

RJ Holmes asked if I'm going to use the word "apocalypse" like I did for his commencement. It seemed like a fun idea at the time--Y2K and all. Then there was Harold Camping's whole rapture thing last spring—who wouldn't make a passing reference to that when the end of the world is said to happen right before finals?! Surely that would have been a convenient excuse when parents asked why you haven't been looking for a job yet. But in answer to your question, RJ: No. Despite the 2012 Mayan Calendar and the doom and gloom economy, I'm not going there this year. Besides. I only talk about apocalypse as a metaphor when it *feels* like the end of the world. The message today is, as always, about hope and transformation when we're in between ending a familiar life chapter and commencing a new one with all the double meaning the word "Commencement" implies.

There is a secret, counter-intuitive wisdom running through all of life like a golden thread. It's a secret only because we humans think we're suppose to avoid it, even though the pattern is found in nature of which we are part, and in the great mythic tales, sacred scriptures, and spiritual wisdom of East and West. From the day we make that terrifying and exhausting journey through the birth canal, until we draw your last breath, we brush against it as we sojourn through the labyrinth of our life journeys.

Many people never fully flourish because they fear it. Still they enjoy reading about it from the safety of their recliners. It's found in ancient and contemporary tales of the hero's journey; including Harry Potter's in J.K. Rowling's seventh and final bookⁱⁱ as Harry dares the path of self-surrender in that climatic scene when he faces all he ever feared, only to wake in a bright misty cloud inside King's Cross Station—metaphor for a transit or transformation place

for people on their journeys. “Am I dead?” asks Harry of Dumbledore. “Ah,” says Dumbledore. “That is the question, isn’t it? On the whole dear boy, I think not (p707).”

Harry’s daring “yes” to the fear and discomfort of transformation--his daring self-surrender, is the secret counter-intuitive wisdom of the hero’s tale, including your own. Even if your life has always hummed along following a pain free, carefully planned itinerary of one achievement after another; even if you are unscathed by life’s trials of failure, falls, fears, and flaws, you can at least intellectually understand this golden thread of wisdom until the day arrives when even *you* will undergo *your* turn groping in the dark until you grasp for that thread. Why? Again, you’re a fellow participant in a process of nature and the cosmos, from the big bang down to the birth pangs of the mother who bore you, and the tiniest seed.

Like when your flight or packed car pulls away tomorrow after the congratulatory celebration begins to wane. And the silence greets you. And the Mystery of the Unknown seated beside you leans over to tenderly kiss your cheek, longing to be friend you. And while you may be adventurous, that invitation creeps you out just a bit when Mystery whispers for you to scootch on over a little closer and enter her arms. To relax with not always being in control of your life. She says “Don’t be afraid; take the golden thread—the wisdom way of relinquishment and trust. And don’t forget to be as patient as a seed when from above the soil line of your life it seems as if there is no metamorphosis or growth; be it in terms of finding work, or healing haunting wounds with family or classmates, or figuring out the purpose and direction of your life. Keep with the secret wisdom way--if not in imitation of Harry, then of your kin, the seed. For as Mark Nepo’s poem *Courage of the Seed* puts it: “All the buried seeds crack open in the dark the instant they surrender to a process they cannot see.”

Being like Harry before Voldemort. Or cracking open like a seed as we grope our way in the dark—sounds as inviting as a root canal, I know. But deep down, as ones who bears kinship with the rest of creation, your accepting the adventure of every free falling seed and autumn leaf like daring sky divers sounds far more fun and freeing than the rigidity of needing to always be in control.

And that is a secret to life I'd like to offer as you sojourn through this and other chapter transitions of your life. Your flourishing will depend to some extent upon loosening a measure of your willful, self-determination. Don't lose your spunk. Just, in a very wui-we kind of way, balance it with the suppleness of a child with all their playful trust, wonder, and openness to mystery. To enter the cloud of "unknowing." Or as I say to students, faculty, and staff when we're on monastic retreat: After the monks chant their good night "Into your hands I release my spirit," prayer, come back into the unlit chapel. Grope your way until you find a bench. Sit still until your heart stops pounding in your ears. Then make your peace with the dark. It was undergoing this experience—or perhaps more broadly the entire monastic silent retreat, that Erin Daly declared it to be one of the defining moments of her Cornell experience.

