

## **SURRENDERED**

**A sermon given on ‘The Touchstone of Surrender’**

**by the Rev. Dr. Kelly Murphy Mason**

**at UU Wellesley Hills on**

**Sunday, February 17th, 2019**

**When I was young and foolish, I set off to see the world. That seems to be the favored time to do such a thing, when you have relatively few commitments, an appetite for adventure, and an outlook that leaves you somehow feeling impervious to the dangers of this world. What I did then seems out of bounds even for the intrepid budget traveller in her 20s. I neglected to arrange any accommodations in advance; I planned elaborate journeys involving train-bus-ferry-train transfers with no margin for error; I once hitch-hiked, which I am still ashamed to admit to strangers; and I took solo strolls through militarized zones because I wanted to be a first-hand witness to history. The extent of my safety planning was carrying a bright neon orange can of pepper spray; it usually bounced somewhere around in my backpack, effectively out of reach.**

**That pepper spray had been a gift from a close friend who had the good sense to be concerned about me. It felt awkward in the hand, and the spray mechanism itself was complicated. I fumbled to operate it once or twice, just to test it, but never even bothered with target practice. I cannot be sure what measure of safety either of us expected from it, although I am convinced we both overestimated its efficacy.**

**Then, catching an infrequent flight from the airport, I got stopped on the way to my gate. Security could not let me through with my pepper spray.**

**The conversation I had with the patient security agent was lengthier than anyone could have reasonably expected. He suggested that I fill out some paperwork for the airport, although doing the paperwork would not result the return of the pepper spray. It would only register my objection to having it confiscated. Since I needed to move along on my itinerary, it was inevitable that I would surrender it. Only, the idea of that bothered me. I did not want to give up this can of paper spray that was really worse than useless; it actually gave me a false, outsized confidence in my ability to care of myself. It made me think that I could go wherever I wanted and do whatever I wanted, that I could take on the world armed with a single can of mace that I hardly knew how to operate under the best of circumstances.**

**Surrendering that pepper spray, though, suddenly made me feel at the mercy of the world, which I had been all along, and and it also forced me to recognize that the world had been exceedingly merciful toward me, a fact that I found humbling and simultaneously resented. Nowadays, when I consider surrender, I think of myself giving up claim to a territory that was never mine to inhabit in the first place. That helps me make my peace with it. Several of you here today, I suspect, are grappling with this term and its negative associations. Instead of talking about giving up, can't we talk about letting go, which sounds more spiritual, or at least easier?**

**The language of letting go leaves us in familiar terrain, where we make decisions deliberately, acting voluntarily. Things we let go of we**

can readily take back. Surrender, though - that is where we likely find just beyond that point of no return. Necessity bears us there.

Author James Baldwin wrote eloquently, unflinchingly, prolifically about the African-American experience after he went overseas. Raised in Harlem, he spent most of his adult years living as expatriate in France, relieved by distance of some of the crushing burden of racism in America. In his essay, "Nobody Knows My Name," he speaks of surrender in terms of "the breakup of the world," something he experienced himself. "Any real change implies the breakup of the world as one has always known it, the loss of all that gave one an identity, the end of safety. And at such a moment... one clings to what one knew, or dreamed that one possessed," Baldwin observes. "Yet, it is only when a man is able, without bitterness or self-pity, to surrender a dream he has long possessed that he is set free - he has set himself free - for higher dreams, for greater privileges."

Here Baldwin describes some of the tactical factors involved in surrender — that one can give up this in order to get that, that one can sacrifice here for gain there, knowing that safety is no longer an option, nor conventional self-preservation, for that matter. As former identities fall away, newer ones are free to emerge. Going abroad allowed Baldwin to live as an openly gay man, an option that would have been nearly unimaginable for him in the African-American community where he was reared.

Like Baldwin, writer Audre Lorde had to navigate the complexity of her personal identities, plural and diverse. She declared herself a "black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet," and later identified as a

cancer survivor, as well. In those verses of her poem “Litany for Survival”, she reminds us: “We were never meant to survive.” She recalls for us our mortality and our very real limitations. What she refused to deny was the totality of who she was as an activist and truth-teller. While she survived an earlier bout with breast cancer, she succumbed to liver cancer in her 50s. By that time - again like Baldwin - she had left the United States for an island in the Caribbean, the same place her Afro-Caribe parents had emigrated from a generation prior. She and her life partner found happiness there.

