

I Surrender All—Barb

I guess we won't be sleeping in this morning. Being retired has spoiled me, as I haven't had to get up this early in a long time. After a six o'clock wake-up call, we set off on an hour long bus ride with coffee and croissants in hand. I want to be grumpy, but I must admit the sunrise over the Blue Ridge Mountains is absolutely spectacular and well worth a few hours of missed sleep. After about 30 minutes, we stop at a scenic overlook, get off of the bus in pitch darkness, and accept blankets from Shula because it is still cold. I'm tempted to head back to the warm bus, but then, as if on cue, the sky is transformed right before my eyes. The veil of darkness slowly lifts as hues of pink, magenta, and orange emerge. The colors dance across the sky as the blackness fades into light. A majestic ball of fire begins its ascent over the horizon. The sun, decorated with streams of gold, fills the sky, and the morning bursts forth.

Not a word is spoken. The quiet is deafening. Savannah, Lindsey, and even outspoken Alex also seem in awe. If I weren't shy, I would lift my voice in praise— "Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord. Let the earth hear Your voice. Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord. Let the people rejoice" or "All hail the power of Jesus' name. Let angels' prostrate fall. Bring forth the royal diadem and crown Him Lord of all" or my all-time favorite, "Great is Thy faithfulness. Morning by morning new mercies I see." I don't think the other ladies know these songs, but these were the hymns I grew up with, are the songs that fill my heart and are the songs that have sustained me over the years. What an awesome experience! All I can say is, let the heavens declare the glorious splendor of the Lord!

“Good morning, ladies, and welcome to the Magnum Pottery Studio in the beautiful town of Weaversville, North Carolina. I trust that you enjoyed the sunrise, the ride through the mountains, and a light morning breakfast. I’m sure you’re wondering why you’re up so early this morning, but I assure you that there is a method to my madness. I ask that you keep an open mind and that you explore every little inkling and feeling you have. Look for the obvious and the not-so-obvious applications to your lives and to your relationships in what you will experience today.” Maybe we’re becoming more accustomed to Shula’s obscure utterances, since no one responds. Then again, maybe we’re all still asleep.

“Ladies, this morning we will have the pleasure and the privilege of learning about the craft of pottery from none other than Wilna Blenheim. I’d now like to introduce to you Wilna, a renowned craftsman known around the world for her pottery. Wilna is on tour this summer, and her work will be featured at the Ackland Art Museum. She is also serving as a guest lecturer at Appalachian State University.”

If we were asleep before we’re wide awake now. How Shula came up with this idea I’ll never know. For me, this is more rewarding than anyone could imagine. I absolutely love Wilna’s work. David gave me a set of her bowls for our twenty-fifth anniversary. Being in the studio with Wilna is surreal. She exudes peacefulness and is clearly a woman of God. She hasn’t even spoken, yet her calming presence washes over me like the gentle morning dew. Without effort or thought, my breathing slows, my circadian rhythm recalibrates, and I feel more at one with nature and thus with our Creator.

I know this sounds a bit spiritualistic, but years of walking with God have taught me what it means to embody His peace and His presence. Society says we have to be doing, moving, and working at all times. But God suggests that His peace and love should dwell in us. Anyway, I wish I could bottle this feeling and sell it, though I probably wouldn’t find many takers because most people don’t know how to be still. They aren’t comfortable just being. Take Alex, for example. This day may just kill her dead.

“Excuse me. Before we get started, can you tell us how this relates to our marriages? I don’t mean any disrespect, but this outing was not described in the brochure, and while it may be a nice excursion and it might be fun to meet a famous, um, pottery person, I’m anxious that we

get on with the sessions. We have only a week to learn from you, Shula, the expert on marriage. And this detour seems to be taking up more of our limited time. And please, I hope you're not offended, Ms. Wilma, because that is not my intent."

I am always intrigued when a person who has no intention of offending still manages to be offensive. I'm guessing Shula warned Wilna about Alex as she handles her so gracefully. "You must be Alex. Welcome and Alex, my dear, no offense taken. I'd also like to welcome each of you, Savannah, Lindsey, and Barbara. I'm sure you're all curious as to why you're here and wondering what in the world pottery has to do with marriage. And I hope that by the end of the day or perhaps by the end of your week with Shula, you'll understand. Now, I'm going to ask you to take a deep breath and allow the moment, your surroundings, and God to speak to you. Free your mind of anxieties, fears, and expectations. Cast all your cares upon God, because He cares about you. I live by 1 Peter 5:7. I invite you to do the same."