Side bar comment: If anyone thinks that by speaking of relinquished self-surrender and trust in the face of fear, and uncertainty I'm suggesting we give up and give in, you're not getting it. As any person going through chemo, or working with AA will tell you, the path of self-surrender is not for the weak. It's probably the gutsiest, most courageous thing one can do. Still the concept is confusing. When Lao Tzu, in the reading Erin shared with us, asks "Can you deal with the most vital matters by letting events take their course?" that can sound like not caring or trying; caving in, settling, or even setting oneself up to get squashed like a bug by domineering Voldemorts. Same with the Gospel reading. Jesus, like Harry, is on the hero's journey upon the

Way of releasement, humility, self-emptying and spiritual childhood which he bids us follow. It shares likeness to the Way led by all the great prophets of differing wisdom traditions including Lao Tzu's passage for both stand in stark contrast to Jesus' disciples who represent the tendency of many people who, in order to mask their insecurity and avoid the threat of vulnerability, seek power and control. As Dumbledore puts it when speaking to Harry at King's Cross, "I had proven, as a very young man, that power was my weakness and my temptation (718)...I was not to be trusted with power (717)... I was safer at Hogwarts. I think I was a good teacher (718)."

Still, as these examples reveal, finding the right balance between willfulness and willingness can be confusing. We all know people who mistake humility and self-surrender for playing small. As spiritual psychologist Gerald May put it, some forms of surrender and humility are no good at all. He writes:

Our confusion is deepened by the fact that too often we really are spineless and unassertive. Too often we do go along with the currents of social whim or the desires of other people instead of standing up for what we sense is truly right within us. [Yet such] surrender to other people, institutions, or causes is...the opposite of true spiritual surrender.As a result, we often find ourselves driven toward the impossible goal of shouldering every bit of our own destinies, and we may feel inadequate when we cannot finally accomplish this....Surely we do not want to be passive doormats for the world to walk upon but the world is so immense...and so mysterious...and so wonderful...that we cannot quite find comfort in seeing ourselves as its masters either.

And then there are those brief, ecstatic moments when something approximating spiritual surrender does come upon us....we can surrender to a loved one, whispering, "Yes my darling, yes." Occasionally while swimming in the ocean we are able to give ourselves to the waves and just float upon them, letting their strength bear us up.ⁱⁱⁱ

Such moments, of course, are fleeting, for soon the awareness of Open Mind fades as we return to the ruts of old mental habits of anxiousness. Which may also be why we're relieved to learn that spiritually wise people like my friend the Zen priest also anxiously fret. That like us, ancient Israelite also knew discouragement and moped. Like us, Rumi's readers from the 13th c.

onward also place themselves upon the torture's rack of past and future as their minds try to shape tomorrow beyond their capacity, thus finding no rest or peace. Like us and our politicians, Jesus' disciples argue over who is the greatest. Like us, Lao Tzu's audience has a difficult time learning to have without possessing, act without expectations, and to love and lead others without trying to control. Like us, even our wise, beloved Dumbledore confesses to Harry at King's Cross how in his youth he was selfish, wanted glory, and sought escape from the responsibility of having to care for his family (715-716).

Perhaps our knowing how the messy parts of our own lives are also the stuff of sagely and seemingly saintly characters in scriptures and best selling hero tales can help us relax the aggression we hold toward our imperfections and that of others; to help us increase compassion. It reminds me of what Rachel Bergman and Tyler Calver-Thompson expressed in their artist statements for their senior exhibitions. As Tyler said of his self-portraits, "I give you my mistakes, successes and everything in between because they are all the things that make me who I am." It's a relief to hear someone say and celebrate that, isn't it? As for Rachel's statement, she mentions the Japanese ceramic tradition in which vessels with cracks and flaws are not rejected; how the seeming flaw is embraced for it's rich beauty as the artist fills them in with bright, polished gold.

