

## I WON'T BACK DOWN

Inspired by the Tom Petty Song

Final Week of a 5-Week "Songs of Life" Series

Rev. Dr. Michele Whittington

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For those of you I don't know, I'm Rev. Michelle Whittington, and it truly is an honor to be with you this morning. I'm sorry that Richard is not here. I was looking forward to his version of "I Won't Back Down," but instead you're going to get mine this morning!

So he's doing this series that I just love -- and I know we all do! -- his series on "Songs of Life" and picking, I like to say, a modern popular song ... but, of course, they're not actually new songs. They're modern for me, because they're my era songs! But picking popular songs and then finding a spiritual lesson in them. So I'm going to give you a spiritual lesson for the idea of "I Won't Back Down." Just do it in a slightly different way than Rev. Richard typically does it.

So I have a question. I am going to start in a way that he does; I have a question for you! Have any of you ever had an opportunity presented itself to you? Maybe it came from the outside. Maybe it came from within; an idea that you had. Some way that you would expand and step out into the world in a bigger way. And instead of saying, "Oh, yay," you said, "No way." [Congregants laugh] Do you ever do that? Thank you for raising your hand on that? Yeah. Thank you. You wanted to back down from that. You wanted to step back and say, "No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no."

But you think about it. It won't let you go. You keep noodling on it. Maybe you do your prayer work, your journaling work, your processing. And then, of course, you talk to every living soul that you know about. About whether you should do this thing. And you start thinking, "Well, maybe I can't back down." And then, "Maybe I won't back down."

And so, despite this fear and trepidation, you say, "Okay; I will stand my ground." You're catching the lyrics, right, that I'm incorporating in here? Good; good! Because that's the connection to the song. I want to make sure we get the connection to the song. [Congregants laugh]

I won't back down.

So I want to tell you a story of an opportunity I had to do those very things. And the journey that I took from the "No way; I'm going to back down!" to "Maybe I can't back down" or "Maybe I won't back down."

And in it -- as I tell you this story, what's really important ... The story is just interesting information; I hope you find it interesting. But it really is what the spiritual deepenings and lessons that I got to live as I walk through this journey. Because, you know, it's one thing to sit here on a Sunday morning and hear a message or give a message. Either one; it's the same. But it's a whole different ballgame to go out those doors and live life incorporating the messages that we have in places like this. That's what makes it real: when we actually do what we say we know.

So I got a chance to practice doing literally what I preach. [Laughs] And so here's how it went. In October of last year, I was humbled and honored to get an invitation to attend an invitation-only leadership retreat in Ahmedabad, India. Right? Wow! It was a leadership retreat called "Gandhi 3.0" and it was based on Gandhian leadership principles. And there were 40 leaders from around the world who were invited to come to this. And I was truly humbled and honored to have been invited.

And being 100% candid and honest with you, everything in me said, "Ooooooh. No! No!" Going to India frankly scared me. It's too much; too chaotic; too this; too that. I don't know. I just never had ... India was

never on my bucket list. Like, I'm sure it is on the bucket list for some of you, and probably some of you have been there. But it was not mine.

But I didn't say no to the invitation. I said what many of us, I think, can do at times as a stalling technique, plus actually we might really do it! But it can also be a stalling technique, and it's this. Tell me if you've ever used it. *"You know, let me pray on that."* [Congregants laugh] Right?

Well, I did actually pray on that. I didn't just use it as a stalling technique; I did say, *"I just need to be with this a bit before I give an answer."* So I did pray on it, and I did meditate on it.

And then I was teaching a class, a women's class -- and I always do the work that we're doing in the class. And in that class we were invited, all of us, to take an issue -- something we might be grappling with a little bit -- and pose a question, and see what would come from that question. And the question we posed, and that I posed, around this trip to India was: What gifts and opportunities are being presented to me here? What gifts and opportunities are being presented to me here?

**This, by the way, is spiritual deepening lesson to live number one, in case you want to keep track and take notes, which would not be a bad idea. What gifts and opportunities are being presented to me here?** And as soon as I asked that question, I got a full-body ... Have you ever gotten a full-body knowing that something was yours to do? That you could not back down; that you had to do it? I got that. I got a full-body *"Yes!"* when I asked that question. And so then I gave a verbal, *"Yes, I will go."*

Now, what I will tell you; and I know this one already; I've learned this one many times. I may have even spoken about this a little bit in previous times I've been here. But here it is again because it's important and it's spiritual deepening number two: just because you get a *"Yes!"* for something that you're afraid to do doesn't mean the fear is going to go away. Darn it! Darn it! It would be really nice if, once we get the *"Yes,"* the fear goes away. But it doesn't! It doesn't work that way. Just live with that. That's just how it is.

