Chapter 10

VIRTUE #7: WILLFUL SURRENDER

WHEN WE STOP TRYING TO CONTROL EVERYTHING, WE GAIN MORE CONTROL OF THE RIGHT THINGS

At this stage in my career, I spend a fair amount of time consulting and coaching companies and people on the process of corporate and personal transformation. I regularly speak to audiences about what the journey involves, managing expectations, subduing fears, offering hope and solutions, and providing case studies and research that gives their personal experiences context, perspective, and new insights.

In a strategy meeting recently, I listened as business leaders tossed ideas back and forth regarding their current state of affairs in a particular market. It wasn’t insurmountable by any means. Just another storm to weather, as we all must.

After some time, I noticed that they hadn’t actually gotten to the bottom of the issue. Before we could overcome anything,
we had to acknowledge the problem directly, and that hadn’t happened yet.

I paused the meeting and explained that change requires a full understanding of the present moment and what brought us here. We couldn’t strengthen their presence in that market without addressing what had weakened it in the first place. In simple terms, mapping transformation is like using GPS in your car: both a starting point and a destination are required to create the ideal route, and it takes time and plenty of maneuvers to get there. If we refuse to type in where we really are, we’ll never be able to get where we’re going.

In this situation, they needed to know where they were starting as well as how they had gotten there to begin with. So I asked them what the real problem might be, hoping to move the conversation in a more productive direction. Great discussion ensued, but people were nervous to say what the real problems were. Frustratingly, the strength to confront our present realities doesn’t appear in a moment, even when we are confronted directly ourselves. Arriving at that point is also a part of the transformative process and these vital virtues certainly aid us in getting there.

As pockets of people stood around chatting after the meeting, a senior executive wisely observed, “Your question created a lot of discussion, but we didn’t actually answer the question.” Then he thought for a moment and added, “I guess, if we were to answer it truthfully, it could take some of us to quite a dark place.”

He was right, and follow up discussions certainly needed to happen to help the right people get there. My response to him was the dark is not a bad starting point. When starting points
are pain points—great! Embrace them. Confront them. When we face our pain points directly, transformation can begin. If we can’t face them, we’ll fail. After all, fertilizer and rain grow more trees than dry ground and clear skies. And we all get our fair share of dirt and fertilizer thrown at us in life.

There is power in a seed being dropped into the dirt, covered in darkness, manure, and rain. Something good happens because of that. But sometimes it feels, while we are lying dormant in the dark, that perhaps nothing will ever come of it. In order to absorb the nutrients of the soil and allow seasons of growth to manifest, the seed must surrender its outer shell. In our case, we must let the ego go.

Even when a tree has grown up tall and strong, there are seasons of barrenness when the leaves must fall and the branches get trimmed back. But it’s always followed by a new season, new life, and new growth.

Unfortunately, when we cannot admit the reality of our struggles, we prioritize that tough outer shell of ego and appearances over the opportunity for new growth. Sometimes we keep marching confidently ahead while still tucked into that shell, expending great effort to ignore our true reality. Then we wonder why we’re going around in circles instead of reaching our goals.

Removing the reality of our present moment only disempowers us to change it. While it might feel easier to distract from present pain, it is still just a distraction. We might repeat what worked in the past or devote energy to wishful thinking—all of which can feel as though we’re employing solutions. But it’s superficial discussion without any answers. It’s being buried without anchoring our roots for growth.
Even when it feels like we have faced nothing but a perpetual, miserable winter, we can still choose a noble and strong response. We can face present realities with heads held high and shoulders squared, empowered by the paradox that the struggle is part of our joy, and that we must lose a sense of control of our lives in order to more fully gain it. And trust me. Owning your pain points can certainly leave you feeling like you have less control. That’s often why we hide from it.

“When ego is lost, limit is lost. You become infinite, kind and beautiful.”—Yogi Bhajan

THE NATURE OF SURRENDER

In the previous chapters, we’ve seen just how important it is to take full responsibility for our lives, adapting to and drawing strength from our circumstances. We’ve seen that time and chance happen to all of us, leaving us without total control of what may be happening in our lives. All the while, we remain empowered to respond well and exercise the control we do have. In light of our limited control, our lives demand the constant emotional work of surrender, relinquishing our fight against what cannot be won and simultaneously maximizing control of what can be.

Surrender does not mean giving up—in fact, it’s quite the opposite. Similar to letting go of the past, surrender to the present is a confrontational activity that demands more of us than perhaps anything else. At the same time, when we choose to surrender to our present reality, it is a virtue of peace and freedom.