I hope that one day all you once feared or rejected you can love. It's part of what Wendell Berry's Mad Farmer Liberation Front poem means when he says "practice resurrection." It's the wisdom of the prophet Jeremiah when he tells exiled Israelites that if they want creative flourishing and a future with hope. He tells them that though they cannot control their outward circumstance, they can reframe the way they look at things. Jeremiah invites them to do something that won't compute: Love all you fear, resent, and reject. Love the world, Adonai,

and your enemies. Seek the welfare of the city where you are exiled. Pray on its behalf, for your welfare and that of your captors is bound up in each other's. Then will you will have hope for your future.

It reminds me of what C.S. Lewis said to a colleague when asked why he bothers praying amid his wife, Joy's, dying. Lewis replies, "I don't know if prayer changes God, but it changes me." Likewise, when Harry asks Dumbledore if what he is experiencing is real or in his head, Dumbledore replies "If it is your head, Harry, why does that mean it isn't real?"

Hinduism gives us the expression "Die before you die." It's a theme repeated in hero tales, Christianity, other spiritual traditions, and nature itself in which--unlike a death that ends life, there are mini-deaths our whole life long which opens us to life in deeper, richer ways of being. The mystery of paschal, or pesach type dying down involves entry into an adversity which leads to transformation and an entirely new way of being. That is what the hero's journey--including your own, is all about. And often these mini-deaths wrought from life's trials are the leaven which sweeten life. Years from now, when you look back over your youth--including your aches and stumblings, I imagine you will not say "what a horrible life" but will sing *What a Wonderful World*. And having made your peace with whatever--or whomever, you had to make your peace with, including with yourself, may you arrive at mid life with something approximating the last line, in the last page, of the last book on Harry Potter where it reads, "The scar had not pained Harry for nineteen years. All was well."

Before I ask Tony to come up here and help us sing, I want to say something. First, your hero's journey isn't for self-improvement alone. Like spirituality itself, the point isn't self-absorption but self-transcendence. Harry's self-surrender was a selfless love that protected others

in the same way the sacrifice Harry's mother made protected Harry. Second the theme of keeping child-like qualities as you age runs throughout our wisdom readings. Like this one over here (President Brand) with his purple Chuck Taylor's. And whoever plopped a giant knitted spider or socktopus on top of the rock next to Old Sem a couple weeks ago. Don't lose that playfulness.

Finally, the Way of Spiritual Childhood implies an awareness of our littleness before the magnificence of the cosmos. Hang on to that humbling awe, and awareness of that same Magnificence, Beauty, and Life Force breathing in and through you, empowering you in ways that are larger than the sheer will power of your autonomous sense of self. Especially when you're needing to pull a Gandhi by being the change you want to see in the world.

Like the Pakistani U.N. peacekeeper did when he was sent into Rwanda during the genocide of 1994 when so much of world, including the U.S., remained silent. Pakistan was so poor it couldn't afford the expense of outfitting their peacekeepers with guns. Still they took up the mantle of responsibility. As Cornell graduate and U.S. Holocaust Museum Chief of Staff, Will Parsons ('67), put it, when hundreds of Tutsis fled into a church for sanctuary as hundreds of militia with hatchets surrounded the building, this one Pakistani had nothing to defend them with other than standing empty handed in front of the door. This U.N. peacekeeper then said from a strength larger than his fear, "There will be no killing today." And somehow, unlike the other people inside other buildings that were burned; and somehow, unlike the powerful nations of the world which stood passively silent, the littleness of this one man's presence and spirit was huge enough to shift something inside that violent mob causing them to walk away.

In the likeness of this man everywhere I hear Dumbledore saying, “It’s a curious thing, Harry, but perhaps those who are best suited to power are those who have never sought it. Those who, like you, have leadership thrust upon them, and take up the mantle because they must, and find to their own surprise that they wear it well (718).”

Class of 2012: Knowing that the world needs you even if you think yourself too little. Your education is for a purpose larger than self alone, so take up the mantle. Wear it well. Even if your knees shake.

