



Series:

When the Heart Ripens
- and life turns spacious

This Episode:

C4. SURRENDERED –

Reconciliation with One's Limits

Tony Macelli

When doors close and contribution in the fields of the Lord narrows, what remains? This episode explores reconciliation with real limitations – not as resignation, but as deepening consent. It reflects on how the heart may remain faithful and present when continuation or expansion of one's contribution is no longer possible.

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Past Episodes in this Series

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

THE SERIES is about the spiritual heart, a spiritual organ. More specifically, the Series traces witness-attested qualities of the spiritual heart when it has “ripened” – by 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 needing to escape or embellish it.

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

Group C. The Inner Surrender. This group turns toward the relinquishing of subtle forms of inner compulsion. The ripened heart releases its reliance on image, outcome, and self-justification, allowing life to unfold without being driven by the need to prevail, to secure identity through contribution, or to overcome every constraint.

Episode C1 explored surrender as release from image and role.

Episode C2 examined freedom from the need to win.

Episode C3 traced the shift from willpower to willingness. Episode C4 considers reconciliation with real limitations, and the discovery that belonging to God does not depend on expansion, usefulness, or visible fruit.

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STORY – “Still Here”

The letter arrived in the late morning, when *el claustro* was already warm and the light lay flat against the stone.

Brother Mateo read it at the small table by the window. He did not hurry. He unfolded the pages, smoothed the crease with his thumb, and read to the end before letting the paper rest in his hands.

The instructions were careful and precise. There was concern for the current political climate, for misunderstanding, for the good name of the Order. Until further notice, the practical formation of novices for work in hospitals and prisons was to be suspended. Preparation was to remain theoretical. Any future developments would be communicated centrally.

Brother Mateo sat with the letter a while longer. He did not argue with it inwardly, but neither did he dismiss it. He knew about this overblown caution, the fear of political repercussions. He recognised the weight of what had been decided – and the narrowness of the reasoning that had produced it. He had seen such letters before.

After a moment, he folded the paper and placed it beside his cup.

From the kitchen came the sound of a large metal ladle striking a stone counter.

The cook – who came from a long line of



passionately irascible cooks and had been warned more than once by the abbot to control his outbursts – grumbled softly through gritted teeth, his face growing a shade redder from the effort to keep his mouth (mostly) shut.

From the same direction, the parrot squawked merrily, as if in approval. "*¡Así se hace!*" . That's how it's done.

Brother Mateo smiled. What we cannot transform, we must bathe in humour, until it softens like bread in milk.

Sister Clara received the letter an hour later in the convent parlour. It was read aloud by *la Superiora*, who used the same measured tone she used for all official correspondence. Sister Clara listened carefully, hands folded, eyes lowered.

"Of course," she said when it was finished. "We will comply."

Later, alone in her cell, she read a borrowed copy of the letter again. This time slowly. Her pencil lay untouched on the desk. A painful tightening gripped her stomach.

For years she had helped prepare novices for difficult places. Not by hardening them, but by teaching them how to stay human when humanity was under strain. How to listen without correcting. How to be present without absorbing despair. How to know when to help and when to step back.

It had never felt like initiative. It had felt like obedience to God. And how vibrant and exemplary were those novices after their service experience!

Now she closed the letter and sat very still.

How can I serve God, she thought, if I am no longer allowed to do what Christ asks of us – to be near the least, the forgotten, the difficult? Can I still be faithful under these restrictions? Am I betraying Christ by stopping the work? Will Christ show me another way?

The questions did not resolve. They circled.

In the monastery courtyard, Brother Mateo swept fallen leaves into a neat line. The task was familiar.

He did not pretend the letter was unimportant. His own work with novices – the careful preparation he had given fifteen years to – had been suspended with the same words. The same concern for misunderstanding. But neither did he treat it as a verdict on his vocation. It was simply what had been given.

The dog slinked in through a doorway carrying something it should not have taken. The cook followed, waving a ladle, muttering fiercely under his breath.

"¡Fuera de aquí, ahora mismo!"

The dog dodged. A basket tipped. Leaves scattered. The dog, now safely out of range, sat down and began eating whatever it had stolen. With great dignity.

The parrot hopped onto the upturned basket. *"¡Así se hace!"* it declared, surveying the chaos.

Brother Mateo paused, took in the scene, and then resumed sweeping.





Later that afternoon, Sister Clara came to deliver supplies. She found Brother Mateo in the monastery garden, seated beneath the fig tree. The heat had softened the air. She had walked quickly, carrying her frustration like a basket that was too heavy.

"Welcome to the new year. 1962, the Year of Progress," she said with restrained irony as she sat down beside him. "They've stopped everything. All of it."

"Yes," he said.

"It was careful work. Necessary work." She stopped, overcome by the pain of bereavement. She continued, without real hope, "They say it's only for now."

