

“Awakening and Surrender”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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In the reading Paul shared with us earlier, John O’Donohue asserts that; “We live between the act of awakening and the act of surrender.” He gives the examples of awakening to each new day and surrendering to a world of dreams each night. While these two examples of awakening and surrender are simple and clear, they are not the only examples of awakening and surrender that could illuminate or validate his assertion. There are many, many other examples. The light of day and the darkness of night certainly exemplify his claim that; “We live between the act of awakening and the act of surrender.” As we contemplate O’Donohue’s assertion, coming up with other examples could offer us a broader and deeper understanding of the point he is seeking to make.

There are many ways to understand or comprehend what it means to “live between” acts of awakening and surrender. For example, “living between” might involve an aspect of time, such as the time between dawn and nightfall. But living between can also refer to decisions we make in a single moment. In a given moment do we make a decision to awaken or surrender? Maybe the decision isn’t an either/or proposition. In that case the question would be, do we make a decision to awaken and surrender. It would be beneficial for us then to consider not just the idea of living between. It would be good for us to consider how we live continually in the midst of opportunities for awakening and surrendering in any moment, maybe even in every moment.

Awakening and surrendering are concepts that many, if not all, of the world’s major religious traditions present in one form or another. In stories about the Buddha, it is common to hear that he was enlightened or awakened. On his journey to becoming enlightened and awakened, he had to surrender many of his conceptions of the world, and of life. He taught that in order to attain enlightenment or awakening, a person needed to surrender their craving, and their attachments to craving, in order to achieve a cessation of suffering. In Christianity, it is common to hear that a person needs to awaken to God’s love for them. And when a person awakens to God’s love, they are then called to surrender. They are called to surrender not just to God’s love but also to God’s will. These are just two examples of how religious traditions speak to the concepts of awakening and surrender.

But even for people who aren’t religious, the concepts of awakening and surrender present themselves in a myriad of ways. Our Story for All Ages this morning, *Ada Twist, Scientist*, presents a number of situations where awakening and surrender are at play. As we heard in the story, Ada awakened to all manner of things in her world, such as her ability to climb and to smell. And she also found that, at least at times, she needed to surrender to the limitations her parents placed on her. Her awakening progressed as she asked more and more questions. Both awakening and surrender came as she found that each answer spawned yet more questions and more things to discover. She surrendered to her curiosity.

Ada isn’t the only one in the story who deals with awakening and surrender. As Ada progresses along her path of awakening and surrendering, her parents find themselves having to awaken and surrender as well. As Ada begins to speak, then climb, then question, then experiment, her parents find themselves challenged to awaken to Ada’s potential. In order to support and encourage Ada’s potential, her parents must surrender at least some of their ideas about what their child should do or be. In this story, Ada’s parents do quite well in their awakening and surrendering process. In the real world, not all parents are as willing, or able, to awaken or surrender at the level of Ada’s parents. Let me be clear here, this is not a statement of judgment, but merely a statement of fact. All of us have our limitations in certain areas and periods of life.

And speaking of periods of life, the process of awakening and surrendering isn’t limited to a particular period of life. Throughout the 70 years of my life, I have had experiences of awakening and surrendering in each of my 7 decades. While I can’t say definitely what more awakening and surrendering will occur in the

years I have left to live, I am certain that I still have much to awaken to, and a great deal to surrender to as well.

My decision to retire from ministry at the end of June is one of the most recent and significant examples in my life where awakening and surrendering came into play. I have shared aspects of this awakening and surrendering process with some of you over the past several months. I share this experience with all of you this morning in the hopes that in doing so, you will be reminded of situations in your own life where you went through a process of awakening and surrendering.