Within chronic struggle and a persistent challenge, struggling to gain control of external factors can be exhausting, espe-
cially if it is a fight against the truth of our reality. Surrender is an active choice to let go of the ego-driven need for control, allowing us to change our underlying beliefs about ourselves, our circumstances, and ultimately, our future.

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THE EGO AND A DISTORTED VIEW OF SELF

From a psychoanalytical perspective, ego is the part of the mind that mediates between the conscious and unconscious, responsible for testing reality and creating personal identity. Freud has many layers of definitions of ego, of course, and then there is the sense of self-esteem or self-importance that we often associate with the word.

When I speak of ego, however, it is from a much simpler place. The ego that threatens our ability to surrender is an unhealthy form of self-protection. If someone is egotistical, they’re driven by a superiority complex and a sense of self-importance. To let that go is to adjust the distorted sense of identity that drives our own interests above others. It is to let go of the false interpretation that we are more important than we are, more right than we are, more entitled than we are, or that our feelings and agenda are more important than reality.

Ego skews the facts to fit its own interpretation. Surrender is a willingness to adjust, to accommodate truth, and reflect reality. It demands humility. The ego is a broken tool. Refusing to face the dark corners of our lives is valuing our own present self-
interest over future possibilities. This behavior does not protect or improve us at all. The only way to reach a better future is to align with reality, relinquishing our stubborn and selfish ego and putting truth front and center, no matter how painful it is. If we deny ourselves the true nature of the present, we deny ourselves the growth it can create in the future.

While some expressions of ego make us bigger than we are, others diminish us, convincing us that we deserve nothing or are less than who we really are. In some of the darkest days of depression I have experienced, a distorted sense of self convinced me that my emotional numbness was the safest choice I could hold to. I embraced my vulnerability too much without acknowledging any of my strengths. I distorted and diminished my perception of self and reality in ways that minimized it and thus minimized my control of it. In this way, ego is tied to the imposter as much as it is to arrogance.

Both extremes are dangerous in what they produce, and both are equally unrealistic in their expression.

The real self exists comfortably in a state of being both nothing and everything. It balances the incredible miracle of who we are, with the flaws, imperfections, and limited control that we possess. When either of those sides become distorted, we have chosen the comfort of ego over the challenge of surrender.

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SUNK COST AND A DISTORTED VIEW OF THE PRESENT

I once watched my stepdad grimace as he sat down at the kitchen table with the most foul-smelling fish pie I’ve ever come across in my life. Every bite that he took looked painful. I asked him what he was doing, and he cringed as he replied, “I bought it and don’t want it to go to waste.” Even worse, it had been on sale for about fifty cents.

How often do we feel obligated to get value out of what we’ve sunk time and money into, long after the value is gone? Far beyond fish pie, we do this in our beliefs, our personal investments, and our projects. Companies pour thousands of dollars, sometimes millions, into projects that have failed, and will keep investing in them for thousands more, all for fear of losing what has already been spent.

Behavioral economists refer to this as *sunk cost fallacy*. When people continue with a behavior or plan beyond its value to them, it’s typically because of previously invested time, money, or effort.

Christopher Olivola, an assistant professor of marketing at Carnegie Mellon Tepper School of Business, conducted a series of experiments constructed to measure the extent to which sunk cost could sway people into making hypothetical decisions. He said this: “Nearly all across the board, the results affirmed the existence and strength of the phenomenon, both as it applies to individuals and to others.”

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56 Ibid.
In one scenario, people were asked to imagine if they were accidentally scheduled to take two trips: one to Montreal and one to Cancun during the same weekend, forcing them to choose one. When they were told that one flight cost $200 and the other $800, people were significantly more likely to opt for the pricier trip, even if they would have preferred the cheaper destination.

In another experiment, participants were asked to imagine that they felt full after eating a few bites of rich cake at a potluck party. Some were told that the cake had been purchased on sale at a local bakery, while others were told the cake was expensive and had come from a shop almost an hour away. Some were told to imagine that they had purchased the cake, and some were told that someone else brought it. Then all were asked whether they would finish the cake despite feeling full. Regardless of who had “bought” the imaginary cake, participants were far more likely to say they’d keep eating the expensive cake compared to the cheaper one, even if they were full.

We have an inbuilt mechanism within us that tries to get the maximum value out of things, and another to avoid loss whenever possible. When those mechanisms are at war, we’re left with the sunk cost fallacy. We’re doing what we can to avoid loss of what has already been invested, even when it creates more loss than surrender and redirection might.

We persist even when it ceases to return benefits, simply because of what it meant to us in the past. And the cost doesn’t have to be great for this to be true, either. Yet when we cling unhealthily to the past, we’re likely to miss present opportunities and future possibilities.