"Yes."

She waited, then exhaled sharply. "I keep asking myself whether obedience means letting people suffer needlessly."

Brother Mateo looked at her. Gentle. Attentive.

"Obedience," he said slowly, "has many seasons. Some are fruitful. Some are barren."

"That sounds too easy," she said.

"It is not easy," he replied. "John of the Cross wrote that God leads by a way we know not. Sometimes that way looks like a wall."

She shook her head. "I don't want to lose my vocation."

"You won't," he said. "But you may discover something. The heart that suffers from its limits and the heart that discovers its freedom inside them – they face the same wall. Only one of them has stopped pushing."

She was silent.

"When I was younger," he continued after a long pause, "I thought faithfulness meant making sure God's work went forward. That nothing important was delayed because of fear."

"And now?"

"Now I also know God does not wait for our permission. Or our efficiency. Meister Eckhart said God is not found in any particular work, but in our detachment from the work we think we must do."

She looked at him. "And what do we do in the meantime?"

"We remain available," he said. "Without insisting that availability must look like usefulness."

"Available for what?" she asked.

"Theresa of Avila would say: for whatever God actually sends, not for what we imagine God should send."

From the kitchen came a crash, the cook's somewhat apocalyptic diatribe, and then the parrot's bright voice: "*¡Así se hace!*" The dog followed, and in moments there was a small pandemonium of spilled food, shouted instructions, and flapping wings, and more.

Brother Mateo watched, amused, unperturbed.

Sister Clara watched too, her face tense, then slowly easing.

That evening, in her cell, she examined her own distress carefully. She did not try to dismiss it. She did not hurry past it in prayer.

If I cannot help in the way I know how, she thought, can I still belong to Christ? If the Kingdom is truly at hand, where is it now, for me?

She did not find answers. But she noticed that the question no longer demanded immediate resolution.

In the monastery, Brother Mateo sat on his narrow bed as the bell rang for Compline. He can no longer prepare novices for the places where suffering pressed hardest. Fifteen years of careful formation – learning how to teach them not to fix people, but to stand with them – now stopped.

And yet, he was here. Still here.

The next morning, Sister Clara passed through the courtyard carrying books she was no longer sure she would use. She paused under the fig tree. For a moment Jesus' words came to mind, about a good tree bearing good fruit.

A novice hurried past, late for prayer, tripped on the step, recovered, and kept running. From somewhere inside: "*¡Así se hace!*"

She smiled faintly – not because she believed everything was fine, but because she no

longer felt compelled to make it so right now. A voice in her mind continued, *y toda clase de cosas estarán bien* – and all manner of things will be well. Was it really the spirit of Dame Julian of Norwich speaking inside her head? She almost laughed.

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"¡Así se hace!"

REFLECTION –

Reconciliation with One's Limits

For many, the life of faith is shaped first by expansion. Gifts are discovered. Responsibilities increase. Contribution widens. The Kingdom of God seems to advance through energy, courage, and initiative.

This movement is often sincere and necessary. Zeal serves love. Discipline forms character. Effort strengthens fidelity. Without such seasons of growth, vocation may never take root deeply enough to endure. The heavenly kingdom may even be enriched.

Yet in many lives there comes a different season.

A door closes and does not reopen. A role is withdrawn. Health alters. Institutional structures harden. Opportunities that once seemed obvious are suspended or quietly removed. The contribution that defined one's sense of usefulness becomes restricted or ends altogether.

Such personal limits or external obstacles are not always dramatic. But they may be very real and immovable.

At first, the instinct is to overcome them. Faithfulness appears to demand renewed effort. We look for alternate routes. We attempt to preserve the original form of our service. Beneath this is often an unspoken belief: that fulfilment of union with the divine will come from stepping

ping up our contributions.

Over time, this effort can become strained. The obstacles may remain. The wall does not yield.

It is here that a further movement sometimes begins — not chosen deliberately, not achieved by technique, but discovered through repeated yielding toward the heart's true centre in God.

The heart no longer needs to overcome its limitations in order to turn toward God.

Reconciliation with the real limitations does not mean that the limits are approved of, or that injustice or bad management are excused. Nor that effort ceases where effort is still possible. It means that identity no longer depends on expansion.

One remains present.

Contribution may narrow. Influence may diminish. Recognition may fade. Yet the heart discovers that its belonging to God does not depend on visible fruit.

This shift does not occur through passivity. Nor is it the collapse of energy. It is the slow unlearning of the belief that fulfilment of union with the divine will come from stepping up one's contributions.

In this movement, effort is not despised. Discipline is not discarded. But neither is effort allowed to carry the weight of self-support. The heart begins to live from another centre.

