

QUITTING vs. SURRENDERING

Dear Ones -

Somebody asked me the other day, on my book tour, whether she should continue laboring over a frustrating creative project she's been working hard on, or whether she should quit. She was bored and frustrated with the work, and wanted to move onto something new, but she didn't want to be a "quitter".

Was it time to work harder? Or time to let it go?

I've gotten this question sometimes, too, in regards to relationships — when people come to me wondering if they should stay in a marriage and fight to the death for it, or if it's maybe time to give up and move on.

I've also gotten this question about jobs and careers that people are struggling through: Should I quit, or should I stick with it, and make it work?

Time to move to a new town, or should I stay put?

Push through, or give up?

Here's the answer: I HAVE NO IDEA.

Or, to put it perhaps more accurately: IT DEPENDS.

The thing is, there is always a good argument to be made on both sides, right? We could come up with hundreds of examples to support the case for quitting, and the case for staying in the game and fighting.

I can show you artists and writers who found success because they stuck with a project despite how difficult it was, and I can show you artists and writers who liberated themselves by giving up on an endeavor that wasn't working, so they could move on to better things.

I can show you marriages where the couple decided to stick with their vows despite betrayal, anguish, and confusion — and years later, they were so happy they held onto each other. But I can show you marriages, also, that really needed to end — and years later, both parties were so glad they split.

I myself have faced this kind of question so many times, in so many realms of life. Do I put my head down and fight, or do I give up and move on?

All I can tell you is that it really seems to help me decide what to do, if I consider the question in terms of "quitting" vs. "surrendering".

The words are worlds apart.

Quitting is when you just plain give up. Something is hard, it's boring, it sucks, you're sick of it, and you simply don't feel like doing it anymore. Quitting is what I do just about every time I go to the gym —

when I promise myself that I will stay for an hour, and after 15 minutes on the treadmill, I'm like, "Yeah, well, that's basically good enough", and then I go get myself some ice cream as a reward, and tell myself some lie about how diligent I am. Am I walking out of the gym because I have pushed myself to the limit? Because I've reached the end of my power? Nah. I'm walking out of the gym because I don't feel like doing it today. That's quitting.

In more serious terms, I have quit relationships and friendships at times, because I didn't feel like doing the work needed to save us — or because the work scared me, or because I just couldn't deal with having to face some really difficult conversations again.

I've never been proud of myself for anything that I ever quit. Because quitting is lazy. Because quitting is just a lazy story that you make up about how you've done all you can do — when secretly you know damn well that you haven't done all you can do. Quitting is giving up on yourself — a kind of self-betrayal, and often a kind of self-hatred. You sabotage your life every time you quit.

Not to say that we should beat ourselves up about this! (We've all been quitters in our lives at times! We are only human! We will probably quit again in the future! People get tired of stuff! It's totally normal!) But let's call it what it is: You will know that you are quitting on something when your justifications sound like bullshit, even to your own ears.

Surrender is something else entirely.

Surrender is what happens when you come to the end of your power. Surrender is what happens when you have searched to the bottom of your soul and found out this truth — which is that you really can't do this thing anymore. Surrender is what happens when you don't have any more ideas for how to fix everything. Surrender is what happens when none of your survival strategies work anymore — and your playbook is out of pages. Surrender is what happens when you turn it all over to God. You release your grip on the thing. You stop white-knucking it. You stop pretending things are great when things are actually horrible. You stop putting on a fake face, or glossing over the problem, or lying. You face the truth that you are not the most powerful force in the universe. You turn it over to fate. You exhale, and let go.

There is always grace in surrender. There is always truth in surrender. There is always a great deal of human dignity in surrender. And what happens next is often very beautiful. You crack open because you have stopped fighting and pretending, and once you do that...anything whatsoever can now occur. Sometimes your true fate can only find you after you have surrendered. As Richard from Texas taught me about cracking yourself open in surrender...well, that where God can rush in. The universe can sometimes only work through you once you have surrendered.

Our friend Pastor Rob Bell has pointed out that — if you go to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting — you will see a room full of people who have surrendered. Everyone in there has reached the end of their power. That's why those rooms shimmer with real, painful, deep grace. Those are rooms filled with people who are saying, "I have nothing left to offer this problem. I'm at the end of myself. I don't know what happens now. Help me."

Anyone who has ever walked into a therapist's office for the first time, or a psychiatrist's office, is in a moment of beautiful surrender. ("I have nothing left to offer this problem. I'm at the end of myself. I don't know what happens now. Help me.") Anyone who has ever knocked on the door of a women's emergency shelter in the middle of the night has surrendered. Anybody who ever inched back into a church after years spent away from worship, has surrendered. (And for that matter, anybody who has ever backed out of their church after years of devoted participation, because their hearts can no longer accept the bullshit and the hypocrisy, has also surrendered.) Anybody who has ever picked up the phone to call hospice has surrendered. Anybody who has ever decided to cut off contact with somebody whom they love with all their heart — but that person is an addict, or violent, or a thief, or a liar, or abusive, or has been lost to a cult, or has turned hateful — is in a state of surrender.

Divorce courts are filled with people who have surrendered — people who have reached the end of their power. As dreadful and scary as divorce court was for me, I witnessed and experienced real grace unfolding there. I myself had to surrender to divorce court (and to the universe) and to completely let go of my power when I left my marriage. And although it was painful, there was certainly nothing lazy about it. I had reached the end of myself. I had no fresh ideas for how to make this relationship work. I was empty, and cracked open. I might as well have been in a temple, for how deeply I was changed by the experience of divorce court. What happened next was nothing less than the unfolding of an entirely new life.

I have quit on things, and I have surrendered on things...and there is a world of difference between them.

So when you ask me: "Should I give up, or should I continue?", my answer can only be, "I don't know."

I CAN'T know, because I'm not inside your head. I don't know your history, and I don't know your potential.

But I do know this: I do know that you need to figure out for yourself if you are quitting or surrendering — and that only you can answer that question.

If you are quitting, you won't be happy about it later — I can promise you that. (And I'll give you a hint: If you have a track record of never finishing anything, or never sticking with anything or anybody, it's very likely that you have a habit of quitting. Maybe it's time to change that. If that is the case, I would suggest maybe staying with the problem a little longer — if only as a change of pace, and as a science experiment upon your own life. Might do you good to see something through for once.)

If you are surrendering, on the other hand, everything will be OK. (And I'll give you a hint: If you have a track record of seeing things through at all costs, and fighting to death to try to make impossible situations work — even if it ruins your life and causes you to have endless nervous breakdowns — then it's very likely that you are in the habit of martyrdom. Maybe it's time to change that. Maybe you need to learn how to let go. If that is the case, well, maybe it's time you gave surrender a try — again, just as a science experiment on your own life.)

And if you can't tell the difference yet between quitting and surrendering, or if you aren't certain which one you are doing...well, that's OK — you don't need to decide today. You don't even need to decide this YEAR. But you do need to keep asking yourself what's really going on here. And you do need to look for help, if you're having trouble sorting it all out. And you will need a lot of honesty and rigorous self-accountability, in order to make sure that you aren't bullshitting yourself or selling yourself out. And you will need to explore these questions with sobriety and courage.

And one way or another — whatever you decide — you will need to be generous and patient with yourself, as you puzzle through these difficult (but oh so important) decisions.

This stuff is hard, you guys. But it's not impossible. Keep showing up. Stay honest and kind with yourself. You can do this.

By Elizabeth Gilbert