

The Final Drive

Harold Walter Sibley was my grandfather –
and a World War II veteran.

As a new recruit in 1942, he noticed a
poster seeking men from the “occupational range of
lumberjacks, forest rangers,
hunters, northwoodsmen,
game wardens, prospectors, and explorers.”

In other words, they were looking for some rugged guys.

Harold was a rugged guy. He had been captain of his high school
football team and a grave digger at the cemetery his father ran.

However, before the war,

Harold was working for AC Spark Plug—
one of many companies supplying the automotive industry
in the Detroit area where he lived.

Not deterred by his job history, Harold wanted the
bump in pay this ad promised and applied for the unit.

And so, Harold became a part of the First Special Service Forces,
the forerunner of today’s Green Beret’s.

Being a member of “the Force”—as the guys referred to it—
would mark the rest of his life.

The Force is primarily remembered for their actions during the
winter of 1942/3.

Specially trained in mountain warfare,
they were able to capture mountain top strongholds
where others had failed.

But the casualties were staggering—
losing more than 50% of their men.

Of the 300 men in Harold's original company,
only 50 men would return to the US at the end of the war.

Harold not only survived, he returned without major injury.

Of course, all of this happened long before I had been born.

By the time I came along decades later,
what I knew of my grandfather was that
every August he spent a week at his army reunion.

The service he gave to this nation rightly imbued him with a life-long
sense of pride.

But, the Force was by no means the only love in Harold's life.

Grandpa *LOVED* cars.

That pre-war job at AC Spark Plug was followed by
post-war jobs at Baldwin Rubber and then
nearly two decades at GM.

But it was not simply that Harold worked in the automotive industry,
he loved to drive and to care for his own car.

The love of cars started young. Very young.

Although his father had accidentally
run over 2-year-old Harold's leg with the car, there is a
photo of a 3-year old Harold sitting
wide-grinned behind the wheel of his father's car.

By 16, Harold was driving his parent's car and
working part-time at a local store which happened to be
located beside a body shop.

This gave Harold an idea.

At a time when 95% of the cars on the road were black,
Harold saved his money, drove his parent's car to the body shop,

and had it painted red.
Facing his mother's displeasure,
Harold saved his money again and had
the car re-painted black.

Changing strategies, Harold saved his money once more and
bought his own car—

a jalopy with a rumble seat.

In this car, he courted my grandmother, Betty.

Driving with her to dance hall after dance hall
to enjoy the big band music that he loved.

Then came the war. He left his new bride and his car and went to serve.

He came back. And my grandmother was still there.

But his car was not.

During the war, his father had sold it to a missionary who needed it.

Harold accepted this and bought another car.

Clearly, I admire and love my grandfather very much.

He passed away several years ago in 2008.

When I learned that I would be preaching today
on Veteran's Day weekend, I immediately thought of him.

It is an easy move to connect the willingness to serve one's nation
with this month's theme of surrender and sacrifice.

By serving in the military,

the men and women of the armed forces have been
willing to sacrifice everything for their country and/or
the ideals for which they understand this country to stand.

Regardless of how a person may feel about

the use of militaristic force in general

or the use of the military in a particular conflict,
the willingness of our veterans to sacrifice their time,
their bodies, and even their lives is sobering.

Sacrifice is not easy. Surrender is not easy.

By definition, to surrender is to give up something, to let it go.

Of course, sometimes surrendering is easier than at other times.

Surrendering in an arm-wrestling match
or another kind of game is relatively easy for most of us.

But sometimes we are asked to surrender something of
great value or importance to us.

What have you had to surrender? To let go of?

Let's go back to my grandpa.

One of my earliest memories was driving with him in a
1978 special edition gold Trans Am with T-tops.

As a GM employee, he had won the rights to buy one of these cars.

He bought with the intention to resell it for a profit.

But, as he had to hold on to it for a few months,
he gave the grandkids short rides around town.

However, us grandkids knew that whenever we
rode in *Grandpa's* car, we better not ever, ever make a mess.

Harold kept his cars immaculately clean—

so much so that his local GM dealer would call
asking whether Harold was ready to trade-in his car yet.

When Harold retired from GM,

he and my grandma began to winter in Florida.