But I learned many years ago when I walked on fire -- which also, by the way, terrified me -- with Edwene Gaines, a beautiful prosperity teacher. And she said to us, *"You're going to come up to that fire, and your fear is going to feel like a wall. It's going to feel like a wall. But this is what you're going to do."*

**Here's our spiritual deepening number two: when you are facing a fear -- ready for it? Good! Three of you are ready; I like that! [Congregants laugh] Take a breath. Expect the best. Take the first step.** And what you will find is that that wall of fear is really just a veil that you will step right through.

So that is what I did! I took a breath; I expected the best; and I took the step. And that step was not only to say *"Yes,"* but then to start wheels in motion to actually get me there. So my *"I must back down"* changed to an *"I won't back down, and I will do this thing that scares me, but that I know will transform me at my core."*

So then ... [Laughs] And if you ever have this happen: You've said, *"Yes."* You've walked through the fear - or you keep walking through the fear; you may have to do this more than once, by the way. And then, all of a sudden, things don't start going quite right. Right? Things start falling apart. Roadblocks come in front of you. Anybody ever had that? You're like, *"Oh, this is not working like I thought it was going to work. I thought it was going to be smooth sailing from here."*

And it isn't! Because roadblock after roadblock comes up. And then you start to think, *"Well, maybe I'm not supposed to do this. I don't know!"* Well, that happened for me! And I will not tell you the long, boring, arduous journey. Some of you in this group -- I'm looking out; I see you -- I know you've heard the story many times, so you don't need to hear it again. But I will tell you this part of the story.

One of the pieces that had to happen for me before I could go was to get a visa. You have to have a visa to go to India, not just a passport. A visa. And for reasons unknown and completely surprising to me, I was rejected for a visa ... not once, but twice. [Congregants laugh] I guess my shady past? [Congregants laugh] I don't know; caught up with me finally? They finally found out? They don't tell you; they just say "rejected."

This took a long time. This took a long time to get to the point of "I don't have a visa." And I am now about 15 days away from needing, from getting on a plane. So, I spoke to my contact in India who's helping me through all this. And he said, "Here's what we're going to do. We are going to send you to the Consulate in San Francisco." I don't have to physically go ... "But we're going to send your application there and we'll see if we can't push that through."

So I had to fill out a whole new raft of paperwork and documentation and this and that. And I called them just to talk about it a bit, and I was told that it's going to take at least 15 days -- minimum of 15 days -- to get a visa, up to 60. Minimum! And I said, "Well, I'm ... you know ..." Because now we're like 10 days out. Frankly, we're about 10 days out now. And I said, "I have 10 days." And the woman went, "Yeah, well, that's a problem. I'm just telling you, it takes 15."

Okay. So I put it in the mail. I put my application and I also had to put in an envelope to the Indian Consulate in San Francisco my passport. [Congregant gasps] Yeah; thank you! That was what I did, too. I did that, too. With shaky hands and trepidation, I put my passport in this envelope and off it went. And at that moment -- and I had been saying to myself all along, "I am taking a breath, expecting the best, taking the steps."

But I also -- not but, and -- I also had an attitude that, if this is mine to do, I will go. And it's not in my control whether or not I get this visa. What's in my control are the steps I can take to get there. To get to the right, you know ... To get my documentation to the right place. But I don't control whether or not I get a visa. And if it is mine to do, I will get this. And if it's not mine to do, I won't.

**And lesson number four -- spiritual deepening number four -- is I truly, truly surrendered.** I surrendered the process and I surrendered the outcome. And I trusted Life.

Now I say Life with a capital L. And when I mean when I say Life with a capital L, I mean God. I trusted God to sort this out.

And I felt like when I put my application and my passport in the mail, I had done every step. I had taken every step I could take. And I did literally put it in the mail 10 days prior to needing to get on a plane to go. And how many days did the consulate tell me I needed to have? You got it! Fifteen. But I trusted Life to unfold as it should for my highest good. I said, "I'm going to stand my ground in that knowing and then let's see what happens."

So on the eighth day -- the eighth day before I'm supposed to leave -- I get an email from the San Francisco Consulate. And I open it. And I'm excited! I have to admit I'm excited, and I thought, "Okay; here we go. Rock and roll!" And it said, "Your application has been processed, and your documentation is being returned." Nothing else.

Okay. Breathe and surrender. Breathe and surrender. Trust Life. Trust Life.

On the Monday before I am to leave on a Saturday ... I have visual aids for you. [Holds up envelope] This envelope; this envelope came in the mail. So, can you just take a moment before I reveal the contents of this envelope to recognize the little miracle that happened. How many days was it going to take? Fifteen. I got this back in, like, three days. I sent it and got it back in three days. We did overnight at both directions, but it took three days for this to go and come back. Having this envelope in my hand is a

miracle. This is a miracle! I just want you to recognize the miracle-making that can happen when we stand true to what we say we believe.

