



Series:

When the Heart Ripens
- and life turns spacious

This Episode:

C3. SURRENDERED –

The Shift from Willpower to Willingness

Tony Macelli

Here we explore a subtle shift in the life of faith – from willpower to willingness. We reflect on how spiritual discipline, usually necessary, may give way to consent as the heart ripens. Attentiveness and responsibility remain, without being driven by effortful self-management or self-supervision.

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Past Episodes in this Series

See or download past PDFs here:

<https://laikosblog.org/blog-by-tony-macelli/>

The Series is about the spiritual heart as a spiritual organ. More specifically, the Series explores the witness-attested qualities of the spiritual heart when it has “ripened” – through grace and lived experience. Please read the Introduction online if you are new to the Series.

Group A. Rootedness in the Real. Episodes A1–A3 traced how the ripened heart becomes grounded in ordinary life as it is. Attention settles, imagination softens, and the drive to secure meaning through achievement or improvement eases. What emerges is a stable presence able to receive reality without escape, embellishment, or withdrawal.

Group B. The Spacious Heart. Episodes B1–B4 explore the widening of the heart through which love, attention, and listening become less anxious and less controlling. The heart learns to hold others, uncertainty, and time itself with greater ease. Relationship deepens as possession, performance, and premature interpretation lose their hold.

Group C. The Inner Surrender. This group of Episodes examines the gradual relinquishing of subtle inner compulsions that persist even after earlier growth. The ripened heart releases its reliance on image, outcome, and effortful self-support. Surrender here does not mean passivity, collapse, or withdrawal from responsibility, but a growing freedom to remain present, truthful, and responsive without securing oneself through winning, approval, or control.

Episode C1 addressed surrender from image and role; **Episode C2** explored freedom from the need to win; **Episode C3** now turns toward the shift from willpower to willingness, where effort gives way to consent.

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STORY:

A Kenyan Interlude

They had started before the sun cleared the ridge.

By midmorning the ground around the trench was already warm, the red earth clinging to shoes and hems. Someone had laid out tools on a sack under the jacaranda – spades, a borrowed wheelbarrow with one loose handle, two jerrycans of water. A radio murmured football talk from Kisumu, fading whenever the wind shifted.

“Let us finish this side first,” Daniel said. “Before it grows *jua kali*.”

He stood with the notebook tucked under his arm, scanning what had been done and what remained. People looked to him without thinking. He had organised the list, spoken to the parish office, found the cement. It had been his responsibility, and he felt it as *kale yake*. Wholly his own burden.

Mama Ruth was already working. She moved slowly but steadily, lifting soil, tapping the shovel once to clear it before setting it down again. She wore the same sandals she always wore, the strap mended with wire. When she rested, it was only long enough to drink, then she returned to the trench without comment.

Daniel watched her for a moment, then turned back to the others.

“Careful there,” he said. “Not too deep.

We measured.”

“Yes, yes,” someone replied. “We know, *toto*.”

By late morning the clouds had thickened. The air felt heavier. Daniel glanced upward, then back at the trench.

“We must hurry,” he said. “If the rain comes now—”

A shout interrupted him.

The wheelbarrow tipped. Cement spilled into the dust. Someone swore softly.

Daniel closed his eyes for a moment.

This was not how it was meant to go. He had prayed early that morning, carefully, asking God to bless the work, to keep it orderly, to let everything proceed as planned. He had risen before dawn to make sure he would not be rushed in prayer.

For Daniel, prayer had always been like this: a turning toward God that required attention, steadiness, intention. Not anxious, not fearful – but serious. God was faithful, yes, but faithfulness mattered. One did not drift into it. One stayed awake.

Now he felt the familiar tightening in his chest – the sense that faithfulness required more care, more precision, more effort.

“Please,” he said, sharper than he intended. “Let us focus.”

Mama Ruth looked up.

“It can be gathered,” she said, nodding toward the cement. “We can still *choma diskette* it



back, even if it is messy.”

“Yes, but it is wasted time,” Daniel replied. “We are already *mbioni*.”

She said nothing, only picked up a tin and began scooping what she could back into the bag.

The clouds broke sooner than expected. Kitu kidogo.

Not rain – not yet – but enough to darken the soil. People paused, uncertain.

Daniel felt something close to panic rise in him. If they did not finish before real rain came, the trench would collapse. The cement would be ruined. People would talk.

And beneath that lay another thought, quieter and heavier: If this fails, what does it say about my faithfulness?