With that, Wilna sits at her pottery wheel, allowing the clay to glide through her wet hands, molding and shaping it and changing its appearance. As she works the clay, she shares her meditations. "And the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul. I imagine God kneading, shaping, and molding Adam into being. I imagine how the clay must have felt in His hands and between His fingers." The lump of clay starts to take form. "I imagine God using His divine thumb as He smoothed the clay into the form of a head, a torso, legs, arms, hands, and feet. I imagine the attention given to shaping the ears, the nose, the eyes, and the lips and the delicate care given to chiseling each strand of hair." A vessel begins to emerge.

"Before each of you is clay, a potter's wheel, a bucket of water, and some tools—an anvil, a rib, and a paddle. You also have headphones and your choice of music, if you want it, on the panel located on the table to your left. I'm not going to give you a formal lesson in pottery. I want you to watch me as long as you feel that's necessary and then begin. You may make mistakes. Actually, you will make mistakes, most likely many mistakes, and that's okay. Just begin again, like this." And as quickly as the vessel emerged, it disappears and Wilna begins reshaping the clay. "See?

Not only did God create us, making each of us a distinctive and treasured masterpiece, but He also has the power to re-create us. Jeremiah 18 tells us,

This is the message that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: Jeremiah, go down to the potter's house. I will give you my message there. So I went down to the potter's house and saw him working with clay at the wheel. He was making a pot from clay. But there was something wrong with the pot. So the potter used that clay to make another pot. With his hands he shaped the pot the way he wanted it to be. Then this message from the Lord came to me: Family of Israel, you know that I can do the same thing with you. You are like the clay in the potter's hands, and I am the potter. This message is from the Lord.

Another vessel appears before our eyes. It differs in shape from the earlier one, but it is a vessel nonetheless. Wilna continues to instruct us. "Relax and allow yourself to create without judgment, without boundaries, without inhibitions, and don't be afraid to make a mistake; you have the power to start over again."

Wilna immerses herself in completing her masterpiece. For a few minutes we all seem perplexed. I can see questions spinning around in the other ladies' heads. They are the same ones spinning around in my head. *How and where do I start? I'm not an artist, and I know nothing about pottery. How can I work alongside this master in her field? And for the twentieth time, what does this have to do with marriage?* Well I could spend the morning questioning this activity, or I could get started. No need to dawdle. I might as well jump in and get started. After selecting a classical music station, I experiment with the potter's wheel. I dry off my wheel, wet my hands, and attempt to throw a ball of clay as close to the center of the wheel as I can, just as I saw Wilna do. Several times it becomes a flattened blob, and I have to release my foot from the pedal, scoop up the clay, and form it into a ball again.

The clay is cold, wet, and smooth. Once I get it centered and figure out how to keep it from flying across the room, I build up speed on the wheel and form the clay into a cone. I use my thumbs along the outside

of the cone and my fingers along the inside. The cone takes the shape of a bowl. The more comfortable I become with the process, the more I am immersed in deep contemplation. Wilna's reflections remind me just how awesome God is. To think that in His infinite wisdom He created little old me with my wit and my warmth, my anguish and my anxieties. He purposely placed the tiny mole above my upper lip and the butterfly-shaped birthmark on my left hip. My Creator loves me.

After fifteen minutes, I take a break and look around the room. Seems like the ladies are immersed in their own little worlds too. All signs of distress and confusion have been replaced with serene dispositions. Pottery making seems to be right up Savannah's alley. Her face reflects pure bliss. Alex seems contemplative or at least more relaxed. And my little Lindsey (she's just like a daughter to me) seems lost in the moment, swaying slightly, hands floating over the clay like an expert. I do believe I'm witnessing the power of God at work.

We work for a couple of hours, becoming more comfortable with the craft. Gradually Wilna brings us back to the present. "Ask the animals of the land, the birds of the air, or the fish of the sea to teach you. Which of these does not know that the hand of the Lord has created them and sustains them? In His hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind. Each of you is special. You were beautifully and wonderfully made, and God has a plan and a purpose for your lives. I'm looking around the room at the masterpieces you've created. To think that just a few hours ago you were all amateurs and now you're potters. I'm in awe of your works of art and inspired by them. Why don't we take a moment to share our creations and the inspirations for them with one another? Lindsey, would you like to begin?"