Alright! So here I am. Monday morning. Okay, this is it. Am I going to India or not? My fate is in this envelope. I rip it open. I look in it. I look in it. Hmmm. Curious. It's curious what's in here. [Holds up her passport] This is what's in here. Nothing else. This, which frankly, by the way, as an aside, I am profoundly grateful to have back. Very grateful to have this back. But I'm thinking, "*Where's the letter that says I got my visa? Where's the letter that says I didn't get my visa? Where's a love note? Where's anything?*" Anything in here? There's nothing!

So I leaf through this ... this meaning my passport. And I don't see anything. Maybe there's a piece of paper in here? No. So I took a breath and I moved into fifth spiritual deepening.

And the fifth spiritual deepening was I was so grateful for the journey and the lessons that I got to live up to this moment. I was in gratitude. **Fifth lesson: be in gratitude no matter what the outcome.** No matter what the outcome, be in gratitude. Was this the fifth one or the fourth one? Did I get myself off five? Thank you. I can count! That's good! Be in gratitude.

And okay; I'm not going. I'm not supposed to go. It's not meant for me to do. Okay; I had already surrendered to that. So I was all right with it I told a few people; I sent a few emails. One text that I sent was to the man who had invited me originally. He would he lives in India. His name Nimo Patel. He's an amazing young man who does extraordinary work in India. And he's a singer-songwriter, in addition to many other things, and has done a lot of collaboration with Daniel Nahmod, who many of you probably, ... Well even if you don't think you know his music, you know his music, because we sing it here almost every Sunday. We sing at least one Daniel Nahmod song every Sunday in the congregational singing.

And so, I met him through Daniel and he's the one who invited me to go to India. I had texted him and I said, "*Nimo, it looks like, you know, it's not in the cards. It's not happening. I will not ... I did not get my visa; I won't be coming.*"

Now it's 12-and-a-half hours ahead in India. So I texted him about noon. So it was 12:30 a.m. for him. So six hours later -- seven hours later -- when he woke up, I receive a text back from him. And I could read in the words and urgency. There was an urgency in his words and his words said, "*Have you looked inside your visa? Have you looked at every page?*"

And I thought to myself, "*Well, I looked ... but maybe I didn't go through, like, every single page.*" So now I'm doing that. I'm looking through every ... I don't see; it's not here. There's my stamp from Machu Picchu. But there's no ... No, there's no visa. I don't see anything in here. [Gasps loudly]

"*Oh, my!*" I won't say what I said. [Congregants laugh] [Holds up her visa; congregants cheer and applaud] Buried in the middle of my passport is my visa ... which, by the way is for 10 years, so I can go back many times. [Congregants laugh]

**Spiritual lesson number six: pay attention.** [Congregants laugh] That's not quite it. That's all of it, but that's enough, right? Look beyond what you think you see, because the miracle might be right in front of you.

I expected it to come in a shape in the form of a letter -- something else in that envelope. I did not expect it to be here. It did not come as I expected. Sometimes we get blinded because our good isn't coming like we think it should; like I said I wanted it. I think it's here, but actually it's coming from over here. And I don't see it because I'm not looking over there.

So take a breath with that one. That one is so big! Look beyond what you expect. Have your eyes open, because your miracle might be right here.

So, I went from, *"I'm backing down; can't do it!"* to *"I won't back down; I will stand my ground"* to *"I'm not sure; I might have to back down."* But to still standing my ground in knowing these spiritual principles and living them to, *"I'm going to India!"* And I did. And I went. And I had a truly life-changing, life-transforming experience there.

And in the few minutes that I have left, I want to share with you one of many concepts that we explored in the seven days that we were together. **And the concept is the idea of soul force.** Soul force. Soul force is a knowing; an inner strength; an inner wisdom that comes -- and I'm going to quote Gandhi now -- that comes *"when we abide in the eternal."* When we abide in the eternal.

It was because of Gandhi's soul force -- and then the way he developed the soul force in those around him -- that he was able to take his country into freedom from England with absolutely no violence. Well, let me rephrase that. His people did not perpetrate any violence. And we often talk about Gandhi and say he was nonviolent. He was nonviolent.

And, you know, I got to deepen so much into his work and to find out that that word is completely inadequate: nonviolent. That is completely inadequate for who he was and what he did. He did everything with love. Not just non-violence; with love. He said to his opponents, *"I oppose what you are standing for and what you are doing, and it is wrong. But I love you."* And he could do that because he had soul force, right?