“We continue,” he said. “Just move faster. We need to *shosh yake* and finish this.”

Some obeyed. Others hesitated.

Mama Ruth set her shovel aside and stood still, feeling the first cool drops on her arms. She noticed the tension in Daniel’s voice, the way his body leaned forward as if pushing the day itself along.

There was simply the same interior ground that had been there when she woke, when she sat in the half-light before dawn, when she prayed without words. It had not always been like this; there had been years when she, too, had measured her faithfulness by attention and effort, learning slowly what could and could not be carried that way.

God was already here.

“Daniel,” she said quietly.

He turned, impatience already on his face.

“Let us pause,” she said. “Just one minute.”

“For what?” he asked.

“For the rain to decide,” she said.

A few people smiled. Someone laughed once, then stopped.

Daniel opened his mouth to object, then closed it again. His heart was racing. Pausing felt like failure. Pausing felt like letting go of responsibility.

If I stop holding this, he thought, will it fall apart?

They waited.

The rain slowed, then stopped. The clouds moved on, leaving the air cooler, the ground damp but workable.

Someone said, “We can continue now.”

They did. Slowly. Carefully.

Not everything went smoothly. The trench held, but only just. They finished late. The work was passable, not perfect.

Daniel wrote notes in his book, his hand less steady than usual.

Mama Ruth washed her hands with the last of the water and sat for a while, watching the others disperse.

As they walked back toward the road, Daniel fell into step beside her.

“You were not worried,” he said.



“I was not stressed,” she said. “*Ni kale yake.* I was willing.”

“Willing for what?”

“For God to do what God will do,” she said. “And for me to do what is mine.”

He said nothing.

The trench lay behind them, unfinished in places, usable in others. The outcome would show itself later.

Daniel felt tired. But beneath the tiredness something had shifted – not clarity, not peace, but a loosening. For the first time that day, he did not feel the need to check whether God was still close.

Mama Ruth walked on, the same pace she always kept, the dust settling again around her sandals.

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REFLECTION:

What is Already Held

For many, the life of faith begins with discipline. Prayer is learned through structure. Attention is trained through effort. Fidelity is sustained by resolve. There is a sense that what matters must be guarded carefully, practised consistently, and maintained against distraction or drift.

This phase is often sincere and necessary. Discipline steadies the heart. It gathers scattered desire. It forms habits of attentiveness and re-



sponsibility. Beneath these practices lies a simple and genuine intention: a willingness to be faithful, to remain open to God, and to keep turning toward what matters most.

Without such discipline, faith may never take root deeply enough to endure.

Yet over time, something subtle can begin to shift.

What once brought stability may begin to feel strained. The forms may remain, but the ease that once accompanied them does not. Prayer is still undertaken faithfully, yet it no longer settles the heart in the same way. Vigilance increases, but peace does not follow. Effort multiplies, but rest recedes.

This is not failure. Nor is it loss of seriousness. Often it arises precisely because faith has been sustained for a long time and taken seriously.

At this point, discipline can quietly take on a new role. Instead of supporting faith, it may begin to carry the weight of identity. What was once an expression of willingness becomes a means of self-support. The heart remains sincere, but its openness is increasingly maintained through effort rather than consent. Prayer becomes something that must be done well. Fidelity becomes something that must be secured. Attention turns inward, not in vanity, but in concern for remaining rightly aligned.

Many remain here for years, faithfully and honourably. There is no reproach in this. Discipline continues to serve real purposes. Responsibility is maintained. Life is ordered, and often productive.

And yet, among those whose hearts have ripened, a further movement is often recognisable.

Without having chosen it, and often without understanding it at first, effort begins to loosen its grip. Not all at once. Not decisively. But enough that something else starts to carry the centre. Discipline does not disappear, but it no longer bears the whole weight.

Prayer becomes less an activity to be managed and more a condition to be inhabited. Attention widens rather than tightens. Faith no longer needs to be held together through vigilance, because it is being held in another way.

Alignment with God's presence emerges not as a reward for effort, nor as an alternative technique, but as a release from the need to secure oneself through effort at all. What remains is a simpler and more enduring posture: a steady willingness to consent to God's presence, to allow intimacy to deepen on God's terms rather than one's own.

You may already know Matthew 6:6, "When you pray, go to your inner room...". But do you know this same passage in the YouVersion (MSG) of the Bible? Here it is, verbatim, "Here's what I want you to do: Find a quiet, secluded place so you won't be tempted to roleplay before God. Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage. The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense his grace." I love it.

