

“Surrender, Dorothy”
by Rev. Barbara H. Gadon
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First Unitarian Church of Wilmington, Delaware

Do you ever wake up at 4:00 in the morning with all kinds of thoughts racing through your head? Your brain has decided that this is the most efficient use of your time – to worry about things – most of which you have no control over whatsoever. I call this “hamster on the wheel”. Since I've been married to a light sleeper for the past six years, there is now someone who is aware of my hamster, my restless 4:00 a.m. state. Sometimes Robert will wake up and say, “Hamster on the wheel?” I'll say, “Yep.” And he'll sling one of his long arms across me. It's very comforting. And the hamster will keep running.

If you have a hamster that is very buff and fit, he can run for hours. People respond to this in different ways. Sometimes people get up and work. Often the thoughts are about things you are worried won't get done, and this may help. My hamster actually likes it when I do that – he thinks I should be working all the time and that rest is for sissies. Sometimes I've distracted myself by reading, and that can help. But if the story is engrossing enough to get me to put down the worried thoughts, it'll – guess what – keep me awake anyway. Hamster likes that one, too. My hamster's favorite is when I try to write down the thoughts. You know, really explore and investigate them. Best cardio work-out ever, he says.

So what do you do? What often helps me when I'm in this condition is to read from the *Big Book* of Alcoholics Anonymous. If you're unfamiliar with AA, this might sound like a strange idea. Why would it help to read the stories of a bunch of drunks who have found religion? Because each story has a key element on which it turns. Surrender. Each person has had to face something over which they were completely powerless. They couldn't outsmart their addiction to alcohol. (“It is in the very nature of addiction to feed on our attempts to master it.) And they had to give themselves over to a power greater than themselves. In reading these stories, something in my heart responds. I know the truth when I see it. The hamster does, too. We both surrender.

Some of you in this room, though the rest of us may not know it, are in AA or another program of recovery. I am willing to say that I am one of you. My drug of choice is food. By saying this, I am bending the rule, or some may say breaking the rule, of an “anonymous” program by not being anonymous. Everything I've learned about surrender in my life has come from my work in recovery. Addiction has been my wisest spiritual teacher, and I am still studying with him. “What if I'm not an addict?” the rest of you may ask us. Well, you *are* at a disadvantage, but don't despair. There are plenty of things you are powerless over. Just cross out “alcohol” and put in “my children” or “my parents” or “how this project will turn out” or “what people think of me”. It's the same thing. We have no control over these. We may not have a problem with not having control – until something goes wrong, and we desperately wish we did. And it's 4:00 a.m. and we are afraid.

It may seem like its 4:00 a.m. in our country right now. A lot of us are feeling powerless over our finances. We worry about our jobs. We worry about our retirement investments. Some of us have lost our jobs and are worried we won't find another one. (And we feel like failures, even though the lay-offs have nothing to do with how well we did our jobs.) Unemployment is now at 8.9% nationally, in the double digits in some parts of the country. We worry about keeping our homes. All the things

that have helped us to feel secure and in control feel somehow...slippery. I confess to being unable to follow many news stories on the economy – they hit so close to home.

So why talk about surrender? Shouldn't we be talking about persevering, fighting back, taking control? The notion of surrendering is a foreign one in Western culture. We live in a culture that celebrates willpower. We honor people most who are in control, in charge, and are making things happen by dint of will and effort. It's easy to look around and see everybody else doing this – or at least doing it better than we are.

Western myths feature knights in armor that slay dragons. You confront problems head-on in America, you back fear into a corner. In “The Wizard of Oz,” when the Wicked Witch of the West writes, “Surrender, Dorothy” across the sky, nobody is eating their popcorn, saying, “Yes! Do it! Surrender!” We want her to fight to the finish. Don't give up. We might laugh at the Zax in Dr. Seuss – but we get a lot of cultural encouragement to be Zax – to have our will prevail. Surrender means that good people die, evil wins, and life is over. Doesn't it?

If you have ever failed spectacularly in a battle for control – if you've had to admit you are addicted, if you have messed something up royally, if you or someone you love have discovered you have a chronic illness, you begin to have a different view of surrender. At this point, surrender is more like freedom, more like the breath of new life. You surrender because you have to. You can't go on living the way you have.

