



## Allowing Grace to Move us Forward

A Review of

# ***Seeking Surrender: How My Friendship with a Trappist Monk Taught Me to Trust and Embrace Life***

**Colette Lafia**

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**Reviewed by Paul D. Gregory, Englewood Review of Books**

Our lives are filled with numerous starts and stops, ups and downs and thrilling and devastating experiences. For most of us, the view from the summit is sublime and easy to negotiate. However, how do we handle the disappointment and loss that invariably arrive at our doorsteps? Some are able to quickly adept on their own, while others spend days, months and yes, sometimes years, learning how to survive the valleys. For many of us, the challenges life throws at us can be overwhelming, shattering our beliefs in friendships, family, as well as God. Colette Lafia's book entitled *Seeking Surrender: How My Friendship with a Trappist Monk Taught Me to Trust and Embrace Life* beautifully tackles these issues.

In sometimes brutally honest detail, Lafia describes her life struggles, including death, insomnia, infertility and her husband's job struggles. The culmination of these stressors was her sister's death. After the funeral, she wrote, "My heart was broken, and the atmosphere of grief pervading my life intensified. I became acutely aware that anything could happen to the body, and the vulnerability of this truth pressed down heavily on me" (2). In an effort to stem the tide of depression and hopelessness, the author and her husband decide to attend a weeklong retreat at a Trappist Monastery in rural Kentucky.

Chapter 2 ("A Dialogue of Letters") documents the author's time at the monastery. This is the point where Lafia meets and begins to correspond with Brother René, a Trappist Monk. It was through these

letters that the author begins her journey of surrendering not only to loss, but also the realization of a different life imagined.

Chapter 3 (“Living Surrender”), details the author’s journey to living a life of surrender. A significant part of this chapter is devoted to the correspondence between the author and Brother René. This chapter contains rich, in-depth descriptions of the process of surrender and includes numerous exercises for the reader who may be going through similar experiences. Chapter 3 is divided into numerous sub-plots and what follows are several of my favorites.

A significant part of surrender involves *being shaped*. Lafia says “To surrender is to allow ourselves to be the raw material in the Sculptor’s hand” (31). Choosing to love the moment instead of worrying about what might or might not happen is also an integral part of seeking surrender. The author says, “*Surrender allows me to let go of fear, to open up and to receive what is offered in the moment – bringing love forward*” (36). We cannot be overly focused on our limitations; rather we should concentrate on the wide-open spaciousness of our lives (38). *Inside Trust* involves placing one’s complete trust in God. Lafia says “*The more I can be held by love when I am awake, the more I can stay calm. This is a new orientation for me: to be held and not to be holding. Once I bring acceptance to myself in the moment, I am able to release the gripping and fear*” (55). *Going Through the Gate* requires “I...more fully enter my life, in the way it is unfolding, trusting in it beyond my understanding” (63). And *Honoring the Path* requires that we consciously accept our lives the way they are, knowing that God is in control and is faithful to the end.

Chapter 5 details the five major steps in Lafia’s journey of surrender: (1) Acknowledge; (2) Find Support and Solitude; (3) Express and Release; (4) Seek Spiritual Nourishment; and (5) Notice Opportunities to Surrender in Daily Life. First, we must come to grips and allow ourselves to experience the full measure of pain and suffering of our lives. We cannot control all the negative and unpleasant things that come our way. Moreover, Lafia encourages the reader to courageously face and give into these things that beset us. Lafia says, “By giving into what we cannot change or control, we begin to pave the way for surrender in our lives” (125). Yes, it is painful to do such things. Lafia points out “I eventually sat in my own grief, not trying to get over it;

rather allowing myself to be with what I was feeling and experiencing (125). This is the beginning process of surrender that leads to something new that will emerge from our brokenness. As her mother taught her, “*People don’t get over things, but over time, they learn to carry their experiences of their lives with more understanding, forgiveness, and compassion*” (126). Second, the duality of support and solitude is paramount. None of us is an island. We need strong, positive people in our lives to lean on periodically. Similarly, we need to fight to preserve quiet times for ourselves. Third, we need to find ways to express ourselves. Some find exercise an ideal way to release one’s emotions. Lafia says, “*I needed to release all I had stored up in myself. I cried, I wrote. I prayed. I painted. I swam. I walked for hours. I cleaned out my closets. And I cared for others. All of these turned out to be part of my healing process*” (129). Importantly, Lafia proposes that the method is not as important as the need to create the form of expression of one’s energy. Fourth, we must all find some type of way to comfort and strengthen ourselves. The author proposes that meditation, reading and writing were some of ways she nourished herself. Last, we must become more conscious of our daily opportunities to surrender. “*Surrender is an invitation to find contentment and peace, today and tomorrow, to open ourselves to trust life beyond the limitations that our fears, our expectations, and our disappointments impose on it*” (133).

*Seeking Surrender* is a relatively short book, divided into 5 chapters that chronicle the author’s journey in learning to surrender her life amidst significant problems like infertility; insomnia, death of loved ones and job change. Integral to her journey was the fortuitous encounter with Brother René, a Trappist Monk who served as a sounding board for Lafia during her times of distress, longing and despair. This book is filled with important lessons for those who find themselves going through hard times in their lives. The letters between the author and Brother René enhance the authenticity of the reader’s experience. Most every person will find the author’s story an invaluable aide in coping with life’s tougher experiences. Additionally, similar to Brother René, we’ve all been graced with one or two individuals that prove priceless in helping us through the hard times of our lives. My favorite part of *Seeking Surrender* was the Seeking Surrender exercises in Chapter 3.

Is this the book that will solve all your problems? Probably not. Honestly, Lafia's writing doesn't make such promises. Toward the end, she writes that, "*Along the way, rage will return, grief will overtake us, loss will come knocking at our door, and doubt will be a constant visitor. But if we seek and build surrender as our foundation, it will hold us in those darker moments, allowing grace to move us forward along our path*" (133). Maybe that's all we can ask.

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