This willingness is not vague or passive. It carries intention, but an intention that no longer directs the process or supervises its unfolding. The heart remains turned toward God, yet relin-

quishes the need to manage how that turning is sustained.

This does not lead to laxity. Nor does it excuse apathy. Those who live from this alignment are often more, not less, reliable. What has gone is not care, but compulsion. What has eased is not fidelity, but the anxiety that once accompanied it.

Age can contribute to this movement, though it does not explain it. Time brings repeated encounters with limit. It teaches, slowly, that intensity does not guarantee fruit, and that vigilance cannot secure what matters most. Over years of faithfulness, the illusion of control wears thin. What remains is not resignation, but a willingness that has survived disappointment and learned to trust without grasping.

From the outside, this alignment may appear quieter than disciplined effort. There is less visible striving, less self-monitoring, less urgency around getting things right. From within, it is often experienced as a deepening of consent and intention together – an openness that no longer needs to prove itself through exertion, yet remains steadily oriented toward God.

Discipline has not been rejected. In many lives it remains, reshaped and softened. But it no longer bears the weight of self-support. The heart has found another centre from which to live and act with freedom.

This movement cannot be forced, and it cannot be imitated directly. It comes, if it comes at all, through long faithfulness, repeated surrender, and the slow education of desire. When it does, it is recognised less by achievement than by willingness – a willingness that sustains attention,

responsibility, and love without strain.

What has ripened here, rather than the effort or the discipline, is consent.

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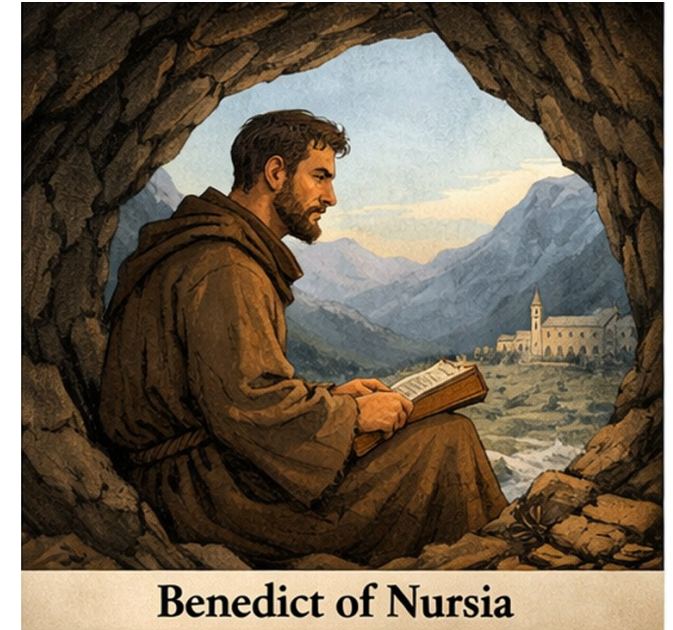
Meet the Witnesses

Benedict of Nursia (c. 480–547)

“Let us prefer nothing whatever to Christ.” (*Rule of St Benedict, ch. 72*)

Benedict is often associated with discipline, order, and stability. Yet the Rule he shaped consistently directs attention away from self-assertion, even spiritual self-assertion. Discipline is not an end in itself, but a way of relinquishing lesser priorities so that trust may rest where it belongs. The heart Benedict forms is not driven by heroic effort, but by a settled preference that no longer needs to prove itself.

As a young man, Benedict fled the corruption and licentiousness of Rome for a solitary cave, leaving behind family, education, and status. When disciples gathered around him, he structured their life not around spectacular feats, but around simple, ordinary stability – prayer, work, and obedience – so that nothing would distract from “prefer[ring] nothing to the love of Christ.” This retreat from a frantic, self-shaping world into a disciplined, humble routine becomes a quiet, lifelong act of surrender: the effort to leave the world is finally ordered toward



Benedict of Nursia

a willingness to be formed by God within the unglamorous life of the monastery.

Julian of Norwich (c. 1343–c. 1416)

“All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.” (*Revelations of Divine Love, ch. 27*)

Julian’s assurance arises not from optimism or denial, but from an interior trust that has relinquished the need to secure its own outcome. Her confidence reflects a heart that no longer strains to manage its safety in God, but rests in a love already at work beneath effort, fear, and uncertainty.