On a deeper level, the fear may simply be of acknowledging
their earlier missteps. We refuse to confront the problems in our relationships that have died long ago, unloved and unhappy, but afraid of the alternative. We harbor secret challenges and internal conflicts that we battle day after day—low self-esteem, quiet depression, addiction, heartaches, heartbreak, disappointment, uncertainties, and wounds that refuse to heal—yet say “I’m fine” over and over again, continuing along the same path we’ve followed for years.

The more we invest in something emotionally, the harder it is to abandon it. Once we’ve put our heart and soul into something, we don’t want to admit when it’s time to move on. We want to save face—to believe that it’s going to work, not because of where it’s taking us but because of what we’ve put into it.

This, at its core, is ego. It’s a distorted view of reality that tells us doing what we’ve done will get us something other than what we’ve already gotten.

In its place, surrender asks us to admit that we don’t have all the answers and that we are going to need help.

If a market fluctuates, a regulation changes, or a disruption arises, a business that does not adapt will not make it much further. The same applies to us in life. Life changes and takes us along paths that we cannot plan for. Surrendering to present reality allows us to save time, energy, effort, resources, heart, soul, and identity—paradoxically, through the act of losing it.

Surrender isn’t giving up on the future, but letting go of our illusions.
THE PRACTICE OF SURRENDER

How can we drive toward achievement while surrendering to contentment in present circumstances? That feels like a contradiction, doesn’t it? But it’s not. It is a paradox in the same way that we must break muscles down in order to build them up, or to swing a golf club downward in order to hit a ball up in the air, or to step away from the hoop to rebound a basketball.

It is a paradox in the vein of the biblical teaching—lose your life to find it, take the yoke when you feel weighted down. It is the child who is nothing in terms of capability or strength, but everything to her parents.

As we build up the muscles of these virtues, their own apparent paradoxes emerge. Urgency couples with patience, a pursuit of the known supports our faith in the unknown, and a strong sense of desire colors our efforts to release, surrender, and work for our past, present, and future moments, respectively. If our vision is worth pursuing, these virtues interact with much less friction than it seems they would.

When we know what purpose we’re driving toward, then it becomes natural for us to let go of some things and grab on to others. To nurture some qualities and temper others. The great balancing act, then, requires identifying a clear vision and keeping it in our sights even as it changes over time.

Viktor Frankl compares the journey of success to the emotion of happiness:

“Don’t aim at success. The more you make it a target, the more you’re going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued. It must ensue. It only does so as an unintended side
effect of one’s dedication to a cause greater than oneself, or is the byproduct of one’s surrender to a person other than oneself. Happiness must happen, and the same holds for success. You have to let it happen.”

Surrender brings us closer to our desires, often because it asks us to relinquish what has held our attention in place of the steps we must take toward our vision. The white-knuckled grip that we keep on our problems sends them spiraling out of control, even though we desperately want the opposite.

Surrender isn’t giving up on the future, but letting go of our illusions. Radical acceptance of the present, including all of its struggles, is the only way to find a path forward out of our pain points. This is a surrender of our need to control everything, precisely so we can focus control on ourselves.

Acknowledging our own mistakes and imperfections is an act of surrendering the ego. Forgiveness and apologies surrender the past. And contentment surrenders comparison in favor of service, humility, and gratitude.

**COMPARISON: THIEF OF JOY AND ENEMY OF SURRENDER**

Astronomers have long proposed that the naked human eye can see about five thousand stars in the dark, and about a hundred from a brightly lit street. But with the amplification of telescopes, Australian astronomers measured the brightness of all galaxies in one sector of the cosmos, then calculated how many stars that space must contain. At a gathering of the

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International Astronomical Union conference in Sydney, they presented the number: seventy-six trillion, or a seven followed by twenty-two zeros.\textsuperscript{58}

For context, that’s more stars in space than the number of grains of sand in all of Earth’s beaches and deserts combined. And that’s just what’s visible within the range of our current telescopes.

If we then take that unfathomable number and acknowledge that many of them will have planets just as our sun does, the size of the universe becomes completely incomprehensible.

Now, amongst the infinite amount of time and space that exists among near numberless scores of stars, and consider that we are each one speck of life on one of those many planets. It’s humbling, isn’t it? Comparison would put us in the context of the stars—or our colleagues, our neighbors, or the leaders in our fields—and say that we’re less than.

Yet, we are quite something, aren’t we?

