

Playing to Lose: The Demon of Ambition, The Angel of Faith

I am not a gentle person, though I wish I were. I would like to be the kind of person who, faced with adversity, surrenders to it gracefully and goes about using whatever blessings she has in service to others. “I’m crabby today,” a woman said in a meeting. “Though not,” she amended, looking over at me, “as crabby as you.” Sigh. She’s right. It is hard to imagine anyone could be as crabby as I have been lately.

I get crabby when I try to force my life to be what it isn’t—or when I spend time measuring the distance between the ideal and the real. I was recently advised to articulate my vision and mission and have a goal in each of these areas: spiritual, intellectual, financial, professional, physical and social/recreational. My crabbiness quotient immediately increased. It took me days to understand that it was connected to the “visioning/goal setting process” upon which my friend was encouraging me to embark.

Now that I’ve recognized the problem, I am sighing with relief instead of exasperation. Oh, that again: the hero’s journey. Strap on your gun, get on your horse and head west to El Dorado! Every day in every way I’m getting better and better! Think and grow rich! Now I get it electronically: work from home, enlarge your p*nis, save up to 80% on dental bills. We construct ourselves around the idea of progress. We slice our lives into portions and want to see each piece improve each year. We believe we can affirm our way to better lives...lives without limits.

The model of triumph over adversity locks me into a helpless, driven cycle of effort, failure and despair. I remember how I loved physical therapy sessions during that second hospitalization. Each day, I noticed strength and balance returning to my body; I knew healing was taking place. I no longer have the “exacerbating-remitting” form of MS. Instead, like many people who have had the disease for years, I have “chronic progressive” MS. I no longer get Sick with a capital S. Rather, each year, I notice I can do less than I did the year before. The health insurance company will no longer pay for me to receive physical therapy. I cannot show consistent, measurable improvement. I no longer fit their heroic health care model. If you live long enough, you will have this experience, too.

Faced with an unending series of losses, faced with the impossibility of living a “normal” life, I have one glorious, incredibly powerful and absolutely unpopular option: I

can give up. No amount of effort or action can fix things. That is what incurable means. Oddly enough, though, surrendering to the frustration, pain and deprivation is the best thing I can do for myself.

Recently, driving to yet another meeting, I entertained myself by imagining a performance art piece to be part of my funeral. “Get someone from the circus who spins plates on poles,” I advised my brother later that day, “She goes up in front and starts spinning a bunch of plates. She keeps them spinning and spinning and then, all of a sudden, she lets go. As the plates come crashing to the ground, she flings her arms in the air and grins triumphantly because that’s what it’s going to feel like when I die. I will finally be able to STOP!”

Later still, it occurred to me that I don’t have to wait until I die to stop. I can surrender right now. I suspect that giving up is wonderful because I am surrendering *to* something. I am, to put it traditionally, relaxing into the arms of God. My belief in and understanding of a higher power waxes and wanes. Times in my life when I have not believed in God have been followed by surrender to the idea that (as I told two clean-scrubbed and faintly-shocked Mormon missionaries the other day) it doesn’t matter if there is one or not, I need to believe there is one. I need a God in part because I need the act of giving up to be joyous instead of frightening. When there is a God, I don’t need to be heroic because I am not the star of this show. It is a long, grand, story and I am a bit player. (But, as the saying goes, there are no small parts, only small actors.)

Having let go of the need to make everything come out the Way It Ought To Be, I can relax into what is. I can stop pushing myself and pet the dog instead. It is when I think It is Up to Me to Make Things Right that I am at my most horrible. (Just ask anyone who has been around me for the last month!)

Now here’s the trick: giving up cannot mean giving in. Despite the fact that the insurance company will not pay for physical therapy, I have to keep exercising. Exercising does not help me make progress, but it does help me make the most of the strength and ability I have. If I exercise, I am more comfortable and capable even if, every year, I can do less and less. I have to keep playing, even though I am bound to lose.

My clients with mental illness were examples, for me, of an alternative to our culture's vision of the hero. Their illness and the stigma attached to it, had robbed them of jobs, income, the support of family and friends, feelings of safety and trust in themselves. Still, there they were, exploring and expressing their gifts, serving those around them. It is the heroism of surrender and persistence.

I've realized recently that practicing surrender in a safe environment is one of the principal reasons I make art. It never, never, ever comes out the way I envisioned it. I start working with a vision pulling me forward, but the material surprises me. My own limitations thwart me. I have to adjust the plan, go with the process and find out what happens. While the end result is not what I had in mind, every piece I make is a startling self-portrait in the moment. I am a better person when I am making art because it is my practice in surrender. It is prayer.

Willful being that I am, I need to surrender and surrender and surrender. No sooner do I breathe a sigh of relief at not having to be the One In Control, than I think of something else I want to try to fix. When Alexis was three, she began taking swimming lessons. When it was time to practice her back float, her head bobbed out of the water, her legs kicked, her arms flailed. Most of the little ones in her class had the same reaction. Floating on my back is one of my favorite things. Supported gently, sound muted, eyes closed—I am released from effort. I had forgotten that such trust is learned.

Here I am, child in God's water, flailing and gasping when all I need to do is stop thrashing, breathe gently and be supported.