

I WILL SURVIVE

Inspired by the song made famous by Gloria Gaynor

Week #4 of an 8-week "Songs of Life" Series

June 27, 2021

Rev. Richard Maraj

SOLO

Guest artist Kristen Drathman sings the message title song, "I Will Survive"

At first, I was afraid; I was petrified
Kept thinking I could never live without you by my side
But then I spent so many nights thinking how you did me wrong
And I grew strong, and I learned how to get along

And so you're back from outer space
I just walked in to find you here with that sad look upon your face
I should have changed that stupid lock
I should have made you leave your key
If I'd have known for just one second you'd be back to bother me

Go on now, go; walk out the door
Just turn around now 'cause you're not welcome anymore
Weren't you the one who tried to hurt me with goodbye?
Did you think I'd crumble?
Did you think I'd lay down and die?

Oh, no, not I
I will survive
Oh, as long as I know how to love I know I'll stay alive
I've got all my life to live
I've got all my love to give
And I'll survive
I will survive, hey, hey

It took all the strength I had not to fall apart
Just trying hard to mend the pieces of my broken heart
And I spent, oh, so many nights feeling sorry for myself
I used to cry, but now I hold my head up high

And you see me: somebody new
I'm not that chained-up little person still in love with you
And so you felt like dropping in
And just expect me to be free
And now I'm saving all my loving for someone who's loving me

Go on now, go; walk out the door
Just turn around now 'cause you're not welcome anymore
Weren't you the one who tried to break me with goodbye?
Did you think I'd crumble?
Did you think I'd lay down and die?

Oh, no, not I
I will survive
Oh, as long as I know how to love I know I'll stay alive
I've got all my life to live

I've got all my love to give
And I'll survive
I will survive
I will survive!

[Congregation whoops and applauds]

MESSAGE

Rev. Richard Maraj: Whooo! *[Congregation applauds]* Kristen Drathman! Whoooo! Fabulous job! Fabulous job!

So how many people ever had a time in your life where you felt like you needed someone else's approval to feel good about yourself? *[Congregation laughs]* Anybody ever have that? How many people have ever blamed someone else for your frustrations or unhappiness? Anybody? And how many people ever been knocked down by life, and you wondered if you had it in you to get back up and keep going? Anybody? So how many people right now would love to have more personal power and a greater ability to create the life you want? Anybody? Okay.

So several years ago in Kansas City, I saw Neale Donald Walsch, the author of *Conversations with God*, give a talk. He spoke for three hours, and I don't recall a single thing he said. *[Congregation and Rev. Maraj laugh]* Except one thing! And here's what he said. He said, "*The saddest and the most unfortunate thing we can think is that we do not have the power to change and improve our lives.*"

It is not just a sad and unfortunate thing; it is also absolutely not true! We are powerful spiritual beings! With powers beyond measure! We are created in the image and likeness of God, given dominion and authority over all things. We are incredibly powerful.

And we have several powers we can use. The power of faith. The power of prayer. The power of forgiveness. The power of gratitude. The power of the spoken word. The power of our thoughts. The power of our vision. The power of our imagination. The power to ask. The power to desire. The power to decide. The power to choose. And the power to take action. To name a few ... *[Congregation laughs]*

So we are powerful! We have all these powers and, yet, how often do we feel powerless? How often do we wonder if we have the power to survive? To succeed? If we have the power to rise and overcome?

Today we continue with Week #4 of our 8-week series, "The Songs of Life." And we use the power of music and the power of songs to see what message we can glean from them to live our life in a more joyful and meaningful way.

Several years ago somebody asked me if I would do a disco version of "The Songs of Life," and recommended "I Will Survive." So here we are! I had somebody text me last night; said, "*I'm really curious how you're going to make a spiritual talk out of 'I Will Survive.'*" And I said, "*I'm curious, as well.*" *[Congregation laughs]* So, um ...

So "I Will Survive" was a hit in 1979 by Gloria Gaynor. And it quickly became a female empowerment song. But after a while, it got an even wider meaning for anyone going through struggles or challenges or having to rise above. So it's really an empowerment song for us all.

