



Series:

When the Heart Ripens
and life turns spacious

Episode:

C1. SURRENDERED

- Letting Go of Image and Role

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This episode: What happens when a role no longer needs to carry who you are? When authority remains, but image quietly loosens its grip? This Episode explores the steady dignity that emerges when responsibility continues without being used to secure identity.

Welcome to another episode in the series “When the heart ripens”, now introducing a new theme: **C. The Inner Surrender.**

The Series is about the spiritual heart, a spiritual organ. More specifically, the Series tries to cover the witness-attested qualities of the spiritual heart when it has “ripened” – by grace and by years.

Please read the Introduction to this Series online for more information about the series of episodes.

Previous Episodes

in this Series

A. Rootedness in the Real

Episodes A1 to A3 explore how a ripened heart settles into ordinary life without needing to escape, improve, or embellish it. Attention becomes grounded, imagination matures into receptivity, and achievement loosens its claim as the primary source of meaning. What emerges is a steady presence rooted in what is already given.

B. The Spacious Heart

Episodes B1 to B4 turned toward the inner widening that allows love, presence, and listening to become less anxious and less controlling. The heart learns to make room for others, for uncertainty, and for life’s own timing. Spaciousness deepens relationship by freeing it from possession, performance, and premature interpretation.

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Introduction

The descriptions of the ripened heart and related reflections in this Episode are grounded in the lived witness of writers and practitioners whose lives and work consistently describe the same interior dispositions, rather than in speculative ideals or aspirational models.

For example, Nouwen’s late work is especially valuable for its honesty about the temptation to secure identity through usefulness, spiritual authority, or admiration. See Witnesses and Sources section near the end of this Episode.

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The Officer

The office of the Divisional Secretariat Officer in Kurunegala, some ninety kilometres from Colombo, smelled faintly of dust and old paper, the kind that lingers in places where documents outlive events. Sunlight filtered through the high windows in long, pale bands, catching the edges of metal filing cabinets and the worn surface of the desk.

Outside, somewhere beyond the open shutters, a bus engine coughed into life and then fell quiet again.

She sat on the wooden bench opposite the



Authority carried lightly. Responsibility present, identity unburdened.

desk, her shawl folded neatly in her lap. Waiting in offices had become familiar to her over the years. Waiting itself had become a skill. She adjusted the *pallu* of her well-cared-for cotton sari over one shoulder. Smoothed the fabric over her knees. A brief downward glance to ensure modesty.

Beside her, her daughter swung her legs, heels tapping softly against the bench in an uneven rhythm. She had promised to be quiet. Quiet, however, was not her natural state. She watched with interest as the clerk at the side-desk stood up. He was holding a large bulging batch of old documents bound with faded pink ribbon, and stretched up on his toes to replace it on a makeshift document loft above the desks.

The powerful official looked up from the papers and met the mother's gaze without hurry. He was a man perhaps in his late fifties, hair already more grey than black, his shirt neatly pressed but plainly worn. The smile was brief, but it was not fake. There was nothing ceremonial about him. No stiffness, no performance. Just careful attention

"Your papers were lost when the records office burned," he said calmly. "That part is clear."

She nodded. Of course they were lost. Many things had been lost. Houses. Names. Identities. Futures.

The official continued, unperturbed. He spoke with care, explaining what could be reconstructed, what could not, what would take time. His voice did not rise or harden. He did not apologise for the limits of the system, nor did he defend it. He simply described it, as one might describe the weather.

Her daughter leaned forward, peering at the rubber stamp on the desk, its handle smoothed by years of use.

“ဘာဘာ,” she whispered loudly, tugging at her mother’s sleeve, “is that what makes things *real*?”

The official glanced down at her, and something in his face softened. He bent slightly at the waist so that he was nearer her level.

“Ah,” he said, with mock seriousness, lifting the stamp and turning it over in his hand, “this?” He set it down again. “This only pretends to be powerful.”

The child frowned, considering this.

He smiled. “Most days it listens to me less than I listen to it.”

