

Why I Don't Say Surrender

On choosing the word that leaves the door open — and why what you need at four in the morning is a handle, not a concept.

There is a word at the center of this teaching that I have mostly stopped using.

Surrender. It is a beautiful word, it is the correct word, and in the tradition I come from it points at something essential: you stop fighting what is already true, you release your grip, you let the thing move through you rather than lodging in you. Michael Singer uses it. I know exactly what it means and I believe in what it describes.

And for a great many people, it lands terribly.

Say *surrender* to someone responsible for four hundred employees, a payroll, and a set of promises, and here is what they hear: give up. Stop caring. Go limp. Let it happen to you. It sounds like an abdication of the one thing they have organized their entire life around, which is showing up and being responsible. So they nod politely and quietly file the conversation under *not for me*.

That is not their failure of understanding. That is my failure of vocabulary.

So I use a different word. **Soften.**

“It softens the use of language. It softens the physical approach. It softens the approach to the person who's making you feel uncomfortable. It invokes breathing and relaxation.”

TIM O. DAVIS

I want to explain why this one works better, because it is not a euphemism. It is more precise.

Soften covers all the bases at once. It softens the language you are using — including, and especially, the language you are using on yourself. It softens the physical approach; you can feel your shoulders do it. It softens your approach to the person who is making you uncomfortable, which is frequently the actual problem. And it invokes the breath without anyone having to tell you to breathe. One word, and four things move.

More importantly, **it does not ask you to give anything up.** Nobody loses by softening. You can soften and still hold the boundary. You can soften and still say no, still let someone go, still walk away from the deal. Softening describes how you are holding the thing, not whether you are holding it.

Surrender sounds like you set it down. Soften means you stopped gripping it so hard that your hand hurts.

There is a practical reason I am this particular about it. What you need in the difficult moment is not a philosophy. It is one word you can pull out of the air when you are in panic, when you are in fear. That is the whole requirement.

When fear comes up it comes up fast — it does not wait for you to recall the framework. You have about a second and a half. You need something you can reach for without thinking. One constant thought you can grab.

Anything requiring interpretation is useless at that speed. If your keyword makes you pause and think *well, surrender doesn't really mean giving up, what it means in this tradition is* — you have already lost the moment. The fear has moved on and taken you with it. **The keyword has to be a handle, not a concept.**

So: soften. It is available in the middle of a sentence. It is available on a call. It is available when you wake at four in the morning with unpleasant energy moving through you and no path back to sleep — and I know that one from the inside, from years of lying there before a big day. You do not need to remember a teaching at four in the morning. You need one word.

I would extend this further, because it is not really about these two words. It is about noticing that the words we use on ourselves are doing work whether we chose them or not. Every one of them carries a private, loaded meaning built out of our own history — a meaning the person who taught us the word knows nothing about. Someone says *discipline* and one person straightens up while another flinches, and both are responding accurately to their own life.

Which means part of this practice is genuinely just vocabulary maintenance. If *surrender* moves you, use it — it is the deeper word and I will not argue. But if it makes you feel you are being asked to lose, put it down.

The teaching does not live in the word. The word is only the handle you reach for at four in the morning. Pick one that fits your hand.

THE PRACTICE

Find the word that opens the door for you rather than the word you inherited. You are not obligated to be inspired by someone else's terminology.