The song was written by Freddie Perren and Dino Fekaris. And Fekaris was actually the lyricist. And he had just gotten fired as a staff writer for Motown Records, and he was really down and depressed. He went home; he thought, "*Oh, man; maybe my career as a songwriter is done already!*" And he felt really down. And so he turned on the TV, and there was a movie called *Generation* that he actually wrote the theme song for, and it was playing at the exact time. And he took that as a sign and an omen, and he started jumping up and down and yelling, "*I'm gonna make it! I'm gonna be a songwriter! I will survive!*"

And so he and his partner started their own recording business, and they hired Peaches and Herb, and they had a hit with "Reunited." When they wrote "I Will Survive," they didn't have anyone to sing it. And so they said, "Well, the next diva we connect with, we're going to ask her to sing." So Gloria Gaynor's company actually got in touch with them to produce a song called "Substitute." And they only agreed to do "I Will Survive" if it was on the "B" side of "Substitute." Because they believed "Substitute" would be a big hit. "Substitute" peaked at 107 on the charts. [Congregation laughs] The DJs started playing the other side of it, "I Will Survive." And it went to #1!

Gloria Gaynor said, "I love the empowering effecting, the encouraging effect. It is a timeless lyric that addresses a timeless concern." And the timeless concern that we all have is: Will I be okay? And will I survive this loss? Will I survive this heartbreak? Will I survive not fulfilling my goals and dreams? Do I even have the ability in me to live and create a better life? Do I have the power in me to overcome and succeed?

So even though this is the context of a romantic breakup song, I believe there is an empowering message for all of us in this amazing song, "I Will Survive."

The first thing we need to do to be more empowered and survive is to STOP GIVING OUR POWER

AWAY. We have lots of power and, not only do we not use it sometimes; sometimes we absolutely just give our power away! The first line of the song is:

*"At first I was afraid; I was petrified
Kept thinking I couldn't live without you by my side."*

So immediately she's giving her power away to fear; giving her power away to this person that she's attaching and giving all the power for her to be happy or not happy. We're constantly giving our power away by not using it. But sometimes we give it away by misusing it! Dan Zadra says that worry is a misuse of our imagination. Worry is a misuse of our own power; it undermines us.

And besides fear and worry, tell me if you relate to any of these other ways that we give our power away: Complaining. Resisting. Procrastinating. Negative thinking. Seeking approval and validation from other people. Pleasing people. Enabling. Blaming. Resenting. Holding a grudge. Not forgiving. Not being honest with others. Not being honest with ourselves. Self-pity. Feeling like a victim or a doormat. Guilt and shame and regret. Talking always about people we don't like or things we don't like. Gossiping. Telling stories of who did us wrong. Just to name a few ... [Congregation laughs]

But these are all examples – and there are plenty more! – of how we give our power away. How we deplete and drain our own power to create the kind of life we want. And we deplete it by giving our power away.

You know, two years ago, I spoke at a conference in Scottsdale. And it was the "Raise Your Vibration" event. And I was the keynote speaker. And my goal was to help people raise their vibration. But my premise was: the best way to raise your vibration is to stop doing things that lower your vibration! [Congregation laughs] And it sounds ridiculous, but the best way to increase our power is to stop doing the things that take our power away. You know, just stopping blaming and complaining in a relationship will automatically raise the energy and the positive vibes in any relationship.

I found a quote, and it says: "The best weight you will ever lose is the weight of other people's opinions of you." [Congregation applauds] So where in your life are you giving your power away? In what situations do you give your power away? To what individuals are you giving your power away? Through what actions and words do you give your power away?

The thing I like about this song is: she recognizes she's giving her power away. She recognizing that she's giving her power to fear of either being alone or being rejected or being abandoned. And so often we give our power away!