She burst into laughter, loud and uncontained, the kind that fills a room before anyone has time to stop it. Even the clerk at the side desk looked up, startled, then smiled and pretended to return to his work.

The official laughed too, briefly, without embarrassment. “ဟာ် ငြိမ်မိသိ,” he murmured – *hari lassanai* – and straightened again.

She watched this exchange closely. Years earlier, in another office, another official had snapped at her brother for touching a folder. That man had sat rigid behind his desk, his authority pressed tightly around him like armour. His voice had carried the weight of rank, and the room had felt smaller for it.

This room felt different.

The official returned to the papers, his atten-

tion steady once more. There was no trace of self-satisfaction in him, no sense that he had just done something kind or clever. He simply continued.

“There is a form you will need to complete,” he said. “We will begin there. It may take some weeks. Possibly longer.”

She nodded again. Waiting, after all, was familiar.

As they spoke, her daughter leaned back against her arm, content now, watching a gecko trace slow patterns along the wall. The official paused once, noticing her intense interest.

“He’s been there all morning,” he said lightly. “Very committed to his work.”

The child giggled again, softer this time.

When everything that could be said had been said, the official gathered the papers into a neat stack and set them aside.

“That is all for today,” he said. “We will continue.”

She stood, smoothing her shawl. After a moment’s hesitation, she said quietly, “ဝေဝေဟာ်မိ နီဘူဒါဒိ.” *Bohoma istuti*.

The official inclined his head, accepting the thanks without ceremony. “ငိမ္မိ,” he said gently – *yamu* – already turning back to the desk.

As they stepped out into the afternoon heat, something unexpected settled in her. Not hope, exactly. Not relief. Something steadier.

The official would go on doing his work. The system would move slowly. Nothing miraculous had happened. And yet, the encounter lin-

gered.

It was not that authority had been absent. It had been present, unmistakably so. But it had not needed to announce itself. It had not needed to be defended.

For the first time in a long while, she realised that it was possible for someone to carry a role without being carried by it. And the recognition stayed with her as they walked down the road, dust rising around their feet, the afternoon stretching ahead.

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REFLECTION

In this series, we have been speaking of the heart as a spiritual organ – a centre of perception, belonging, and orientation that operates on a different plane from ego-identity. When we turn now to inner surrender, the question is not whether the heart changes its nature, but whether the structures that once dominated identity loosen their hold, allowing the heart to come more fully into view.

Earlier in life, roles are often indispensable for one’s understanding of identity. They give shape and coherence to the self: parent, professional, helper, leader, expert, reliable one. Through them we learn how to function, how to contribute, how to belong. Image grows naturally around these roles – how we are seen, what is expected, what is rewarded. None of this is mistaken. It is how a social self is formed. Yet over time, these same structures can quietly become

burdensome when they are asked to carry more than they were meant to bear.

As the inner life matures, a subtle re-centring takes place. The ego no longer needs to rely so heavily on image and role to maintain a coherent sense of self. Identity ceases to be organised primarily around how one appears or functions. The heart, which was never dependent on these supports, begins to set the tone of lived experience more clearly. Responsibility may be carried, but the basis on which it is carried changes.

A person in this condition still inhabits roles fully and often faithfully. They show up. They act. They remain accountable. But inwardly, something has softened. The role is no longer confused with the self. Image is no longer treated as a guarantor of worth. One can be effective without being vigilant, committed without being self-protective. The heart is no longer overshadowed by the need to maintain a particular version of oneself.

You may recognise this state in small but telling ways, perhaps in yourself. I notice that speaking feels simpler. Authority no longer needs to be signalled, and uncertainty no longer feels like a loss. Misunderstandings can be held without urgency. Outcomes come and go without defining me. What remains is a steady presence, and a quiet sense that nothing essential is at stake in how I am perceived.

Psychologically, this reflects an important integration. Ego-identity has learned that it does not need to remain on constant guard. The self-concept relaxes its grip. Defensiveness eases. Energy once spent on self-monitoring becomes available for attention, responsiveness, and care.



A role set aside, without the self being misplaced.



Present in the world, without needing to prove a place in it.

