success. It cheers Wall Street bull markets. It idolizes the competitive spirit. It spends billions of dollars every year consuming competitive professional and college sports. A salient manifestation of this fighting culture is the fact that our nation’s military spending accounts for 40% of all military spending on the planet. We outspend China, our nearest competitor, by nearly 5 to 1.² Cuts to US military spending in recent years leave barely a blemish on this spending dominance. We’re not just ready for a fight. We’re ready to dispense “shock and awe.” We’re ready for winning anywhere in the world at any time. Like it or not, it’s a prominent part of who we are as a people. I’m not critiquing this fighting culture. I’m simply making the point that it’s a fighting culture, and being enmeshed in it makes surrender in any form challenging, even if we’re only talking about surrender in the context of our internal lives, in the face of our own personal high winds and battering storms.

I notice an absence of the language of surrender in our Unitarian Universalist principles and in our hymns. We put significant emphasis on the self—on discovering our unique selves, on valuing our selves, on proclaiming our selves—who we are, what we’re passionate about, what we love. And thus the idea of surrendering the self into some greater reality seems counter-intuitive. A member of our congregation asked me what I would be preaching about in Meriden. I said “surrender.” She reminded me, “that’s not an easy thing for UUs to do.” She’s right.

Having said this, we nevertheless encounter the spiritual advice to surrender all the time. We encounter the advice to let go, to fall, to accept things as they are, to embrace the world as it is, to go with the flow, to enter the mystery. I often start with the Taoist philosophers of ancient China, who offered surrender as an alternative to infighting within families, communities and governments; an alternative to greed and corruption; an alternative to militarism and oppression as tools of leadership. Surrender, for them, was the path of wisdom, the path of peace—a way to lead without appearing to lead. They looked at nature for affirmation of this principle and for guidance on how to do it. Lao Tzu, in chapter 76 of the *Tao-te ching* says: “All things, the grass as well as the trees, are tender and supple while alive. When dead, they are withered and dried. Therefore, the stiff and the hard are companions of death. The tender and the weak are companions of life.”³ Be soft, be gentle, bow down, bend in the wind, move with the current, yield, remain quiet, observe, listen. Fighting—the path of rigidity, the path of holding on tightly—would ultimately lead one to break, to snap, to wither, to die. “If the army is strong,” said Lao Tzu, “it will not win.” Fighting was the path of foolishness. Perhaps Lao Tzu’s most

² This chart from [globalissues.org](http://www.globalissues.org/article/75/world-military-spending#InContextUSMilitarySpendingVersusRestoftheWorld) is instructive: <http://www.globalissues.org/article/75/world-military-spending#InContextUSMilitarySpendingVersusRestoftheWorld>. This 2/24/14 CNBC article is also helpful: <http://www.cnbc.com/id/101440355>.

³ Wing-Tsit Chan, tr., Lao Tzu, Chapter 76, *The Way of Lao Tzu* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1963) p. 233.

famous statement of this principle comes in Chapter 22 of the Tao-te Ching: “To yield is to be preserved whole.”⁴

The spiritual writer I come back to again and again on this theme is the late Philip Simmons. I’ve quoted many times from his last book, *Learning to Fall: The Blessings of an Imperfect Life*, a series of reflections on living with ALS—Lou Gehrig’s Disease—a series of reflections on finding meaning, peace and joy in life as one surrenders to the reality of death. If I stay in ministry long enough I will eventually quote this entire book. “Learning to fall” is another way of naming the act of surrender. Simmons writes: “At its deepest levels life is not a problem but a mystery. The distinction...is fundamental: problems are to be solved, true mysteries are not. Personally, I wish I could have learned this lesson more easily.... But each of us finds his or her own way to mystery. At one time or another, each of us confronts an experience so powerful, bewildering, joyous, or terrifying that all our efforts to see it as a ‘problem’ are futile. Each of us is brought to the cliff’s edge. At such moments we can either back away in bitterness or confusion, or leap forward into mystery. And what does mystery ask of us? Only that we be in its presence, that we fully, consciously, hand ourselves over. That is all, and that is everything. We can participate in mystery only by letting go of solutions. This letting go is the first lesson of falling, and the hardest.”⁵ This point is so important: holding on tightly, hanging on at all costs, striving to win, fighting—all of it so often leads to a diminishment of ourselves, a compromising of ourselves, a losing of ourselves. But in the space we create in our lives as we surrender—if we really surrender—*there* is new meaning. *There* is new joy. *There* is new peace. *There* is a new reminder of how we aspire to be, feel, and act in the world.

