

**The Courage to Let Go: Surrender**  
**by Rev. Don Southworth**  
**Unity-Unitarian**  
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I want to begin this morning by saying thank you. Thank you to Rob and Janne for giving me the privilege to preach in this historic congregation and pulpit. Thank you to your outstanding Hallman intern minister, Lissa Gundlach, for her assistance and warm welcome this morning. And thank you to each of you. Not only for coming out on a morning when it would have been easy to pull up the covers and savor the hot coffee or tea and the morning paper a bit longer than normal. After all I am a guest preacher and ice and snow can be a bit rough, not only for a California native weather wimp like myself but maybe even for some hearty Minnesotans too. And of course I hear there is a football game that some of you care about this afternoon as well.

Thank you for being here but even more importantly thank you for all you do as a community and congregation for our Unitarian Universalist movement. This is one of our flagship congregations and

the work you have done with spiritual deepening, social justice outreach, and generosity is legendary.

On a morning when we are reflecting on the courage of letting go, the courage to surrender, I want to celebrate and affirm a letting go you have done for a very long time, an act of courage and commitment you might not even acknowledge or appreciate as much as I, and the 1600 members of the UUMA, I serve, do.

The letting go, the courage I speak of is your willingness to support your ministers as they serve our larger Unitarian Universalist movement. Both Janne and Rob are tireless champions of Unitarian Universalism throughout the world and they are specially called to serve and mentor other Unitarian Universalism ministers. I had the privilege of serving with Rob for three years on the UUMA Executive Committee and now, in my new role as Acting Executive Director of the UUMA, he is essentially my boss. Rob has been an inspirational and dynamic President of our professional organization and his leadership has helped create a powerful vision that we believe will help ministers more deeply

and fully live their calls, which will help our congregations more fully realize their missions.

Janne has served for two years co-leading our Dreaming Big initiative which is helping to develop and mentor ministers who feel called to serve large congregations like this one. Her work has been so outstanding that we are working on creating a ten-year continuing education plan for ministers based on the Dreaming Big program.

As someone who has served a large, vibrant congregation I know that there is always more work - for ministers and congregation members. The courage and commitment of letting your ministers be away from you for several weeks a year to serve, support and lead those who will never step into this community is both selfless and wise. The difference your ministers are making in the life of Unitarian Universalism, in the life of ministers like me, is profound. And it is because of your willingness to share them. So on behalf of so many, thank you.

One of the aspects of life at Unity I have admired from afar is your practice of having a monthly theme that guides the worship and study life of the congregation. When Lissa told me that January's theme was courage and our topic today was the courage of letting go, of surrendering, I was thrilled; not only because letting go has been a spiritual challenge and occasional practice of mine for thirty years, but because courage and surrender are not a trait and practice that seem to belong together. At least not in our culture.

Courage is usually about fighting, about giving everything we can no matter how much it hurts so that we can make something happen, whether that is a goal we achieve or a war we win. Surrender? Giving up? Letting go? That is the stuff of cowards, of people who lack the strength - moral, physical, spiritual - to hang in there until they succeed, until they win the battle, or maybe even the football game. At least that is what I was taught when I grew up, when I learned about the self-

reliance, the self-confidence, the “courage” that I needed to make it in this world.

Now, without question, there is a well of physical, moral and spiritual courage that soldiers and single mothers, lonely teenagers and laid-off auto workers, the disabled and the depressed, the sad and the scared, call on for inspiration and strength to to hold on, to make it another day. But sometimes courage looks less like someone dragging a dusty lion behind us, as Mr. Herbert suggests in our reading this morning. Sometimes courage is about letting go. Even surrendering.

John F. Kennedy, in his book *Profiles in Courage*, writes, “To be courageous requires no exceptional qualities, no magic formula, no special combination of time, place and circumstance. It is an opportunity that sooner or later is presented to us all.” All of us have had the opportunity at some point in our life to practice the courage of letting go. And for many of us letting go or surrendering, whether it be to a relationship that no longer works, a job that has sucked our soul dry, an anger or resentment that has held us captive for years, or the loss of

something or someone we never wanted to lose, well that type of courage is the hardest to find.

Surrender. Giving up control. These are things that do not come easy to many of us. We Unitarian Universalists are people of action; people who do what we can, as much as we can, to make the world a better place. We take pride that we practice a faith not of creeds but deeds. Deeds that often demand we have the courage, or at least the stick-to-it-ness to hang in there, overcoming inertia, cynicism or oppression to make a difference. Our principles do not speak of the type of courage that demands surrender, submission even, to the will of something larger than ourselves, whether that be God or life.

Which is one reason we would be wise to look at the world's religions and poets for inspiration and lessons which teach us how to give up our need to control and hold tightly to that which no longer serves us well.

Letting go and surrendering are common themes in many religious traditions. The first pillar of Islam, shahadah in Arabic, is the profession

of faith that there is one and only God – Allah. This is the creed that the Muslim lives by and it is brief, simple and explicit. “There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger.” Islam’s very definition is surrender or submission to God.

My grandmother was the only religious person in my family. I lived with her and my grandfather for a few months when my mom was in the hospital when I was eight years old. I have many fond memories of living with my nanny including kneeling by my bed every night reciting the lord’s prayer as she watched over me. Thy will be done, is one of the main tenets of the Christian faith; something that I never heeded much in my young life.

But that changed when I was forced into a recovery program for compulsive gambling when I was 21 years old. Although I was younger than most, compulsive gambling took away from me what most addictions take away - money, self-esteem, relationships that deeply mattered and any perspective or hope for life.

When I began recovery I was a resistant atheist who did not have much use for higher powers, prayers or cliches and sayings such as “let

go and let god.” I was someone whose life was not going very well but who believed in all his heart that he could hang on, could fight it out without having to pay much attention to letting go of anything.