For over twenty years, he drove back and forth

with pleasure from Michigan to Florida every year.

Then he began to have trouble with his eyes.

He was diagnosed with macular degeneration.

Slowly the center of his vision began to blur.

What began as a small blurry spot gradually became
a larger black dot obscuring his vision.

At first, he continued to drive during the day,
but became increasingly anxious to avoid driving at night.
He was being cautious, but did not want to stop driving.

Grandpa *loved* to drive.

I think we have all heard the stories about elderly drivers
whose health in some way interferes with their ability to safely drive.
My family and I were worried.
Would Harold become one of those stories?
Would he stop driving?

There began to be close calls.
Their condo in Florida abutted a busy divided highway.
Driving here was difficult and errors could be costly.

One day, there was a *very* close call.
Another car came harrowingly near to hitting Harold's car
. . . . to hitting the passenger side where my Grandmother Betty sat.

Harold and Betty had been sweethearts since before the war.
They had endured months of separation.
They had struggled with infertility before adopting two children.
They had walked with their son along a dark path of drug
addiction.

They had laughed and loved and lived together
for nearly 60 years.

Grandpa loved to drive. But he loved Betty more.

They arrived home from that very close call.

Harold put the car keys on the kitchen table and
announced that he would not drive anymore.
And he did not.

He surrendered.

What enables us to surrender something of great value to us?

I want to suggest that the ability to surrender is a holy practice.

As the description of the monthly theme explains,
the term sacrifice comes from the root word *sacra*
from which the word sacred is also drawn.

In this sense, to sacrifice is to make sacred or to make holy.

While sacrifice certainly entails a loss or a letting go,
it can also a moment of coming face to face
with what is sacred and holy for you.

In December of 2000, the country was exhausted by
weeks of ballot recounts in Florida and
a complicated legal battle between Republicans and Democrats.
Into this contentious, fractured space of partisan conflict,
Al Gore delivered his concession speech.

Today's reading only reflected parts of the speech.

In choosing the sections that I did, I hoped to
convey what I found to be a powerful
example of a difficult surrender.

He disagreed with the Supreme Court decision.

He was disappointed by the result.

He held on to the reality of differences
between he and George W. Bush.

And yet, he conceded "for the sake of our unity of the people
and the strength of our democracy."

His country and the institutions of democracy were more important and sacred to him than becoming the president.

He wanted to be president, but he sacrificed this possibility in the face of the partisan rancor that threatened something even more precious and sacred to him.

Surrender is not easy and can take great courage.

In the first reading, poet Denise Levertov re-imagines the biblical story of Mary receiving the news that she was to be the mother of Jesus.

Western art and hymns have long taught us to see a Mary who meekly and quietly accepted her fate. She is portrayed as a vessel for the (male) God to do what he would with her.

This message of womanly obedience to the (male) orders that come from above has too often been used to justify gender inequality and violence against women.

To just do what you are told and “surrender” is *coercion*. Such obedience is not the holy work of making sacred choices about living a life of love and justice.

And so, Levertov pushes back against this image of a meek, coerced Mary.

Rather, she writes:

*No one mentions
courage.*

*The engendering Spirit
did not enter her without consent.*

God waited.

*She was free
to accept or to refuse, choice
integral to humanness.*

Mary has a choice whether or not to surrender
to God's idea that she become the Mother of Jesus.
In Levertov's picture, Mary does not
submit with gritted teeth, raging, coerced,
but instead makes a choice of tremendous courage,
consenting to become a part of a sacred story.

So also, our own choices about what we hold on to and
what we surrender shape the sacred story of our lives.
Surrender and sacrifice may seem like
lofty words far removed from the
everyday choices that we make in our lives.
They may seem to be more befitting for
a politician's speech, a veteran's life, or a biblical figure
than to describe what we do in our daily lives.

Our lives are full of choices on how we spend
our time, our money, our energy.
All of these are limited.
We have 24 hours in a day.
We have bank accounts and economic resources
which can only go so far.
We grow tired and need to
eat, sleep, or reach out for a hug.

Because we are limited,
we cannot do everything we want to do.
We cannot buy everything that we want to have.

We cannot keep on going without stopping—
even when we have more to do.