Of course, there are many other compelling scriptures and writings that speak to this principle and remind us there are times when the best course of action, the path to peace, to serenity, to greater clarity, to wholeness, the path back to our true selves—or we might say to our *next* selves—is surrender. But there is something missing. I’ve described the *what* of surrender—but not the *how* of surrender. How does one actually do it?

“Winds be still. Storm clouds pass and silence come.”⁶ Surrender is an act of prayer. Not the kind of prayer that lists all the things we want to have happen; not the kind of prayer that looks to some magical outcome or miracle to take place. It’s the kind of prayer that begins “I don’t know.” *I don’t know*. It’s the kind of prayer that begins, “I am not in control.” *I am not in control*. It’s the kind of prayer that begins with the recognition: “I have something to learn.” *I have something to learn*. And perhaps most fundamentally, it’s the kind of prayer that begins with the affirmation: “I am here, now.” *I am here, now*. Though the past shapes us, makes us who we are, often weighs heavily on us, and cannot and should not be forgotten, surrender requires that we step away from the past for a moment, that we let its hold on us loosen, that we let it, in the words of the Rev. Mark Belletini, “take [its] Sabbath now, [its] brief and simple rest.”⁷ Likewise, while the future calls to us, beckons to us, prods us, fills us with both anticipation and dread, with both excitement and stress, surrender requires that we step away from the future for a moment, let its voice grow quiet, let its vision cease to direct us. Surrender requires that we come fully into the present moment, where future and past are ghosts. In that moment we may encounter no more than silence. We may receive no more than a brief respite

⁴ Wing-Tsit Chan, tr., Lao Tzu, Chapter 76, *The Way of Lao Tzu* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1963) p. 139.

⁵ Simmons, Philip, *Learning to Fall: the Blessings of an Imperfect Life* (New York: Bantam Books, 2000) p. 8.

⁶ Kimball, Richard S., “Winds Be Still,” *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press and the UUA, 1993) # 83.

⁷ Belletini, Mark, “Slower and Slower,” *Sonata for Voice and Silence* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2008) p. 12.

from the winds that batter our lives and the storm clouds that drench us with their rain. But we may, and often do, receive much more: peace of mind, peace of heart, a more grounded and steady understanding of what to do next, and that precious reminder of how we aspire to be in the world, how we aspire to feel in the world, how we aspire to act in the world.

Rev. Belletini says it so well: “Let the breathing in this room be free and flowing. / Let pulses trace a slower rhythm in the wrist. / Let the coming silence be like hands / pulling back a curtain, / revealing the table set with the feast of life / which is present here and now / and has been the whole while, / present to those who give up living in either the past / or the future.”⁸ The words of surrender are not “I give up.” They are not a cynical, “you win.” They are not “I quit.” The words of surrender are “I don’t know. I am not in control. I have something to learn. I am here, now.”

The act of surrendering is not a losing of the self, though it may feel like the self we have been clinging to is disappearing. The act of surrendering is not an act of weakness, though it may feel like weakness. The act of surrendering is not something to be feared, though it may feel frightening. On the contrary, the act of surrendering is a return to the self we most aspire to be. As Lao Tzu said, “To yield is to be preserved whole.”⁹

As we rise to meet all the challenges of our lives—all the winds, all the storm clouds, all the pain and anxiety, all the turmoil great and small—may we remember the value of surrender, trusting that the present moment truly does offer a table set with the feast of life. I don’t know. I am not in control. I have something to learn. I am here, now.

Amen and blessed be.

⁸ Belletini, Mark, “Slower and Slower,” *Sonata for Voice and Silence* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2008) p. 12.

⁹ Wing-Tsit Chan, tr., Lao Tzu, Chapter 76, *The Way of Lao Tzu* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1963) p. 139.