"Absolutely. This was a totally amazing experience. I could imagine what you were saying about God creating us from the clay. I had the same feeling this morning that I have when I'm out on the wildlife reserve. It's so peaceful, and my mind is totally clear when I'm out in nature. I had no clue what I was making. I just let the spirit guide me. And I was thinking about when I first met Eddie. His eyes seemed to dance in the sunlight, my heart skipped a beat, and I knew the moment he said hello that I'd be his forever. So when I look at what I created, it reminds me of a cup overflowing with love. So yeah, that's basically it. It seems I made a cup."

“How beautiful, Lindsey. Your inspiration reminds me of Psalm 23. ‘He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters,’ and it goes on to say, ‘He prepares a table before me in the presence of my enemies: He anoints my head with oil; my cup runs over.’ Excellent analogy, and thank you for sharing. How about you, Alex? Would you like to share?”

“Okay, but I didn’t have some spiritual awakening like Lindsey. I just set out to make a bowl because that seemed to be easiest thing for me to do. I watched what you did until I got the hang of it, and then I tried to copy you. I messed up a few times, but after a while I figured it out and I got a little rhythm going. So I made a bowl, and I was thinking it would fit perfectly in my office since I’ve done it in a Santa Fe sort of décor. I was wondering if we’ll have a chance to decorate our art and if you’ll give us tips on how to blend and match colors and maybe how to use stencils to create designs?”

A bowl to match the décor of her office. Is that all Alex got from this experience? How will Shula or You reach her, dear Father? Wilna, however, doesn’t miss a beat. “So out of your need for security and predictability, you watched me for a while so that you could establish a pattern or a method. And perhaps because of your desire for perfection, you started three times before you created your final masterpiece, and because you are a planner or a forward thinker, you created something that would serve a purpose and would have a place. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Alex, we all have an inner compass that guides our thoughts, actions, and responses. So use the time this week to get acquainted with your inner compass. What drives you? Why do you do the things that you do? And by the way, I love your bowl. It is absolutely beautiful, but besides creating beautiful art, you should sketch out your reasons for being here and explore what makes you tick. Does that make sense?”

“Well, that’s why I asked earlier about the point of all of this. Had I known you wanted us to have some grand epiphany, I would have adjusted accordingly. But for me there is nothing deeper to what I made and why I made it. I’m proud of this accomplishment, and I’m happy to be going home with a lovely bowl that I created in your presence, no less. For me it’s nothing more, nothing less.”

“Very well, Alex. I’m glad that you’re happy with your bowl, and perhaps we can find time to help you with decorating it. How about you, Savannah? You seem to be bursting over there.”

“Albert Einstein once said, ‘True art is characterized by an irresistible urge in the creative artist.’ This ladies, is true art.” And before our eyes, Savannah transforms the studio into her stage as she recites “The Creation” by James Weldon Johnson.

“Then God sat down on the side of a hill where He could think. By a deep, wide river He sat down, with His head in His hands. God thought and thought till He thought, ‘I’ll make me a man!’”

I’m stunned into silence. We’re all stunned into silence. She should definitely be on Broadway. I’ve never seen anything like it. I feel as if I am standing on the edge of darkness with God Himself. The room remains silent as Savannah slowly transforms back into herself.

“That was my inspiration, and I had no idea what would emerge as I molded the clay. But I knew that I would call it ‘The Creation,’ and every time I look at it I will be reminded of this moment. It has no use other than to serve as memorial of this experience.”

Well, it is definitely creative. It’s not a vase, a bowl, or a cup. Maybe a statue. A statue of what I’m not sure, so I guess Savannah is right in naming it “The Creation.”

“Savannah that was a powerful and moving rendition of ‘The Creation.’ And I can see how the clay, in your hands, has taken on the attributes of God’s creation. Your statue or memorial, with its many twists and curves and its edges jutting out in varying angles, resembles the brilliant rays of the sun or a tree with many leaves and branches or the crashing waves of a turbulent ocean. It might also be the mane of a lion, or two lovers intertwined in a moment of heated passion. Your work contains all aspects of the creation—light, land, water, animals, people. Thank you so much for sharing from your heart.” Wow, I’m amazed again by Wilna’s brilliancy and her ability to take the obscure and bring it back to God.

“Barb, that leaves you. Why don’t you share your masterpiece with us?”