But time, pain, desperation, wise counsel and glimmers of hope have ways of changing people. It was not long before I was praying “Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference” and studying and doing my best to understand what it really meant to let go and let god - or life -... take over. I am still learning the lessons thirty years later. I - and maybe you too- always will be.

Hopefully it is not an addiction - yours or a loved one's - that is summoning your courage to let go and surrender today, but I suspect for most of us there is something we know deep down we need to let go of for a better, more peaceful life. And perhaps we are resisting, struggling, maybe even fighting that invitation to surrender with all we have.

January is the season for resolutions, for the hope and courage, to change. Many of our resolutions speak to something we wish to give up

- those 20 or 50 extra pounds, cigarettes, the extra glass of wine, television, or the stress and anxiety a bad job or a no job at all is causing; some of us are wanting to add something to our life, a goal to achieve such as a revitalized exercise program, spiritual practice, new relationship or different job. Congregations have goals and resolutions too. To add a new program, to grow, to have more people involved in service, to have fewer people suffer in their community.

No matter if we wish to add or subtract something to our lives, or even if we are fine with everything as it is right now, we are faced with the reality that life is always inviting us, reminding us, that we will be forced to change, forced to let something go.

Mary Oliver's poem reminds us of the cycles of life and death which all nature, including us, must endure and celebrate. Her instruction is clear. To love what is mortal, to hold it against your bones knowing our life depends on it and when the time comes to let it go, to let it go.

What is it in *your* life that the time has come to let it go?

And once you know, deep in our bones, what that is, how will you find the courage to let it go?

The Quaker author and teacher Parker Palmer gives us a hint. “Our deepest calling is to grow into our authentic selfhood whether or not it conforms to some image of who we ought to be.” Authentic selfhood is Palmer’s phrase for the sense of wholeness and health that is the aim of the religious and spiritual life. Conforming to some image of who we ought to be is what too often gets in our way. Especially when we need to let go, to surrender to something bigger than us whether that bigger is a higher power or the flow of life which is beyond our control.

Letting go and surrendering **should** be easy to do. Especially when we know that which we are holding on to is bad for our spirits, toxic to our souls. The bad relationship. The anger and resentment we carry from past hurts. The grief of losing of someone who we loved. An addiction that has taken away almost everything and everyone we care about. The reality that people we love, including ourselves, will one day die. We should be able to let these go, to surrender, and yet we struggle to do so.

Which is why our spiritual lives and practices are so important to living a courageous life where we are open to the surrender and letting go that the cycles of life and death demand of us. Muslims stop five times each day to pray; to remember to submit, to surrender, to Allah. Christians celebrate the ritual of Advent when they sit with an emptiness, sometimes even a literal giving up of something to get closer to their god. Jews celebrate the high holy days each year when forgiveness and letting go are encouraged and atonement is remembered. Unitarian Universalists lack specific rituals like these but we are invited to remember letting go and connecting with something greater than us when we worship together, when we sit in meditation or prayer, when we journal, spend time in nature, show up to serve at the shelter or whatever form of spiritual practice we have that reminds us of the mystery, wonder and spirit of life and God.

The courage to let go, to surrender takes something that we all can cultivate, something that we Unitarian Universalists do not speak about as readily as those in other religious traditions. Something called faith. Faith that the life we are letting go of, the story we tell about ourselves

and about others, can survive the changes that will come when we surrender.

The Buddhist tradition has as much to teach us about letting go, surrendering and faith as any religion. Their wisdom begins with the four noble truths. The first noble truth tells us simply that suffering exists. It comes with this gift package called life. The second noble truth tells us that suffering arises from our attachment to desires, our cravings. Those things that we have such a hard time letting go of. The Third Noble Truth claims that suffering ceases when our attachment to desires and cravings cease. When we let go of our clinging and attachments – to life, to relationships, to our net worth, to our beliefs about life – we step into a scary place. Maybe that is why the Buddha took meditation practice so seriously. Buddhist meditation practices start and end with the breath. Breathe in and breathe out. Count to ten and think of nothing else. Breathe into accepting life as it is at this very moment. This is the Buddhist's way to say Let Go and Let God. Or more accurately, Let go, and let Life.

The courage to let go and let god or let life takes wisdom, it takes faith. The Zen teacher Alan Watts wrote, “Faith has no preconceptions it is a plunge into the unknown.” Faith is what we need when we summon the humility, the willingness, the uncertainty, the courage to plunge into the unknown and surrender something we know for that which we do not know.

Ray Bradbury, the science fiction writer suggests we, “Go to the edge of the cliff and jump off. Build your wings on the way down.” Wings are the stuff created from courage and faith but I would suggest building your wings before you are forced or chose to go over the cliff.

For as my favorite Buddhist author Sharon Salzberg reminds us, “No matter how much we want it to be otherwise, the truth is that we are not in control of the unfolding of our experiences. Life...is a flow we can't command or stave off. We can affect and influence and impact what happens, but we can't wake up in the morning and decide what we will encounter and feel and be confronted by during the day. Faith, in contrast, reminds us of the ever-changing flow of life, with all its

movement and possibility... No matter what we encounter in life, it is faith that enables us to try again, to trust again, to love again”.

To try again, to trust again, to love again. When the time comes go let go, to let it go. Let go, surrender so that new life, our authentic self can emerge. This is the invitation, maybe even the demand that awaits us. Salzberg adds, “To become more aware and loving people. This is the goal of faith.” To become more aware and loving people. This is the goal of surrendering and letting go. This is the goal of Unitarian Universalism. This is the goal of life. May we turn to every person, every sacred teaching, every breath we draw to make it be so. May it be so. Amen.