Before my son was diagnosed with nephrotic syndrome, I never once thought about his kidneys, or mine. Yet there they were, cleansing my body on a consistent basis. When was the last time that you were consciously grateful for your kidneys, without a sudden failure to call your attention to it? Or your liver or spleen or pancreas? Often, without the wake-up call of a sudden illness or the constant presence of something chronic, we take our bodies for granted, instead of respecting the living miracles that they are.

For every new model of a camera that comes out, we have our own self-correcting lenses with an automatic focus found in our eyes. For every new car that we’re so proud to purchase, they still get scratched and dented, while our skin and our bones self-heal under nearly any circumstance. We are simply incredible.

Life is in your beating heart, against all of the millions-to-one odds that you could come into being at the end of a long line of millions-to-one odds that your ancestry came into being. Even if we have nothing but the love of people close to us, we are miraculous, and a culmination of countless miracles.

Comparison would have us focus only on our flaws—the nothingness in the paradox of mankind without the hope and optimism of the other side. Our everythingness. Yet true change can only come to us when we accept the paradox that we are nothing and everything at once, just as joy and suffering are two sides of the same reality.

Let’s see ourselves and others all as delicious confections of pure potential, delicately wrapped in imperfection and vulnerability. Then calmly watch comparison and insecurities melt away.

We will become liberated to reach new heights, and we will help others to do the same. We could then humbly let go of our excessive need for control and feel greater peace of mind. We would learn to surrender our illusions with courage and become empowered to shape our reality into something far brighter. A more peaceful now and the thrill of a brighter future ahead is certainly something to be thankful for.

Gratitude becomes fuel for our transformation, vision accel-
erates it, and good character carries it through to realization, ensuring bumps in the road don’t halt our progress.

THE UNNECESSARY FEAR OF LOSS

There is nothing my younger children love more than jumping into my bed to have cuddles while we watch their favorite cartoons. All of them need to rest their head on my arms, which I stretch out wide while they snuggle in close. Even our dog gets in on the action and finds her rightful place curled up on my legs. I think this is one of the most rewarding moments of my day, and I’m pleased to say, it happens a lot.

If there is any victory in life that I’ve been able to claim, it is that my relationship with my children is my greatest success. I love those kids more than any human expression could possibly convey.

Ironically, in spite of the strong foundations, great relationships, fond memories, fun times, support, sacrifice, and overwhelming love shared, my greatest fear is ending up with broken relationships with my children like my dad has with his. The thought scares me to this day. It is certainly unnecessary, but it definitely fueled my efforts in the past. Past experience for me has created an unfounded fear of loss.

In Daniel Kahneman’s book Thinking, Fast and Slow, he explains that all decisions involve uncertainty about the future, and in response, the human brain has evolved an automatic and unconscious system to protect against potential loss. Our default setting becomes a focus on the loss rather than potential future gains. Of our naturally inclined perspectives, he writes:

“Organisms have placed more urgency on avoiding threats than
they did on maximizing opportunities, and these are more likely to be passed on in our genes. Over time, the prospect of loss has become a more powerful motivator to our behavior than the promise of gain. Wherever possible, we try to avoid losses of any kind, and when comparing losses to gains, we don’t treat them equally.”

So, let’s take a moment to balance the scales. We face both threat and opportunity all the time. But past threats don’t need to cloud our present opportunities.

**JOY IN THE ACT OF SURRENDER**

Viktor Frankl once said that the central theme of existentialism is “to live is to suffer, and to survive is to find meaning in the suffering.” I would add to that, that to thrive is to find joy in the meaning. In living, we suffer. In survival, we find meaning. In the discovery of meaning, we thrive.

The level of surrender that growth requires takes great courage.

Suffering exists. There will be mistakes, pain, and adversity lurking when we turn to face our pain points. But we are miracles of creation, destined to step forward in faith, unshackled by the past and firm in our vision of the future. We are given resources of discipline and intellect, immersed in love and tempered by patience. We are an interconnected garden marked by time and chance, nurtured by suffering and weathered in adversity. In our individual weaknesses, we are collectively strong. In our personal imperfections, we are unitedly complete.

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We are paradoxes of joy and adversity, and that is the most empowering truth of all.

**THE MIRACULOUS SELF**

For the purposes of this book, look inward one final time—be honest about who you are, with all of your strengths and weaknesses on display. Then admire them. You are miraculous, in fantastic circumstances. And there is so much more joy for you to know and share.

Ask yourself the following questions:

- What are some illusions that I hold on to?
- How can I let them go?
- How will letting go of pretense and confronting my pain points give me greater strength?
- If this makes me feel vulnerable—how will I manage that and still take action?
- What are some examples of achievements, big or small, that I have experienced that can encourage me to move forward?
- Who can I turn to for extra strength if I need it?
- Is there someone I can support in this process?