“Perhaps I should have gone first. Really, there’s not much to share. I was listening to a beautiful song, one of my all-time favorites.” I begin singing, which surprises the ladies and me too. “I come to the garden alone while the dew is still on the roses, and the voice I hear, falling on my ear, the Son of God discloses . . . And He walks with me and He talks with me and He tells me I am His own. And the joy we share as we tarry there no other has ever known.’ Anyway, it goes something like that. I remember my grandmother singing this song when I was just a young child, and I remember that she had the most beautiful gardens.” I pause and smile. “Hmm. Maybe I got my green thumb from her.

“Anyway, when I was working with the clay I was reminded of my garden back home. And it just felt right to make a vase that could hold my flowers. David used to bring me fresh-cut flowers every week, and I’d have them on the kitchen table. Come to think of it, I haven’t had flowers on the kitchen table in a while. Maybe a new vase would serve as a reminder of how much I appreciated and enjoyed them, and perhaps I can begin the tradition again. This is nothing fancy, but it’ll do if for nothing more than a reminder.”

“Thank you, Barb. The Bible compares Christ to a rose, the rose of Sharon. Like a rose, He was pure and lovely amidst all the thorns. We should also remember that left unattended, weeds and thorns can destroy a garden and all its beauty. Gardens need our care and attention—weeding, watering, pruning, fertilizing. Sounds sort of like marriages, but I’ll leave that to Shula. Barb, by the way, your voice is absolutely beautiful. Do you sing in the church or something?”

“I sang in the church choir many, many years ago, but I haven’t sung in a long while.”

“Maybe you should consider ways you could share your gift with others again.”

“A gift? Hmm. I guess I never considered my voice or my singing a gift. It’s something I usually do in private. I sing to my children or sing in my garden. David used to say he loved to hear me sing. I guess it wasn’t a big deal to me.”

“Well, more food for thought for you, Barbara. Ladies, I must say job well done. Your works have touched my soul. I’d like to close with this. Each of you has created a masterpiece, at least in your own eyes. And that’s

all that art, the beauty of art and the appreciation of art means—beauty is in the eye of the beholder. I'm reminded of a potter who designed most of his works of art during the early 1900s. His name was George E. Ohr, and he created hundreds of pieces of pottery, all of which were obscure, asymmetrical, and abstract. Here's one example. Look at this bowl. The edges are rumpled like a brown paper bag. There are several indentations, and the vivid colors blend together in haphazard and chaotic ways.

“Well, back in George's day, his work was shunned and considered loony. And in the twenty-five years that his shop was open, he didn't sell one piece. Today, his pieces sell for as much as sixty thousand dollars. Can you believe it? A century ago they were worthless and today they're priceless. The other thing I like about George is the sign in his shop window that read: *Magnus opus, nulli secundus, optimus cognito, ergo sum*. Anyone know what that means?” Wilna looks around the room. Everyone is captivated by her story, but no one knows the meaning of the Latin. “Well, I'll tell you. Those words mean ‘A masterpiece, second to none, the best; therefore, I am.’

“Maybe old George wasn't so loony after all. And I for one am glad that we are God's masterpieces, second to none. Psalm 139:4 tells us we are fearfully and wonderfully made. And Ephesians 2:10 tells us that we are God's handiwork, created anew in Christ Jesus. And we've already explained that because we are mere pieces of clay, like the pieces you've been working with, God can shape and reshape us as needed so that we shine like the masterpieces He designed us to be.”

Wow! How powerful is that? From the looks on the faces of the ladies, I think they agree.

“Now, as Alex requested, and I had actually already planned, we'll head to the back of the studio and complete our masterpieces. As with the molding of your creations, feel free to watch me decorate my vessel. There are objects and materials on the tables for your use—forks, feathers, rope, stamps, stencils, paints. Use whatever you like to make designs, and afterward we will glaze our creations and fire them in the oven and you'll be all set.”

What a blessing to have met Wilna. She has a way of making people feel at ease and an uncanny ability to read people and to draw biblical lessons from the most mundane occurrences. We spend a few more hours

with Wilna and are all ecstatic. After our departure, we stop at the Crescent Lodge Inn for lunch. The view is spectacular, the food is delicious (hope Trixie and Genevieve don't get wind of this), and the conversation is peppered with humorous anecdotes and comments on the lovely scenery. I can tell that we're bonding, but as we'll soon learn, today's mission hasn't been accomplished yet. What happens next will cause weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Shula goes in for the kill. "Ladies, this has been a wonderful day. We couldn't ask for better weather, our time with Wilna will be a treasured memory forever, and it's such a blessing to see you growing closer as a group. Our focus this week is on the concept of submission, and today more specifically we are focusing on the notion of surrender. One of my favorite hymns is 'I Surrender All.' Maybe we should ask Barb to sing it for us. Your voice is simply amazing." I blush but am pleased by the compliment. "Just listen to the words for a moment. Allow them to permeate your heart while you reflect on the meaning."

