

## **Let It Be**

By Jane Coburn

When Michael first asked me to do this talk, I was reluctant and asked him to give me some time to think about it. After a few days, we began an e-mail dialogue about what I might discuss and how it could be tied into Advent. I suggested I use a recent essay I wrote about surrender and acceptance as part of my talk. He replied that surrender...letting go would be a perfect advent topic considering Mary and her unquestioning acceptance of what the angel Gabriel told her would be her fate. I replied by asking if he was comparing me to the Blessed Mother and if so then yes – I would be happy to speak. You see, religious flattery will get you somewhere.

I immediately started singing the Beatles song in my head, “When I find myself in times of trouble, Mother Mary comes to me, speaking words of wisdom...Let it be.” My whole life I have found it hard to let it be. Surely, I could fix everything.

My parents are devout Catholics. When I was young most kids did not attend catechism classes past Confirmation in 7<sup>th</sup> grade – a handful of us were sent to catechism through most of high school. I was part of a small group of girls who had a weekly class in the home of a parishioner. In my freshman year, we had Mrs. Mannell and she gave us gifts at Christmas. Mine was a poster with a lovely picture of a covered bridge and the words, “Slow Me Down Lord” written at the top. God knows what she heard or saw in me, but she was right. I needed to slow down.

My whole life, I’ve been a perfectionist and a person who found her worth through pleasing and doing for others. I have always worried what others thought of me. I have always overbooked and overworked myself. Despite creating impossible expectations, I would then admonish myself if I could not do it all perfectly. I felt guilt about the past and worried about the future. I looked like a person who could do it all, but inside I was crumbling. Almost two and a half years ago, I hit a bottom...emotionally, spiritually, and physically...something had to give.

Up to this point, surrender and acceptance meant failure to me. Hitting bottom can be a real gift because you find yourself forced to surrender and then, if you are lucky, you realize that surrendering is a big win. I started on an amazing spiritual path. My prayers changed. In the past, I would often go days without praying and if I did pray it was in desperation or asking for something. I started to pray differently. I began praying every day. My entire life I have recited The Lord’s Prayer, but it was not until I surrendered that I even truly listened to the words. Now, the first prayer I say upon waking and before my feet hit the ground is, “Thank you God for this day, Thy will be done.” And I actually mean it.

My whole life, I have been a whirlwind of energy and I rarely shut up. I wanted to try meditation, but I thought it would be impossible to stop thinking and just be still. Like most Americans and every mother I know, I spent my life as a whirling dervish multitasking my way through the day. If I was not actively doing something, I felt lazy, bored, or guilt ridden about what I SHOULD be doing. If I did try to relax, my mind

missed the memo and kept running. I thought meditating meant you could not have a thought. If your mind was not completely clear then you were doing it wrong. So, I didn't try often and when I did try, I gave up quickly when thoughts arose as they always did. It turned my attempts at meditation into failure which in my perfectionist mind was not an option.

I watched or heard of others meditating and I was distrustful. Meditation seemed silly or self righteous and I never truly believed these people weren't faking it. After I surrendered and began searching spiritually, I started reading about Buddhism and other Eastern spiritual practices. Later, I was overjoyed to find teachings about the Christian tradition of meditation, a much overlooked part of our history. These writings spoke to me and I realized that the thoughts that arise while trying to quiet my mind are simply thoughts. I can see them, I can reflect on them or let them pass. As Rumi said in his great poem The Guest House, I have begun to learn how to welcome them as guides. When meditating, I feel safe to notice a thought and ask myself, "Why am I having this thought? What does this say about me?"

In time, I have learned that meditation is not just something you do in quiet or on a mountain top. I spend much less time in the past or future and have learned to be present. My meditation practice is helping me pause at any given moment and welcome a feeling, experience it for a few moments, be truly honest with myself about what that feeling is saying about me and then with some deep breaths I can let it go. A friend of mine told me he thought meditation was too passive and not helpful in dealing with his problems. In my experience, meditation has been quite an active way to welcome my feelings and reactions to life, pause, be still and listen helping me to learn and adjust my emotions or behaviors based on what these guests teach me.

Over the past 2 and a half years, through prayer, meditation, yoga, lots of journaling and self examination, but mostly by just getting truly honest with myself, I have learned I can not control anything except my own attitude toward whatever comes my way. I have learned to let it be. I have made a real effort every day to see the blessings in my life. Some days that is harder than others, but they are always there.

As I prepared for this talk over the past week, it became much harder to let go and accept, much harder to see the blessings. My dear friend Joanne was diagnosed with cancer and is undergoing an intense surgery today. On the heels of Joanne's diagnosis, I learned of the massacre in Newtown, CT. How can anyone accept this news. On Friday, I watched the news reports, read people fighting over gun control on Facebook and was filled with anger. How could this happen? How little control we have over our lives, how unfair and senseless this life can be. I could not let it be. I cried, I yelled at the TV and computer, had anguished discussions with Andy.

The next morning, I woke up and I prayed like every other day, "Thank you for this day God, Thy will be done" But, I am not sure how much I meant it. Something made me start to take deep breaths and I began to meditate. As I meditated, I began to think about the day I had ahead of me. The boys and I planned to go visit Joanne and Jody later that

morning. We were bringing her a hospital goody bag and giving her some hugs and lots of love. Joanne is particularly close to my oldest, Austin – a surrogate grandmother to him and she had asked to see him before her surgery.

Next, we'd head to another friend's house. These friends have been struggling with infertility and had asked us to take care of their dog while they took a brief trip. It was a very simple task, but one we would do with love because we know how much these friends love their dog.

Then in the afternoon, Jake had his big holiday concert. Two of Jake's friends were joining us. At 10 and 13, these boys do not particularly enjoy choral concerts, but were coming to support Jake since he, who does not particularly like sports, had cheered on some of their soccer games this fall. Finally, we'd end our night with a fire and a family movie night watching our favorite Christmas movies.

As I lay in bed that morning, I realized my whole day ahead of me would be about friendship and love... and I felt blessed. In the face of my friend's cancer and this horrible tragedy in CT, I knew that I was blessed and that love and friendship is really the only important thing in life. If we face illness or tragedy, it is the love and friendship we've given and received that matters. Each day since, I have not yelled and screamed at the TV or computer. I have quietly prayed that Joanne and all the families in Newtown will feel the love and friendship around them and have some comfort. Let it be.