Her “all shall be well” emerged in the midst of personal suffering and pandemics, when she



Julian of Norwich

was enclosed in a tiny cell attached to a church, physically ill and spiritually wrung out. Her first response was not serene acceptance, but a trembling protest: *How can all be well, given the reality of sin and pain?* Only slowly did she come to see that trust in God’s love did not erase suffering but held it within a larger, unseen healing. This inner struggle – of wanting to manage her own safety and then letting God’s love hold both her fear and the world’s chaos – mirrors the move from self-protective effort to a willingness to rest in God’s care even when the outcome is unknown.

Francis of Assisi (c. 1181–1226)

“And in this is perfect joy.” (*from the early Franciscan account of Perfect Joy*)

In the well-known account of “perfect joy,” Francis deliberately excludes success, recognition, and even spiritual achievement as the basis of fulfilment. What remains is not resignation, but freedom – a willingness to be received by God without needing affirmation, vindication, or spiritual accomplishment. Joy here is no longer secured through effort.

As Francis walks through bitter winter cold with Brother Leo, they discuss what would count as true or perfect joy. Again and again, Francis rejects even the most impressive spiritual achievements – miracles, conversions, heroic self-denial – until only one thing remains: enduring humiliation, rejection, and abuse at the door of their own monastery, yet receiving it with patience and humility. This comical yet painful scene turns the notion of “spiritual success” upside down: the effort to endure hardship is finally surrendered into a willingness simply to be received, even when treated as a nobody. This is not the ordinary contentment, but the joy that passes all understanding. It does not depend on receiving respect or recognition from others. It does not depend on cultivating spiritual discipline properly. It is not in one’s own hands – it is simply received.

John of the Cross (1542–1591)

“To come to what you do not know, you must go by a way in which you do not know.” (*Ascent of Mount Carmel, I.13.11*)

John’s teaching repeatedly warns against the spiritual will to mastery. As the soul matures, methods that once supported faith can begin to obstruct it. What is required then is not



Francis of Assisi

refined control, but consent to a path that cannot be supervised. Willingness, in John’s account, emerges precisely where wilfulness reaches its limit.

The “dark night” he describes is not a strategy devised by the soul, but a perceived withdrawal or abandonment by God, in which the familiar consolations of prayer and devotion vanish. In the long aridity of this night, traditional methods of prayer and asceticism fail, and the soul is left with nothing but the bare choice to keep calling out to God even when no answer is felt. Divine purification is already at work, though the soul experiences it as absence; willingness here is the quiet, simple refusal to let go of God when every sense of presence has disappeared.



John of the Cross

Thomas Merton (1915–1968)

“We do not want to be beginners, but let us be convinced of the fact that we will never be anything else but beginners.” (*New Seeds of Contemplation*)

Merton’s later writings trace a gradual release from spiritual ambition and self-directed progress. The willingness he describes is not incompetence or passivity, but freedom from the need to arrive. Faith no longer depends on achievement or completion, but rests in openness that does not require supervision.

His own journey moves from a young man who sought to prove himself worthy of God through rigorous asceticism to a monk who

speaks of beginning again every day. One pivotal moment occurred in 1958, when, standing in a busy Louisville intersection, he suddenly felt an overwhelming love for the strangers rushing past him, as if he saw them all as “loved and loved” by God. That experience did not come from a disciplined spiritual strategy, but from a heart that had grown willing to let God surprise him in the middle of the mundane. This public, ordinary moment – far from quiet solitude – becomes a powerful image of willingness displacing the need to manufacture or formulate spiritual experiences.

Rowan Williams (born 1950)

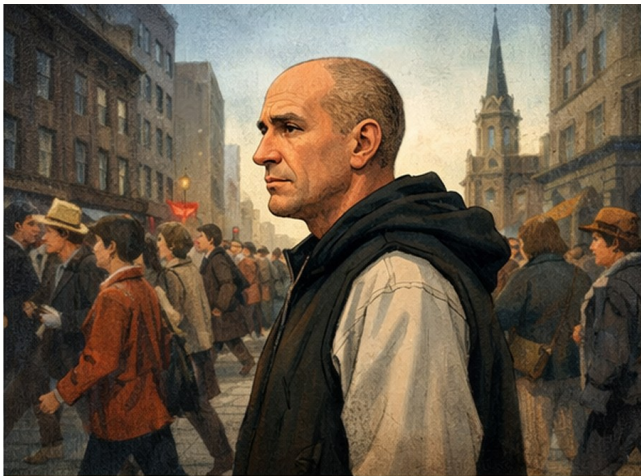
Mark Tully, on interviewing the then Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams wrote “When he

let things happen.” *Transcript of BBC Radio 4, “Something Understood: Understanding Prayer,” 13 September 2009, Archbishop of Canterbury website: <https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org>.*

Across his teaching on prayer, Williams consistently returns to this point. Prayer is not an act of management or persuasion, but a readiness to be addressed and shaped. Willingness here is expressed as restraint – a refusal to direct God’s action, paired with a trust that God is already active.