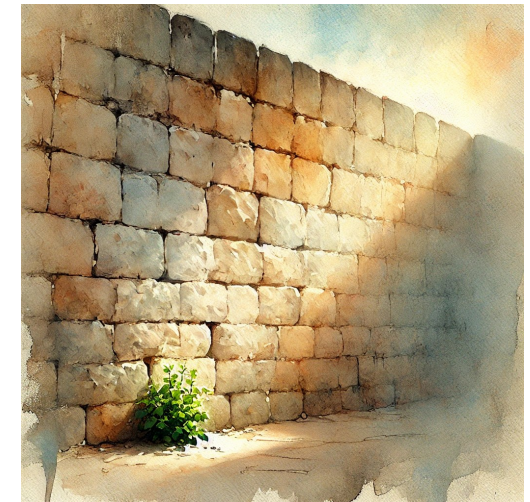
Age may contribute to this discovery, though age alone may not produce it. Over years of faithfulness, the illusion that intensity guarantees fruit begins to weaken. One sees that the Kingdom is not secured by diligent contributions alone.

What remains is a quieter posture: willingness to inhabit the present boundary without argument, and to trust that God's action does not depend on our range of actions.

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 with freedom.

What has ripened here, rather than the effort or the charism or the *diaconia* or the visible results or the discipline, is consent, and a sense of identity now rooted in God rather than in any specific work.

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Noticing How You Currently Stand As Regards Your Real Limits

This practice does not produce reconciliation with real limitations. Ripening belongs to grace and long faithfulness. This practice trains awareness of how one currently responds to limits.

1. Identify a present limit

Name a real limitation you are living with.
It may concern time, health, influence, institu-

tional boundaries, or a closed opportunity that is unlikely to reopen.

Pause before deciding whether it is fully immovable. Discern carefully. If no such limit comes readily to mind, reflect on one from your past.

2. Notice your first interior movement

When you consider this limit, what arises?

Do you strategize immediately?

Feel diminished?

Experience shame at reduced usefulness?

Turn to prayer in urgency?

Simply observe.

3. Distinguish effort from compulsion

Some limits should be addressed. Reconciliation with real limitations does not forbid responsible action.

Ask gently:

*Is my effort arising from love and responsibility,
or from fear that I will lose meaning
if this remains?*

The distinction is subtle but important.

4. Imagine the limit remaining

Without resolving anything, imagine that this limitation does not change.

Notice what tightens.

Then ask:

If this remains, could I still belong to God?

Could I still be faithful?

Do not rush the answer.

5. Attend to what remains possible

Within any real limitation, certain forms of fidelity remain:

attentiveness

presence

patience

prayer without visible fruit

These are not substitutes for lost contribution. They are expressions of belonging that do not depend on expansion.

6. End without resolution

You are not trying to achieve reconciliation with real limitations. You are noticing your present stance.

Over time, such noticing may reveal where continued effort is appropriate — and where effort has quietly become strain.



DISCERNMENT BOX

Reconciliation with Real Limitations, (and Its Look-Alikes)

Not every endurance is reconciliation with real limitations. The ripened heart does not collapse, nor does it romanticise constraint. The following distinctions may help.

1. Reconciliation with real limitations vs Resignation

Resignation says: “Nothing can be done.”

Reconciliation with real limitations says: “This cannot be changed — and I remain present.”

Resignation often carries heaviness or bitterness. Reconciliation with real limitations carries grief, but also clarity.

2. Reconciliation with real limitations vs Apathy

Apathy reduces desire to avoid disappointment.

Reconciliation with real limitations does not extinguish desire. It frees desire from the demand that it must succeed in order to remain meaningful.

If care itself is fading, restoration may be needed.

3. Reconciliation with real limitations vs Burnout

Burnout brings depletion and cynicism.

Reconciliation with real limitations changes the source of energy. Activity may lessen, but interior hardness does not increase.

If exhaustion dominates, attend first to healing.

4. Reconciliation with real limitations vs Avoidance

Sometimes a limit is labelled immovable too quickly.

Discern:

Is this truly beyond my responsibility?
Or am I withdrawing from necessary courage?

Reconciliation with real limitations does not excuse evasion.

5. Reconciliation with real limitations vs Superiority

The heart reconciled with real limitations does not look down on those still striving.

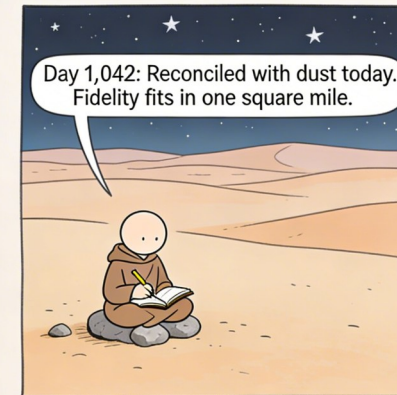
Earlier seasons of effort were often necessary. They are not failures.