If that means being a teacher who gets to love and learn from the likes of you, then that will be the most gratifying privilege imaginable. If your life would sing by being the head of something like, say, Apple Computers making a gazillion dollars--great. Just remember to feed the hungry, care for the sick, lift up the broken hearted, love your family, and be nice to house elves. Set free the house elves. You can even remember your Hagrids, McGonagalls, Trelauneys, Mad Eye Moodys, Dumbledores, and Snapeses seated over there and the next generations of eager students who will want to wear your robes on this hero’s journey. Because I’m telling you, it feels good to selflessly give. It has everything to do with the unfolding plot and climax of the hero’s quest. Thank you.

[reverence class with Namaste]

Tony, won’t you come up here now, and help us do a little singing [*What a Wonderful World*].

¹ Sacred reading for this service wove together the following sacred texts:

RUMI POEM

A reading from the 13th century Islamic mystical Persian poet, Jalāl ad-Dīn Muḥammad Rūm, known in the West as Rumi, who is among the world's most beloved and passionate of poets.

[read in Arabic then in English]

Why lay yourself on the torturer's rack of the past and future? The mind that tries to shape tomorrow beyond capacities will find no rest.

Be kind to yourself, dear--to our innocent follies. Forget any sounds or touch you knew that did not help you dance. You will come to see that all evolves us.

If you put your heart against the earth with me, in serving every creature, our Beloved will enter you from our sacred realm and we will be, we will be so happy.

From a poem called *Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front* by Wendell Berry

[gentle pause]

Love the quick profit, the annual raise, vacation with pay.

Want more of everything ready-made.

Be afraid to know your neighbors and to die. And you will have a window in your head.

Not even your future will be a mystery any more. Your mind will be punched in a card and shut away in a little drawer.

So, friends, every day do something that won't compute. Love the Lord. Love the world. Work for nothing. Take all that you have and be poor. Love someone who does not deserve it.

Ask the questions that have no answers. Invest in the millenium. Plant sequoias.

Say that your main crop is the forest that you did not plant, that you will not live to harvest.

Say that the leaves are harvested when they have rotted into the mold. Call that profit. Prophesy such returns.

Put your faith in the two inches of humus that will build under the trees every thousand years.

Listen to carrion - put your ear close, and hear the faint chattering of the songs that are to come.

Expect the end of the world. Laugh. Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful though you have considered all the facts.

Go with your love to the fields.

Lie down in the shade.

Rest your head in her lap.

Swear allegiance to what is nighest your thoughts.

As soon as the generals and the politicians can predict the motions of your mind, lose it. Leave it as a sign to mark the false trail, the way you didn't go. Be like the fox who makes more tracks than necessary, some in the wrong direction.

Practice resurrection.

[The Country of Marriage, copyright © 1973 by Wendell Berry]

The Gospel according to Mark (9:30-37)

They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.” But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.

They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the road?”³⁴ But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.” He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.”

Tao Te Ching Chapter 10

Can you coax your mind from its wandering and keep to the original oneness?

Can you let your body become supple as a newborn child's?

Can you cleanse your inner vision until you see nothing but light?

Can you love people and lead them without imposing your will?

Can you deal with the most vital matters by letting events take their course?

Can you step back from your own mind and thus understand all things?

Giving birth and nourishing,

having without possessing,

acting with no expectations,

leading and not trying to control: this is the supreme virtue.

Hebrew Scriptures: Jeremiah 29:7-11

Seek the welfare of the city to which I have sent you into exile, and pray to *ADONAI* on its behalf; for your welfare is bound up in its welfare.’ For this is what *ADONAI-Tzva’ot*, the God of Isra’el, says: ‘Don’t let your prophets who are living among you and your diviners deceive you, and don’t pay attention to the dreams you urge them to dream. For they are prophesying falsely in my name; I have not sent them,’ says *ADONAI*.

“For here is what *ADONAI* says: ‘After Babylon’s seventy years are over, I will remember you and fulfill my good promise to you by bringing you back to this place. For I know what plans I have in mind for you,’ says *ADONAI*, ‘plans for well-being, and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

ⁱⁱ Rowling, J.K., Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows. Arthur A. Levine Books, 2007.

ⁱⁱⁱ May, Gerald, Will and Spirit: A Contemplative Psychology. NY: HarperOne, 1982, p. 4.