In Unity we always talk about affirmations: stating affirmatively something we want to create and experience in our lives. Like my favorite: *"Each and every day, in each and every way, my life is getting better and better and better."* We love affirmations! We say them all the time! But there's also another aspect: affirmations and denials. Most people don't know about that. How many of you have never heard of denials in the spiritual sense? Oh, great! One person! And so ... And it's not being in denial about something; it's about denying things that we give power in our lives ... denying that power.

And so, whatever it is that we give our power to, we need to deny those things power. And it's reaching that point where you just say, *"Enough! Stop! I'm not doing that; that doesn't live here any more. I will not continue to allow that thing to give power in my life ..."* Whoever the person is, or whatever that belief or idea is. Let me give you a couple of examples of a denial. It would be, *"My past mistakes and failures have no power over my present and future success."* So my past does not have power over my future success. Or, *"My previous bad relationships have no power in me attracting a healthy romantic relationship."*

So it's about acknowledging that we give our power away, but saying, *"I will not do that anymore."* And so she, in the song, gives a great denial:

*"Go on now, go; walk out the door
Just turn around now, 'cause you're not welcome anymore."*

And the *"You're not welcome any more"* is not necessarily just a person; it's that place that we're giving our power away. And so if we don't deny – if we don't say that, *"That's enough and you don't have any power over me anymore"* – you know what happens? We tend to repeat patterns in our lives. We keep dating the same person. We keep having the same arguments. We keep going through the same cycle of losing weight and then gaining more. The same cycle of starting out excited about exercising, and then being back on the couch watching too much TV. [Congregation laughs] We go back to fear. We go back to gossip. We go back to all the things that took our power away, and keep giving it back to them.

The fact is: if we want to survive – if we want to be empowered – the first thing we need to do is stop giving our power away, and to deny those things. To recognize them, and then deny them giving power and taking power from us.

The second thing we need to do is RECLAIM OUR POWER. I love how she keeps repeating: *"I will survive! I will survive! I will survive!"*

*"As long as I know how to love, I know I'll stay alive
I've got all my life to live, and I've got all my love to give.
And I will survive!"*

I just love how she begins to reclaim her own power. In one line she says:

*"I grew strong, and I learned how to get along
And now I hold my head up high
And ..."*

What the heck is it? [Congregation and Rev. Maraj laugh]

"And you see me: somebody new."

So she has renewed herself by just reclaiming the power that was always hers! One thing I've come to realize: that we always have our power; it's just sometimes we forget it, and we need to reclaim it. We kind of disconnect ourselves.

And the Bible tells us over and over and over again how powerful we are. In the Book of Timothy it says, *"God has not given you a spirit of fear and timidity, but a spirit of power, love and self-discipline."* The affirmation today was, *"I can do all things through God, who strengthens me."* Jesus said, *"You shall do*

the things that I have done, and even greater things than these.” In Luke 17: 21 it says, “The kingdom of God is within you.”

The fact is: you are powerful! And are you willing to reclaim your power?

“I have a spirit of power, love and self-discipline. I have a spirit of power, love and self-discipline.” Let’s say it together. [With congregation]: “I have a spirit of power, love and self-discipline.” Just take a deep breath into that. Are you willing to own and reclaim your power? One more time: [with congregation] “I have a spirit of power, love and self-discipline.” One more time! [With congregation]: “I have a spirit of power, love and self-discipline.”

And do you know what the greatest sign of reclaiming your power is? Okay, I’ll tell you. *[Congregation laughs]* Our greatest sign of reclaiming our power is accepting full responsibility for our lives. It is accepting full responsibility for our emotions. It’s accepting full responsibility for our feelings. It’s accepting full responsibility for all the situations, for our happiness, for our unhappiness, for our actions and our reactions. To accept full responsibility for your life is to reclaim your power, because it means that you’re not using anyone to blame them for your happiness. Or you’re not using someone to say that they will fill your life with more joy. It is leaving the power with you! That you’re the one who controls your destiny! You’re the one who controls your happiness!