Prior to informing the Board last September that I would be retiring at the end of June, I had found myself struggling to live up to expectations I had about my performance in carrying out my ministerial responsibilities. I knew that I was not alone in that struggle. All of the UU minister colleagues I was having conversations with were sharing that they were struggling as well. Ministry is a challenging profession even in good times. But trying to do ministry during a global pandemic amplified the challenges of doing ministry many times over. For a time, knowing that my ministerial colleagues were also struggling provided me reassurance. When I was doubting my capability I would tell myself, "You aren't alone. Colleagues are struggling, too." But over time I came to recognize that reassuring myself that the struggle I was going through was shared by many others just didn't address something very fundamental to my particular struggle. I was finding that my ability to will myself to generate the energy needed to address the issues that were arising simply wasn't what it used to be. I began to realize that there was something more than the pandemic at play here. The pandemic brought me face to face with the fact that I was getting older. And not only was I getting older, my capacity to generate the kind of energy I could when I was in my 30's, 40's and 50's was a thing of the past.

At first, I tried to convince myself that what I needed to do was learn to work smarter, not harder. That strategy had worked for me in the past. Then I began to hear about what is sometimes referred to as the great resignation and the great retirement. Those terms refer to the dramatic numbers of people who resigned or retired from their jobs over the course of the pandemic. I began hearing about the number of ministers, including UU ministers, who were leaving the profession. A significant number of the UU ministers I knew were retiring. A good number of those ministers are younger than I am. All of this led me to the awakening to the fact that my age was limiting my capacity to do ministry at the level I was able to do previously, and to the level that I knew you, the members and friends of UUFB deserved. In order to come to that awakening, I needed to surrender to the reality that was being presented to me in multiple situations again and again.

I will say here that not all awakenings are what we would desire. And some awakenings are anything but pleasant initially. That was true in this case for me. I am reasonably certain that a considerable number of you can identify times in your own life when you had to awaken and surrender to a reality that was difficult, unpleasant or even painful. Reality, however, doesn't take into account whether it is difficult or painful for us to awaken to. Reality simply is, whether we like it or not. Our task, if we choose to accept it in this life, is to become aware of and, once awareness is achieved, to accept reality for what it is. And when we become aware of and accept reality, the next step on the path is to make the most of our lives by utilizing the abilities we have.

Every one of us has our own times of awakening and times of surrender. Sometimes our awakening and our surrender are separated by a period of time, as O'Donohue points out. Sometimes they arrive nearly simultaneously. Our times of awakening and surrender may be, or at least may seem, monumental. Significant awakenings and surrendering frequently feel monumental at first. Often, after having some time to live with them, we may recognize them more like a jump over a small stream on a wilderness path than a leap from a twenty story building. While some of my awakenings and surrenderings have impacted my life significantly—including my calling to ministry in my mid-50s—I recognize that each one has been considerably smaller than I initially imagined it to be at the time. So far, I haven't experienced anything near the magnitude of Buddha's awakening or Jesus' surrender on the cross.

As I mentioned earlier, I hope that what I have shared with you this morning has inspired you to think of times in your life when you have experienced an awakening and/or a surrendering. Recalling such times can

help us to face future awakenings and surrenderings with less anxiety, and maybe even with a bit of confidence. I say that because I am reasonably certain that everyone of us will, before our final breath is taken, experience another awakening and surrendering of some type and size. I am sure that is the case for me. At the end of June, I will be surrendering my second, and almost certainly my last career. Preparing for this sermon has provided me with an opportunity to recall prior awakenings and surrenderings in my life. Recalling many such experiences from my past has helped me recognize that each one has been a gift in my life, even when some of them may have at first seemed like a curse.

None of us can know for certain exactly what our next awakening or surrendering will involve or entail. If we already knew, we would likely be as awakened, enlightened and aware as it is claimed the Buddha and Jesus were.

My hope is that, in the days ahead, we may all face the realities that present themselves to us with openness, curiosity, courage and creativity. May we draw on the wisdom we have gained from prior awakenings and surrenderings. And may our life path offer each of us as many opportunities as we need to both awaken and surrender. And how many awakenings and surrenderings might that be? My hope is that it will be enough for us to reach the highest level of awareness and fulfillment of our life's purpose that we are capable of attaining.

So may it be.