So spiritual deepening whatever the number is now, I've lost my count. But it doesn't matter. Six. Thank you so much. **Spiritual deepening six is: how are you deepening your soul force?** What are you doing? I know coming here every Sunday is an amazing thing, and what are your spiritual practices that deepen your soul force?

I want to leave you with a story. And it's not about Gandhi, but it's a story I heard at this retreat that moved me more than anything else in these seven days. And there were many, many things that moved me to tears. But this one was ... it took the cake, as they say.

And it's a true story of two monks in 1977. This happened in 1977. And these monks were part of a monastery in Los Angeles. And one of their spiritual practices that they did all the time was to bow. Now I do not mean a bow like this. [Clasps hands and bends at the waist so that upper body is parallel to the floor] I mean a bow on your knees, forehead-to-the floor bow. That was one of their spiritual practices.

So it's 1977 and these two monks want to do something for peace. They want to stand for peace. They want to live peace. They want to do something to promote peace out in the world. And they decide that they are going to take a trek from Los Angeles, where their monastery was, to the City of 10,000 Buddhas, which still exists today. It is north of San Francisco outside of Ukiah, California. That is approximately an 800-mile trip.

They decided to walk that trek for peace. Ooh, but let me say that differently. They didn't just walk. They traveled 800 miles taking three steps and one bow. Three steps and one bow. Three steps and one bow. It took them almost three years to do that journey. And they stayed centered in peace, abiding in the eternal, their soul forces alive as they did this journey.

And they were met with lots of kindness and support and help; people inviting them in to spend the night with them; school children -- stories of school children -- giving them their lunch bags so that they would eat. But they also met with some not-so-nice things. They met with some violence and ridicule. *"I mean, who are these crazy monks? What are they doing? This is ridiculous!"*

And one experience they had, which we learned about in this Gandhi retreat, was that there was a gang in Los Angeles that heard about these crazy monks who were doing this ridiculous thing -- in their minds.

Right? And they had an initiate in their gang, and he needed to do an initiation. And they decided the initiation would be that they would find these monks and this initiate would take a bat and beat one of the monks. That was the plan.

So they found the monks. The monks are taking their three steps, bowing, getting up. Three steps, bowing, getting up. The gang encircled them. The kid -- the initiate -- had his bat. He went into the circle. The gang members are cheering him on: "Come on; let's go! Let's do it! Hit him; hit him!" And he held his bat, and he could not strike. Not that he didn't want to or changed his mind. He could not lower that bat. That, my friends, is the power of soul force and what it can do.

So your journey to soul force -- deepening -- it is probably not 800 miles, bowing every three steps. But whatever it is, I invite you to make it very, very real for you. Because developing our soul force is what really matters.

So one more time! In my "Ultimately-I-did-not-back-down" journey, let me tell you the six lessons that I learned. And I invite you to bring them into your life, no matter what you might be facing now or sometime in the future.

Number one: when you're faced with a "I-want-to-back-down" situation, ask yourself the question: What gifts and opportunities are being presented to me here? And you will get an answer. You will absolutely get an answer.

Break through that wall of fear by taking a breath; expecting the best; taking the step.

Number three: surrender and trust life. Trust God.

Number four: be in gratitude no matter what the outcome. No matter what the outcome!

Number five: be willing to look beyond what you think you see, because the miracle might be hiding in plain sight.

And number six: do whatever you can do to continually -- and on an ongoing basis -- deepen your own soul force.

So in honor and in recognition of your journeys of not backing down; of your journeys of standing your ground; living these principles that you know; and deepening your soul force, this morning I offer you -- from the deepest place in my heart -- this. [Gets to her knees and places her head on the ground in front of her] [Congregants cheer and applaud]

### **"I Won't Back Down" Song Lyrics**

*Well, I won't back down*

*No, I won't back down*

*You can stand me up at the gates of hell*

*But I won't back down*

*No, I'll stand my ground*

*Won't be turned around*

*And I'll keep this world from draggin' me down*

*Gonna stand my ground*

*And I won't back down*

*(I won't back down)*

*Hey, baby, there ain't no easy way out*

*(I won't back down)*  
*Hey, I will stand my ground*  
*And I won't back down*  
*Well I know what's right*  
*I got just one life*  
*In a world that keeps on pushin' me around*  
*But I'll stand my ground*  
*And I won't back down*  
*(I won't back down)*  
*Hey, baby, there ain't no easy way out*  
*(I won't back down)*  
*Hey, I will stand my ground*  
*And I won't back down*  
*Hey, baby, there ain't no easy way out*  
*(I won't back down)*  
*Hey, I won't back down*  
*(I won't back down)*  
*Hey, baby, there ain't no easy way out*  
*(I won't back down)*  
*Hey, I will stand my ground*  
*And I won't back down*  
*No, I won't back down*

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