6. A quiet indicator

When imagining the limit unchanged, is there only constriction — or also a small widening, a sense that your belonging to God does not depend on this being different?

Even a slight widening may signal that reconciliation with real limitations has begun.

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MEET THE WITNESSES

The reconciliation with real limitations described in this Episode is not speculative. It has been lived in radically different historical contexts – colonial deserts, industrial suburbs, prison camps, and modern intentional communities. What follows are not abstract theologians, but men and women whose vocations encountered immovable constraint.

Together these witnesses show that reconciliation with real limitations does not belong to one temperament, one century, or one form of vocation. It appears in desert solitude, urban ministry, prison camps, and intentional community life. In each case, the heart discovers that fidelity does not depend on expansion, and that God's action does not wait upon our range.

Charles de Foucauld (1858–1916)

“My Father, I abandon myself into Your hands; do with me what You will.”

(Prayer of Abandonment)

Charles de Foucauld was once a cavalry officer in the French army, a restless explorer, and for a time an agnostic. After a profound conversion in his late twenties, he sought an increasingly hidden life. Eventually he settled among the Tuareg people in the Algerian Sahara, not as a conventional missionary seeking conversions, but as what he called a “universal brother.”

For years he lived in near solitude at Tamanrasset. No religious community formed around him during his lifetime. No measurable “success” marked his presence. His dream of founding a congregation did not materialise be-

fore his death in 1916. To outward eyes, his mission appeared fruitless.

Yet Foucauld's spirituality matured precisely within this apparent failure. His Prayer of Abandonment was not composed in triumph, but in obscurity. He gradually relinquished the expectation that fidelity would produce visible results. The desert became for him not a field of achievement but a school of consent.

His reconciliation with real limitations did not erase longing. It relocated it. Fidelity ceased to depend on expansion, influence, or confirmation. What remained was availability.

Madeleine Delbrêl (1904–1964)

“Holiness is not a luxury; it is a necessity.”

(We, the Ordinary People of the Streets)

Madeleine Delbrêl lived in Ivry-sur-Seine, a working-class suburb of Paris known for its strong communist identity. She did not withdraw into a convent or rural retreat. Instead, she formed a small community of lay women who chose to live in the midst of secular, often explicitly anti-Christian society.

Her health was fragile. Her environment was politically charged. Institutional support was limited. Yet she refused both defensive withdrawal and aggressive reaction. Her writings describe holiness not as heroic achievement but as attentiveness to “what is given” in the present.

In works such as *We, the Ordinary People of the Streets*, she speaks of obedience not as compliance with an idealised programme, but as fidelity within constraint. She saw daily life — bureaucratic work, neighbourly relationships, urban fatigue — as the very place where God is en-

countered.

Her reconciliation with real limitations did not dull her energy. It grounded it. Sanctity unfolded not through expanding influence, but through inhabiting the exact conditions she had not chosen.

Etty Hillesum (1914–1943)

“I shall try to help You, God, to stop my strength ebbing away.”

(Diary, 12 July 1942)

Etty Hillesum's diaries, written between 1941 and 1943, document her inner life under Nazi occupation in the Netherlands. A young Jewish woman of intellectual and emotional intensity, she refused to reduce her spiritual awakening to ideology or despair.

Deported first to the transit camp at Westerbork and later to Auschwitz, she faced immovable historical forces that no personal effort could overcome. Yet within her writings one finds not naïve optimism but a remarkable interior spaciousness. She repeatedly chose not to allow hatred to define her inner atmosphere.

Her astonishing line about “helping God” reflects not theological confusion but radical availability. She recognised that she could not alter the political machinery around her. What remained was her inward stance.

Her reconciliation with real limitations preserved her freedom at the level of the heart, even as external freedom disappeared. Her diaries, later published as *An Interrupted Life*, reveal a maturation that unfolded under extreme constraint.

(continued, next page)

(Witnesses, continued)

Henri Nouwen (1932–1996)

“I am not what I do. I am not what I have. I am not what other people say about me.”

(Sabbatical Journey)

Henri Nouwen taught at Notre Dame, Yale, and Harvard, and became one of the most widely read spiritual writers of the late twentieth century. By conventional standards, he had achieved significant academic and pastoral influence.

Yet in midlife he experienced deep restlessness and vulnerability. Eventually he left prestigious posts to join the L’Arche Daybreak community in Canada, living among adults with intellectual disabilities. There, he encountered limits of a different kind: reduced public influence, emotional exposure, and the inability to measure impact in academic terms.

His later journals, especially *The Inner Voice of Love* and *Sabbatical Journey*, document a gradual relinquishment of the need to be productive, admired, or indispensable. He did not cease writing or teaching, but he learned to detach identity from visible achievement.

His reconciliation with real limitations involved accepting diminished roles, misunderstanding, and personal fragility. In that acceptance he discovered that belonging precedes contribution.

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