It's a puzzler, though, looking at it from the outside. Talking to Unitarian Universalists, I know that the notion of powerlessness and giving up control to a power greater than ourselves has often been disturbing. It seems counter-intuitive, which is a nice way of saying “stupid”. We are the religion of personal choice and responsibility. How could this possibly jibe with our faith? I have respect for those who see it this way and have recovered by other means. “How does giving up my will do anything? Doesn't saying I have no power mean I give up and eat compulsively?” I asked my first sponsor. “How does it work?” “Very well,” she smiled in that aggravating way she had. But then she took pity on me and said, “Look, you are learning to do the footwork. You leave the results up to God.” It also meant doing things on a regular basis that I didn't want to do. Attending meetings. Calling people and asking for help. Weighing and measuring my food – and being rigorously honest about things I would rather not look at. Giving up my will to a higher power – which I sometimes saw as God, sometimes as the collective wisdom of the program. The way in is to somehow imagine someone or something you can lean on – something divine, something collectively human, something of nature itself – something bigger than you that can hold you. And you give your will over to it.

Perhaps a more UU-friendly way to put it is that we must learn to cultivate a willing heart, rather than a willful one. Gerald May, author of *Will and Spirit*, a book I have read and re-read many times, makes the helpful distinction between *willfulness* and *willingness*. Being willful means to “set oneself apart from the world in an attempt to master or direct our personal existence.” Being willing is to realize “that one already is a part of some ultimate cosmic process and to commit to participate in that process.” We seek to become willing to cooperate with life rather than fighting it, rather than imposing our will upon it. Still, this is easier said than done. Willingness does not come as naturally to us. “As a culture,” May writes, “we now have tremendous difficulty viewing ourselves as part of nature and even more trouble seeing ourselves as children of the universe.”

And yet we long to. I've always loved these words by the great poet and statesman, Dag Hammarskjöld: "I don't know who – or what – put the question. I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer Yes to Someone – or Something – and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal."

Surrender is the starting point of many religions. It means saying yes to something or to someone, rather than the willful, go-it-alone, I'll-do-it-my-way, thanks approach. The word Islam means "surrender" - one is surrendering to Allah, and this marks the beginning of study and practice, of following the wisdom laid down by the prophet Muhammad and leaning on the strength of God. Judaism and Christianity ask their followers to do much the same.

Buddhism teaches us that there is suffering in attachment (whether you're a Zax insisting on going North or a mother who needs your son to be a lawyer, or even a patient hoping your test results are negative). The relief to this suffering comes in detachment or, surrender – letting go. There is much peace that can come in relinquishing control – or more accurately, the illusion of control. But we do it so reluctantly. Sometimes we do it because of a religious commandment, or because we see the spiritual sense in it. The *yes* is hard, it means making a commitment to some sort of practice – like meditation, or prayer, or yoga – that teaches you how to let go. And this gets boring and old sometimes, and you don't always feel like doing it. It means asking other people for help – something most of us never feel like doing. We only do it when we have to. Nothing else has worked. Something usually must *make* us say yes.

Physical limitations may do this. I remember the year I turned 40, some [muffle] years ago. There were five of us turning 40 in the small fellowship I served, and I thought it would be fun to celebrate with a dance. We cleared out our sanctuary, and one of our members who is a professional DJ brought in her flashing colored lights, CDs and sound equipment. She played the songs we loved from high school and college. And we danced and danced and danced. Afterwards, I noted two things. One: It really does make a difference if your dance floor is concrete. And two: There was now a discernible gap between the youthfulness of my spirit and the abilities of my body. I was more sore and tired than I would ever have imagined! I had a small glimpse of what it would mean to age.

