



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.

Surrender doesn't get much play in Unitarian Universalist circles. Nothing in our seven principles encourages the practice, not even when the principles are read with subtlety and nuance. We don't sing about surrender: the word doesn't appear in the gray hymnal and it's missing from the teal hymnal as well. Outside the walls of Unity Church, very few sermons get preached on the subject. Surrender? Why would UUs want to do that?

As a result, many of us probably associate surrendering with what happens on the battlefield. Surrender happens at the barrel of a gun, the point of a sword, means domination and the loss of power. Surrender hurts.

Even without the war-like connotations, however, many UUs are uncomfortable with the notion of surrender. We UUs tend to place great value on our own ideas and to focus on self-determination and personal decision-making in our quest for truth. Indeed, our fourth principle encourages us toward a "free and responsible search for meaning." Because the search for personal truth is central to our faith, surrendering our ideas to someone else's perspective can seem almost antithetical to spiritual development.

And then there's our history. Ibrahim Farajaje, former provost at the Starr King School for the Ministry, explains that Unitarianism emerged during what he terms the "En-white-ement." Farajaje argues that ideas of white supremacy and manifest destiny had been baked into Enlightenment ideals and thus continue to determine how we practice our religion. The values of modernity — autonomy and the centrality of the individual, the value of reason, the uplifting of ethical thought over doctrine and emotion — don't encourage humility, don't leave much space for backing down or surrendering

to someone else's will. We pursue our self-interest, we see to our self-care, we exercise our self-control. Farajaje argues that being white meant always expecting to be right. No retreat, no surrender.

Yet our desire for control often harms our spiritual growth, makes us susceptible to crushing perfectionism, and prevents us from finding our way toward health and happiness. Most of us probably have a story of wanting something and "going for it" relentlessly, only to grow more and more frustrated as our goal eludes us. Clinging to behavior or ideas that once felt productive no longer works. Only when we gave up, when we stopped looking, or stopped trying, did the possibility for change occur.

Giving up control allows us to focus more on being than on doing, taking us out of the relentless striving for perfection that characterizes modern society. In *The Artist's Way*, Julia Cameron claims that we will struggle if "we try to push, pull, outline and control our ideas instead of letting them grow organically. The creative process is a process of surrender, not control." This is as true for life as it is for art.

Sometimes we have no choice. We get bad news from a doctor, our job gets downsized, a loved one dies; maybe addiction ensnares us, an accident happens, our friends disappear. At these moments, our sense of control cracks and shatters and surrendering can be the only way through the grief and loss and pain. Humbled by our failures and our fears and yearning for a grace beyond our understanding, we give in to the mystery. To the unknown. We let go. Philosopher Mark Nepo writes that "buried seeds/crack open in the dark/the instant they surrender/to a process they can't see." In acknowledging that we don't have answers and cannot control the future, new ways blossom, new possibilities emerge. We relax into the dark.

Surrender connects us to the holy. Theologian Richard Rohr explains that "surrender is about a peaceful inner opening that keeps the conduit of living water flowing." For Rohr, "surrendering to the divine Flow" transforms an unproductive willfulness into an expansive willingness of spirit. Similarly, in Buddhist practice, surrender signals the letting go of individual desire in search of a larger becoming. Surrender is oneness, an unfolding awareness of the whole, a richness that only happens when humility overtakes ego.

None of this is easy. Given our conditioning and the social expectations of control, it takes practice to let go. Surrendering is counter-cultural, maybe even anti-UU. But when tiny acts of surrender become part of our daily practice, we release our need for control, we admit our vulnerabilities, we allow our creative inspiration to rise. It seems worth the effort.

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Surrender Theme Resources

BOOKS

The Year of Magical Thinking by
Joan Didion (2007)

*How to Change Your Mind: What
the New Science of Psychedelics
Teaches Us About Consciousness,
Dying, Addiction, Depression, and
Transcendence* by Michael Pollan
(2018)

*The Dark Interval: Letters on Loss,
Grief, and Transformation* by Rainer
Maria Rilke (2018)

*The Silent Cry: Mysticism and
Resistance* by Dorothee Sölle (2001)