Shula will sometimes fall silent, waiting for us to react. I assume she wants us to enter a quiet zone where God speaks and reveals things to us, where we cast all our cares aside and focus on Him. I strive to get there as the music begins. "All to Jesus I surrender. All to Him I freely give." The only sounds now are the intermittent chirping of birds, the hushed rippling of the creek below, and the beautiful melody of "I Surrender All." Tears are rolling down Savannah's face, and Lindsey appears to be whispering to God in a somewhat anguished state. Alex has closed her eyes, but I can't tell if she's napping, praying, or silently cursing Shula.

"To live out the principles of submission in our lives and in our marriages," Shula says, "we must first willingly surrender everything to the will of our heavenly Father. That includes all of our hopes, our fears, our longings and desires, our most cherished possessions, our relationships, our plans, and those we love most. We must place our lives in the hands of our Father and depend on Him completely. 'I appeal to you by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.' So ladies, it is now time to exercise our faith by willingly surrendering our cherished vessels, crafted under the tutelage of Wilna Blenheim." Before we have time to react, Shula drops her

bowl, which had been beautifully wrapped and placed in a gift bag, over the side of the Cascade Bridge onto the jagged rocks below.

“What the devil? Are you out of your mind? Why did you do that? To make some point? We get it, Shula. Surrender all to Jesus. We get it. But did you have to destroy something so valuable? That was a Blenheim original, or at least something made in her studio with her clay. Do you know how much that is worth? I’m now convinced that you’re crazy.” Alex rolls her eyes, shakes her head, and sighs, obviously perplexed and annoyed by what Shula just did.

“Maybe you get it in theory, Alex. But do you really understand how hard it is to give up something you treasure? To give up something you’re proud of? To give up something that’s symbolic or meaningful to you? Just imagine how hard it is to surrender everything, to surrender things, feelings, attitudes, or beliefs that may be far more valuable than even a Blenheim original. Your first step in surrendering all begins right now. I’ll give you all a few minutes to let your creations go, and I’ll meet you back on the van.”

Oh boy. This will be hard. I understand where Alex is coming from, and I get what Shula is trying to help us understand. I can’t let go yet, so I watch the others. Savannah quickly swipes the tears from her cheeks and is the first to let go. She doesn’t even look as she tosses her sculpture over the railing. She hurriedly returns to the van, puts her earbuds in, and stares out of the window from her seat in the back. Lindsey stands beside me, as if waiting for a cue. Maybe she needs my strength to do this hard thing, so I take my vase out of the wrapping, examine it one last time, and pray for strength. I believe that God is with me, so I rewrap the vase, place it back in the gift bag, and I let it fall over the rail. I watch it as it descends and crashes, and then I begin to sing softly “I Surrender All.” Lindsey watches me for a while and then joins in singing. Our voices blend and echo through the valley, and Lindsey appears to gain strength as she too sends her cup overboard. She seems at ease, and we remain a minute longer, continuing to sing.

As for Alex, not only can she not release her anger or her contempt, but she’s also unable to let go of her bowl. She returns to the van, gift bag still in hand, bowl still intact, and as she passes Shula, she shakes her

head, muttering about the insanity of counselors, the underestimation of the worth of our creations, and the stupidity of those who follow lunatics.

Our journey back to Naaman's is just as quiet as our journey there although I suspect for very different reasons. When we finally arrive, Shula hands us discussion points and reflection topics to guide our journaling. We have the rest of the day to reflect and to sort out our jumbled emotions.

Dear loving Father, today we focused on surrendering our all to You, and while I understand the importance of surrender and think that Shula conveyed its significance, it's still something I struggle with daily. Yielding my will, my plans, my fears, my loved ones, my very life to You is a struggle. But I know that with You all things are possible. As You continue to break me, to mold me, and to create in me a clean heart, I pray that You do the same for all of the ladies this week. Help them to be receptive to Your Holy Spirit. Help them to yield to Your will and Your way, to Your plans and Your purposes for their lives. I'm beginning to understand why I'm here. I believe You led me here not just for me but for the ladies too. I lay my burdens at Your feet, and I close this prayer confident that my life is secure in Your hands. I ask all these things in the most precious and worthy name of Jesus. Amen.

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