As a pastor, I encounter many people who are dealing with the limitations of their bodies. They must live with a disability. They must live with the effects of aging. They spend more time in doctors' offices and are more dependent on their families than they want to be. Surrender in this realm is seldom easy. In fact, it's usually a bloody fight. Robert Latham used to call these "reverse milestones". Losing your driver's license. Leaving a lifetime of paid work. Losing a spouse. No longer being able to live independently in your home. Some of you who have made these transitions have told me that there are rewards. Retirement, especially if you have good health and enough means to travel, is a gas. Retirement communities can bring the freedom to pursue passions that have nothing to do with yard work or cooking; people form new friendships and even find romance. The loss of one significant relationship makes way for others. But the transition is a killer. And nobody thinks of these as a fair trade. As Garrison Keillor said, "Life isn't fair. But it is generous. There is no justice. But there is grace."

I believe that in this economic crisis, we are now at a point where we have the opportunity to unlearn some of our conditioned willfulness and become more willing. We may be at a teachable

moment. We are discovering that we are all pretty vulnerable right now, if we have the courage to admit it. We may just have to learn to surrender our notions of complete autonomy, of money and success as the be-all and end-all to life. We've been saying for years we'd like to live less like consumers and more like neighbors. We've always been meaning to reach out more to each other. What if this were our chance?

Recently on the radio program, "Speaking of Faith", people were invited to share their responses to the economic downturn. This is a story by a man named Khalid Kamau, a financial analyst who recently lost his job. He writes:

I remember once when I was young, I came home after school and baked a cake for dinner to surprise my mother, who worked a full-time job as a clinic manager before her "second shift" as Mom.

We had run out of eggs, which I didn't discover until after I emptied the cake mix into the bowl. Then I remembered the stories my mom and aunts used to tell about growing up in the rural, segregated South. Though Jim Crow Blacks suffered severe institutional oppression, their communities were strong, and neighbors were always helping one another out. "People would come over to ask for a cup of sugar or a loaf of bread," they would wistfully recount, "and if you had it, you gave it."

So I went across the street to Mrs. Jesse, our retired neighbor across the street who kept an eye on my brother and I for those few hours between 3 and 6 pm when we were left to our own devices. A gentle grandmother in her 60s, I was sure she'd have some eggs, and fondly recall this tradition of sharing.

And she did. I got my two eggs and baked a cake. When I presented the cake to my mother, I proudly told her of my efforts and resourcefulness. The glow on her face from my good deeds quickly faded when I got to the part about borrowing the eggs.

She called my father to the kitchen, and together they scolded me about going around the neighborhood "begging for food."

"But I thought that's what you guys did in the olden days?" I pleaded.

"That was a long time ago." My mother retorted.

I have only once in my life knocked on a neighbor's door to borrow eggs, or anything else. It appears that in today's culture, "strong" communities are those where estranged neighbors live on islands of manicured McMansions in gated exurbs, and have no need for one another — where sharing is an act of last resort for the truly destitute, not a practice of healthy community building.

- "Your Voices in the Economic Downturn", Speaking of Faith, May 17, 2009.

I thought this sounded a bit exaggerated, until I thought about my own neighborhood. I know the names of a few neighbors, and we are friendly, but I would much prefer to jump in my car and buy my own eggs – or not bake the cake altogether – than to go to my neighbor needing something.

But the story didn't end there. For Khalid Kamau, it was hard to tell people he had lost his job; he felt ashamed. But then, he said, he started to tell everybody. And he received more love and support than he would have ever dreamed of. Eventually, it caused him to rethink his career, and he took a job as an administrator in a charter school. Others who wrote to Speaking of Faith spoke of the opportunities they took to reexamine their lives. They appreciated the time they had with their children. The fact that they weren't rushing, rushing, rushing now. They liked it – and wondered how they could make their lives more like that once they found work again.

It's hard to take in that something we've counted on might not be there. It's hard to imagine

making these kinds of changes – slowing down, living more simply, depending more on others and having them depend more on you. It's hard to imagine something other than what we know – or that it could bring us gifts. But there is a gift to be found in surrendering what we know. Augustine once wrote, “God is always trying to give good things to us, but our hands are too full to receive them.” Gerald May says that none of us can completely empty our hands, though we can relax them. “This simple choice,” he writes, “may be the greatest kind of struggle any human being can face, and it may call forth the greatest courage and dedication.” May we find such courage and dedication, required in times like these. Amen.