Day after day we have to choose.

Should I spend another hour at work
or make it home for dinner with the family?

Should I stop and let my body rest
or go out to meet a friend?

Should I buy the new iPhone
or should I try to pay down the credit card?

Even in our desires to do good,
we have to make choices.

Do we have the extra money to make a charitable donation
or should we save it in case the furnace
does not make it through the winter?

Do I make one large charitable gift to this organization
or do I give less money to more groups?

Is it better to spend Saturday morning volunteering
or at home with my spouse?

Daily we make choices that pick one path over another.

Certainly many of these choices are small—
do I do laundry today or tomorrow?

Do I eat waffles or pancakes for breakfast?

But sometimes, these everyday choices are
also the ones that shape our lives in lasting ways—

Do I sign up for the extra pay that poster is offering?

Can I keep driving the car or is it getting too dangerous to drive?

In our opening words, we read together,

“Holding reality and possibility together is
the holy hope filled work of humanity.”

Our lives are shaped both by the reality of our limits

as well as the possibilities for our future.
Sometimes the reality of our failing eyes, a close election,
or our limited resources of time, money, or energy
leads us to the sacred work of surrendering.

In surrendering, we *are* letting go of something.

But, we need not see all such surrender as
a gritted teeth sacrifice that undermines the humanness of choice.

Yes, sacrifice and surrendering are marked by loss.
But they are also the choices which illumine
what is sacred and holy to us.

Holding up the importance of democracy,
Gore surrendered the possibility of becoming president.

Unwilling to risk his beloved wife's safety,
Harold surrendered the car keys.

Our reality is that we live within limits and
we have to make choices about how we are going to
spend our time, our money, our energy.

Inevitably, we will have to let go of some possibilities.
We will face times of sacrifice.

We will sometimes have to surrender.

And, this can be hard and
leave us grieving the loss.

At the same time, we can recognize such difficult choices as
the "holy hope filled work of humanity".

For when we choose to surrender something of love or value,
we may also find that our consent illumines
the holy for us in a whole new way.

We are opened to see anew
what is truly sacred and worth holding on to.

Excerpts from "Annunciation" in *Breathing the Water*
By Denise Levertov

We know the scene: the room, variously furnished,
almost always a lectern, a book; always
the tall lily.

Arrived on solemn grandeur of great wings,
the angelic ambassador, standing or hovering,
whom she acknowledges, a guest.

But we are told of meek obedience. No one mentions
courage.

The engendering Spirit
did not enter her without consent.
God waited.

She was free
to accept or to refuse, choice
integral to humanness.

This was the minute no one speaks of,
when she could still refuse.

A breath unbreathed,
Spirit,
suspended,
waiting.

She did not cry, "I cannot, I am not worthy,"
nor "I have not the strength."

She did not submit with gritted teeth,
raging, coerced.

Bravest of all humans,
consent illumined her.

The room filled with its light,
the lily glowed in it,

and the iridescent wings.

Consent,
courage unparalleled,
opened her utterly.

Al Gore, Concession Speech to George W. Bush, December, 13, 2000
excerpted

Almost a century and a half ago, Senator Stephen Douglas told Abraham Lincoln, who had just defeated him for the presidency, ``Partisan feeling must yield to patriotism. I'm with you, Mr. President, and God bless you."

Well, in that same spirit, I say to President-elect Bush that what remains of partisan rancor must now be put aside, and may God bless his stewardship of this country.

Neither he nor I anticipated this long and difficult road. Certainly neither of us wanted it to happen. Yet it came, and now it has ended, resolved, as it must be resolved, through the honored institutions of our democracy.

Now the U.S. Supreme Court has spoken. Let there be no doubt, while I strongly disagree with the court's decision, I accept it. [...] And tonight, for the sake of our unity of the people and the strength of our democracy, I offer my concession.

Other disputes have dragged on for weeks before reaching resolution. And each time, both the victor and the vanquished have accepted the result peacefully and in the spirit of reconciliation.

So let it be with us. I know that many of my supporters are disappointed. I am too. But our disappointment must be overcome by our love of country.

And while there will be time enough to debate our continuing differences, now is the time to recognize that that which unites us is greater than that which divides us.