The person is no longer compelled to secure themselves through role or image, because security is no longer being sought there.

Spiritually, this is a form of consent. The heart trusts that its belonging does not originate in function, status, or perception, but in a deeper givenness. This trust does not weaken engagement with life. It purifies it. Action becomes cleaner when it is no longer entangled with self-justification. Service becomes freer when it is no longer confused with self-maintenance.

Letting go of image also reshapes relationship. When we are no longer preoccupied with how we are received, we are freer to receive others. Listening deepens. Speech becomes less strategic. Silence loses its anxiety. We allow others to be complex without needing to manage their response to us. The heart meets the world with fewer filters.

This surrender does not imply that roles disappear. Roles still evolve, shift, and eventually end. What has changed is the inner attachment to them as identity anchors. When a role is affirmed, the heart remains steady. When a role is questioned or lost, the heart remains intact. The person does not vanish when the role recedes, because the heart was never identical with it.

Many experience this as a quiet dignity. Life continues with its demands and responsibilities, but the self is no longer at risk in every encounter. One can participate fully without self-surveillance. One can lead without clinging. One can rest without withdrawing.

Letting go of image and role, in this sense, is not a retreat from life. It is a way of inhabiting life more truthfully. Ego-identity loosens its dominance, and the heart – which has always

known where it belongs – is free to shape perception, action, and presence more openly.

This is the nature of inner surrender: not necessarily a relinquishing or loss of function, but the uncovering of a deeper centre from which life can be lived with greater ease, honesty, and freedom.

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Practice Box

Letting go of image and role

This practice will not produce maturity, nor will it remove roles, responsibilities, or long-formed habits of self-presentation. The ripening of the heart unfolds over time and often beyond direct control. Practice can, however, sharpen recognition. It can help us notice when identity has already shifted to a deeper ground, and when roles and image are no longer being asked to hold us together.

You might allow the following invitations to accompany you gently over a day or a week:

- Notice moments when you are aware of how you are appearing to others. Instead of adjusting or correcting that appearance, simply stay present to the moment itself. Let image look after itself.
- Sense the difference between carrying a role and being carried by it. Notice when responsibility feels steady rather than effortful.
- Allow yourself to remain fully engaged in an interaction without reinforcing competence,



Responsibility continues, no longer asked to carry identity.

authority, or usefulness. See what supports the encounter when self-presentation relaxes.

- Pay attention to how your body responds when you are not inwardly maintaining a position. Is there any quiet settling, ease, or groundedness?

- Notice situations where you continue to act responsibly even though you feel no need to be recognised for doing so. Let that be enough.

- If humour or light self-forgetfulness arises naturally, allow it. It often signals that identity is no longer at stake.

Nothing here requires withdrawal, passivity, or disengagement. These invitations are about remaining present while no longer relying on role or image for inner coherence.

If you are in a group meeting:

You might invite each person, if they wish, to name one role they still inhabit and one way their sense of self has become less dependent on it over time. Listening itself is sufficient.

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Discernment Box

Presence, responsibility, and avoidance

The interior loosening described in this Episode is sometimes mistaken for disengagement, indifference, or stepping away from life. In fact, what loosens is the need for identity to be secured by role, and the impulse to manage image as a form of self-support. Roles continue. Re-

sponsibility remains. What changes is the inner demand placed upon them.

A few questions may help clarify the quality of what is unfolding:

- Does this loosening make you more available to people and situations, or less engaged with them?

- Does responsibility feel steadier and simpler, or does it quietly dissolve?

- When you pause or remain silent, does that stillness feel alive and attentive, or like a way of avoiding contact?

- Are you less compelled to defend who you are, while still willing to act when needed?

- Does humility here feel like warmth and ease, or like shrinking and disappearance?

Authentic inner surrender does not remove us from life. It allows us to inhabit it without needing to be upheld by appearance. If uncertainty remains, let it remain. Discernment itself belongs to a heart that is already learning where it truly rests.