Lorde wrote about living “at the shoreline standing upon the constant edges of decision” and aligned herself with “those... who cannot indulge the passing dreams of choice.” Her particular social location as a queer woman of color constrained the options available to her, but she refused to make decisions based on fear. That basic refusal liberated her. Even in the face of impending death, she remained defiant. “[F]or by this weapon/this illusion of some safety to be found/the heavy-footed hoped to silence us/,” Lorde wrote, “For all of us/ this instant and this triumph/ we were never meant to survive.”

One of the hardest things for most of us to surrender is precisely what she describes here, “this illusion of some safety to be found.” People of privilege tend to cling to that. For us, it’s especially hard for to release our delusions of certainty and security, but that is what a larger life asks to do - to surrender them and engage with a shared human reality. Those things that we think we are giving up probably were never rightfully ours in the first place. If we view our personal surrender as a kind of defeat, we lose sight of all it affords us: the possibility of peace, no longer needing to win, freedom from senseless struggle.

Most of you have surrendered so much already, perhaps unwittingly, never recognizing the paradoxical victories you won. Gradually, you surrendered the endless optionality of all possible lives to settle into the one singular and unique embodied existence you have now. You entered one profession but not another, you had children or you didn't, you married or you didn't or you did and then you divorced, you gambled everything you had or instead did not, you made this place home and not another, and so on and so forth. Not all of us will surrender something so dramatic as the land of our birth, as Baldwin and Lorde both did, in order not to have to give up integral parts of themselves. But there may have been a series of other things we gave up to keep ourselves and our sanity intact: the fantasy of an idyllic childhood and caring family, say, or a career ambition that was costing those we loved too much.

Our wider culture does not sanction our celebrating what we have surrendered, though by rights, it should. It's such a relief for us to not have to fight life on every front, to not constantly be embattled with our circumstances. These days, when people talk about their spiritual practices in popular podcasts or national magazines, I hear them describing various techniques for getting what they want. Of course, that impulse to pursue what we desire is perfectly natural. Yet the truest test of our spiritual mettle is how we meet disappointment, where we manage to carry on when we failed to get things we wanted very badly, what we are willing to finally surrender. Surrender is a precursor to abiding peace.

Not coincidentally, it's also our best hope for a sustainable future and the survival of civilizations. Those of us in Western countries have to surrender our unrealistic expectation that we can have it all, all at

once and all the time. The ravages that the developed economies has wrought on developing ones a direct consequence of our most maladaptive beliefs in endless expansion and accumulation, resulting in the ecological crisis of today. As recently as the last century, our Universalist forbears used to testify to the power held by people of “sacrificial spirit” to “progressively establish” a different sort of world order. If that sounds impossibly naive to us nowadays, we may need to start by surrendering some of our cynicism, too.

How might our world look, sound, or feel like if we ourselves were not so highly defended? We can explore that only after we have dropped our defenses. Let’s start today, by acknowledging our worst individualistic habits: our insistence on continuous choice, our vanity around being self-determining, our sense of unquestioned entitlement, our addiction to perpetual optionality. Surrender is not a casual spiritual practice; it is a serious spiritual discipline. It is required in faith communities like ours. Every Sunday morning in the Sanctuary, for example, you surrender the ability to hear whatever poems you like, donate to whatever charity you like, sing whatever songs you like. You do it gladly. You do it routinely.

All religion is a reckoning with finitude. We make our commitments and then we discover they have the power to remake us. We talk about pushing beyond the binary, but often, there is a dividing line drawn from our decision points, before and after, there and here. We surrender citizenship to a past life so as to belong to the present; we surrender a passport to select future plans because we have a different sort of determination now. “Love does not begin and end the way we seem to think it does,” Baldwin maintains. “Love is a battle, love is a war; love is a growing up.”

**Love is a giving up, too, of self and a giving in to other in order to belong to something far greater than either, but nothing less than whole. So declare surrender, already! Dare to celebrate it. The Roman poet Virgil famously wrote, “Omni vincit amor”, usually translated, “Love conquers all.” It may even conquer some of our worst instincts and meanest self-concepts. It can hold both our triumphs and defeats in a wide embrace of who we are, who we have been, and who we might yet become.**

**Now that I am considerably older and marginally wiser than I was when I trotted the globe decades ago, I understand that there is no magical concoction, no pepper spray potent enough to make me invincible, much less immortal. And these days, I wonder if the world does not at least as much protection from me and my personal prerogative as I do it from it and its vagaries. That mace frankly made me a danger to myself and others, a menace at each border. Being asked to surrender it was instructive and ultimately spiritually edifying. It reminded me to take closer hold, more modestly, of just those things within my own reach.**