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Vol. 34, No. 7

Unity Church–Unitarian

March 2011

Surrender

The life of a congregation is a rich community tapestry of people, programs, ministries and worship. We lift up the patterns of this tapestry at Unity Church with the threads of monthly themes woven through our worship and programming. These themes deepen our understanding of our own faith and strengthen our bonds with one another in religious community. We explore each theme in worship and in our newsletter; in covenant groups, guided writing sessions and Wednesday evening programming; and in our community outreach ministries, our literary journal and programs, and many other opportunities. The March theme is Surrender.

It was not a typical time or place for kneeling – a summer evening several years ago when I stood at the kitchen sink, hands immersed in the warm dishwater. But then it happened. After days of first denying and then fending off an illness as yet undiagnosed, my legs simply buckled. I sank down slowly, knees to the floor, hands gloved in soap suds and draped over the sink, eyes glancing up, lifted to a new skyward perspective through the open window. For all my fierce determination to keep going on my own, to continue my tasks at work and at home, in that moment on bended knee I acknowledged my limitations and surrendered, feeling a grateful connection to the sky beyond my windowsill. It was surprising how much it felt like prayer.

Worship Theme Resources

BOOKS

Learning to Fall: the blessings of an imperfect life, by Philip Simmons, essays by a gifted Unitarian Universalist writer, reflecting on his search for peace and wisdom while living with ALS for ten years before dying in 2002.

Reaching Out: the three movements of the spiritual life, by Henri Nouwen, a thoughtful discussion of the movement from loneliness to solitude, from hostility to hospitality and from illusion to prayer.

Peace Like a River, by Leif Enger, a story of family, faith and spirit set in Minnesota and exploring the surrender of the human heart.

Surrender, for many of us, does not have a very good name. In a culture that values individual accomplishment, strength and victory, surrender conjures up images of defeat, weakness and capitulation – a white flag feebly raised as one turns oneself over to the enemy.

But the white flag, initially recorded as an act of surrender almost 2,000 years ago, is first and foremost a commitment to disarmament and a request for parley. Recognized by the Geneva Convention, the white flag is a promise not to fire on others and a reciprocal request not to be fired upon while you enter into conversation. In the context of spiritual discipline, this kind of surrender suggests a dropping of our defenses just long enough to become open to another. It is a vulnerability we often resist in the name of independence and self-protection; and it is this resistance that can leave us in an ironically susceptible state of crushing perfectionism, isolation and despair.

As Carl Jung once observed, there appears to be in humankind a conscience that “severely punishes” those who do not “somehow and at some time, at whatever cost to (their) pride, cease to defend and assert (themselves), and instead confess (to being) fallible and human.”

But to what or to whom do we surrender in spiritual terms? And, importantly, how do we avoid the danger of surrendering to forces that would do harm, to us or to others? How do we know what is trustworthy of our surrender?

Consider, for a moment, the surrender that occurs in a healthy, loving relationship. How, when you love someone deeply – be it a child, parent, lover or friend – you set down your shield and let down your defenses, how you open and offer your heart. In this kind of love, it is less a surrender to the other person as it is a surrender to the relationship, to the partnership you have made and continue making together.

So too, in our spiritual practices, we are asked to surrender to a partnership with that which is sacred, with the ground of our Being, with our highest Truth. It is a partnership that begins when we yield to our own limitations and then lean into relationship with a larger possibility, a greater oneness, with the wider web of life. It is a partnership in which we turn ourselves over to that great demanding claim that we be nothing less than our fallible but whole and truest selves, healed and connected to one another.

D.H. Lawrence wrote, “Go down to your deep old heart, and lose sight of yourself. And lose sight of me, the me whom you turbulently love. Let us lose sight of ourselves,” he said, “and break the mirrors. For the fierce curve of our lives is moving again to the depths out of sight, in the deep living heart.”

So it begins on bended knee; then it lifts us up together, rising into the new day.

~ Karen Hering,
Consulting Literary Minister