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Witnesses and Sources

for your further exploration

The following writers and texts are offered as reliable companions to the reflections in this Episode. They are included not as theoretical supports, but as witnesses whose lives and writings consistently describe the same interior dis-

positions explored here: a loosening of identity from role and image, alongside sustained responsibility, humility, and presence.

Thomas Merton (1915–1968)

Merton, Thomas. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. New York: Doubleday, 1966.

Merton, Thomas. *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998.

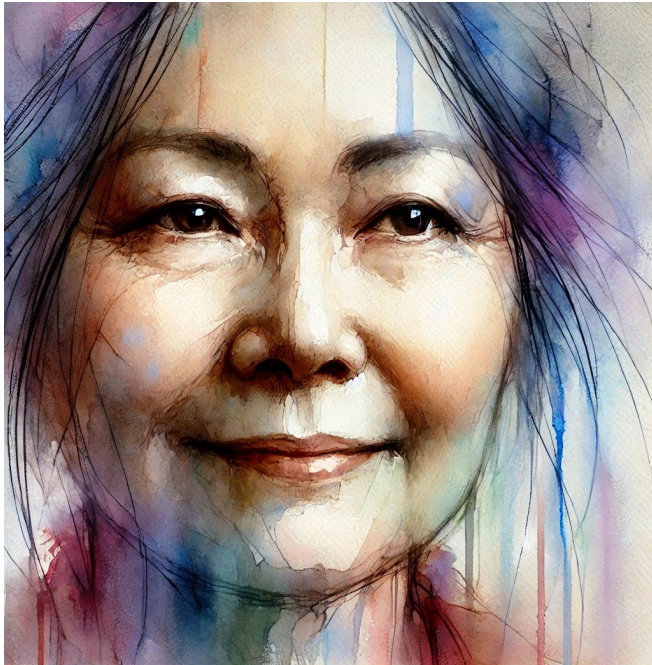
Merton's later writings show a sustained disengagement from authorial and monastic self-image without any withdrawal from moral seriousness or social responsibility. He repeatedly names the relief and freedom that come when identity is no longer propped up by role or reputation.

Henri J. M. Nouwen (1932–1996)

Nouwen, Henri J. M. *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*. New York: Crossroad, 1989.

Nouwen, Henri J. M. *The Inner Voice of Love*. New York: Doubleday, 1996.

Nouwen's late work is especially valuable for its honesty about the temptation to secure identity through usefulness, spiritual authority, or admiration. He describes mature discipleship as a state in which leadership and responsibility continue, but are no longer asked to justify the self.



Evelyn Underhill (1875–1941)

Underhill, Evelyn. *Practical Mysticism*. London: J. M. Dent, 1914.

Underhill, Evelyn. *The Spiritual Life*. London: Methuen, 1937.

Underhill offers a precise distinction between function and being. Her work consistently describes mature spiritual influence as arising from inner alignment rather than visible competence or role-based authority.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945)

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Edited by Eberhard Bethge. London: SCM Press, 1953.

Bonhoeffer's prison writings articulate a form of responsibility freed from self-justification and image management. His thought supports the claim that one can act decisively and faithfully without needing to secure identity through moral or institutional standing.

The Rule of St Benedict (c. sixth century)

Benedict of Nursia. *The Rule of St Benedict*. Translated by Timothy Fry. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981.

The Rule assumes that mature authority is quiet, restrained, and relational. Leadership remains real, but its legitimacy no longer depends on assertion or display. This text offers an early and enduring witness to authority decoupled from image.

Rowan Williams (b. 1950)

Williams, Rowan. *Silence and Honey Cakes*. Oxford: Lion, 2003.

Williams, Rowan. *Being Christian*. London: SPCK, 2014.

Williams reflects on Christian maturity as truthfulness before God and others, rather than performance. His work bridges theology, pastoral realism, and contemplative depth, reinforcing the emphasis on responsibility without self-display.

Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582)

Teresa of Ávila. *The Interior Castle*. Trans-

lated by E. Allison Peers. London: Image Books, 1961.

Teresa describes later stages of the spiritual life as marked by a loss of concern for reputation and self-presentation. This loosening is portrayed not as moral effort, but as a natural consequence of interior grounding.

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