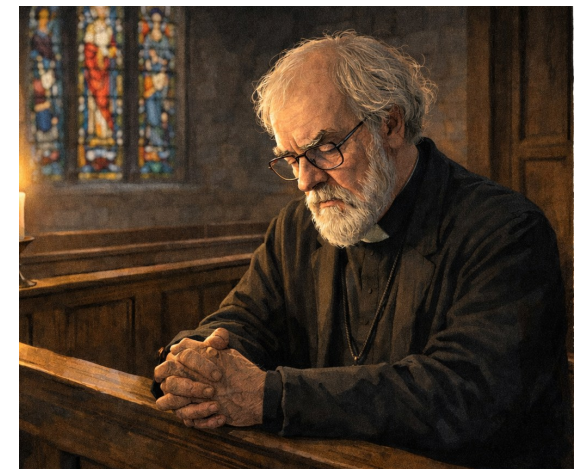
In reflecting on prayer, he has spoken of often feeling “not very good at praying,” yet continuing to return to the conviction that prayer is not about changing God’s mind or managing outcomes. He describes it as letting God “into the situation” and allowing God to hold the pain, anger, or confusion he cannot handle himself, even while feeling the natural urge to ask for specific interventions. This humility – that he can be a public theologian and still experience prayer as clumsy and uncertain – makes his witness to willingness quietly compelling and recognisably human.

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Thomas Merton

prays he’s not trying to do something – and he’s certainly not telling God what to do or what he wants him to do – he’s trying to be with God to



Rowan Williams

PRACTICE BOX

Attending to Willpower and to Willingness

This practice does not, by itself, ripen the spiritual heart. Ripening comes through grace and long faithfulness. What this practice offers is a way of noticing how willpower and willingness already operate in you, especially under pressure.

Choose an ordinary situation in which something matters to you. It may involve responsibility, prayer, a task, a decision, or an outcome you care about. The situation does not need to be dramatic.

As you recall or enter the situation, notice first the posture of effort. Observe any inward tightening around doing things properly, staying faithful, keeping control, or ensuring that things turn out well. You are not asked to change this. Simply recognise how effort feels in the body and in attention.

Then, without trying to replace effort, allow a second question to arise quietly:
What is already being carried, without my management?

Do not answer this question conceptually. Let it remain open. Notice whether there is any shift, however small, toward allowing rather than directing. This may feel like easing, or like nothing much at all.

If effort remains, let it remain. If

willingness appears, let it appear. Neither needs to be preferred.

You may repeat this noticing in moments of success, failure, or unresolved outcome. The point is not to abandon responsibility, but to recognise whether your faith is being held by exertion alone, or whether consent is also present.

Over time, this kind of noticing can sensitise you to the difference between carrying faith through willpower and resting faith within.

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DISCERNMENT BOX

Willingness and Its Look-Alikes

Willingness, as described in this Episode, can resemble several other interior states. Careful discernment helps prevent misunderstanding, especially when effort begins to loosen.

Willingness is not apathy. Apathy withdraws care and attention. Willingness remains engaged with life and responsibility, but without the inward pressure to secure outcomes or manage God's response.

Willingness is not avoidance. Avoidance turns away from difficulty or delay. Willingness stays present to what is required, including discomfort or uncertainty, while relinquishing the need to control how things resolve.

Willingness is not passivity. Passivity abdicates responsibility. Willingness continues to act, decide, and respond, but from a place where faithfulness is not measured by intensity of effort.

Willingness is not spiritualised indifference. Indifference numbs concern. Willingness allows concern to be felt without becoming organised around it.

It is also important to notice that willingness does not replace discipline prematurely. For many, disciplined prayer and attentiveness remain essential for a long time. The movement described here is not a rejection of discipline, but a ripening beyond the point where discipline must carry the whole weight of intimacy with God.

A helpful question for discernment is this: Has effort softened because trust has deepened, or because engagement has quietly withdrawn? The answer is not found through analysis, but through lived honesty over time.

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