Some people think responsibility’s a burden but, no! It’s an empowering, liberating gift that we’ve been given to be fully responsible. Love the word “responsible”: the ability to respond. Even when things are unfair. Even when it’s something you don’t deserve. Guess what? The best option is always to take full responsibility to make it better. Always the best choice: to be fully responsible.

“I am fully responsible for everything in my life. I am fully responsible for everything in my life.” Let’s say that together. [With congregation]: “I am fully responsible for everything in my life.” Deep breath. One more time. [With congregation]: “I am fully responsible for everything in my life.”

So I have been working on reclaiming my power to an area of my life where I give my power away a lot, particularly recently. I’m trying to work on reclaiming my power with my attitude towards the hot weather. *[Congregation laughs]* Because I moan and whine on a daily basis about how hot it is! *“I can’t believe how hot it is! It’s only 99? It feels like 110! It’s dry heat ... no, no! It’s a furnace heat!”* *[Congregation laughs]* *“I mean, it feels like someone holding a blow dryer in your face; it feels like someone opening an oven! I wonder if you can cook an egg on the hood of your car!”*

I’ve been saying this same thing for 17 years, multiple times! *[Congregation laughs]* I’m giving my power away to the weather! *[Congregation laughs]* And it sounds silly, but we do stuff like this. So now, as of yesterday, I started affirming, *“I am fully responsible for my relationship with the weather.”* *[Congregation laughs]* *“One hundred degrees has no power over my peace and happiness.”* *[Congregation laughs]* *“I love living in Phoenix!”* And that’s really the truth! *[Congregation laughs and applauds]*

And while it’s being silly, the truth is: our power is always there. We always have the power to choose. We always have the power to adjust our own attitude. And, while it might be the weather, look at the many ways that we give our power away, and we refuse to reclaim it. So I’m trying to reclaim it in an area.

And so what area do you want to reclaim the power of your life? And, of course, we want to do it in all areas ... but is there something where it’s an area where you want to be stronger? An area that you want to reclaim it? The fact is: we are fully responsible for our actions and reactions. And we have the power to change and transform and heal and let go and improve and better ourselves. We have that power all the time! It doesn’t go away! We just have to reclaim it, and accept full responsibility for our lives.

And the final thing she does ... She stops giving her power away. She reclaims her power. **And then the last thing she does well is that she RAISES HER STANDARD.** So instead of loving somebody who doesn't love her, and keeps waiting there, it says:

"Now I'm saving all my loving for someone who's loving me."

So she's moving from a co-dependent, unhealthy relationship, and raising her standard for her own worthiness to a relationship that is mutually loving and fulfilling. She chooses not to settle. She chooses not to just take whatever comes along. But she chooses to take charge, and decides to raise the standard and quality of life that she deserves.

And so where in your life are you settling? Where in your life are you playing small? Where in your life are you just taking whatever comes? Where in your life do you need to set new boundaries? Where in your life do you need to stand up for yourself? Where in your life do you need to speak up? Where in your life are you being called to show up in a bigger, better way? What standard do you want to raise? What area of your life do you want to improve your quality?

Like, right now I would like to raise the standard and improve the quality of my jokes. *[Congregation and Rev. Maraj laugh]* So here we go! *[Congregation laughs]*

So a Scotsman stranded on a desert island for many years looks up one day and sees this gorgeous woman in a scuba outfit walking on the water. And he's absolutely amazed and speechless as she walks towards him. And she says to him, *"So how long since you had a good smoke?"* And he says, *"Fourteen years."* And then she unzips the right part of her suit and pulls out a box of cigars. Hands him a lighter; he puffs up/takes a drag, and *[breathes in]*, *"Oh! This is heavenly."*

And then she says, *"How long since you've had a good drink?"* And he said, *"Fourteen years."* And then she unzips the sleeve on the left side and pulls out a 16-year-old bottle of scotch. He has a sip and he smiles and says, *"This is the nectar of the gods!"*

And then she says, *"So how long since you've played around?"* with a little sparkle in her eye. And he said, *"Fourteen years."* And as she starts unzipping the center compartment, his eyes open wider and wider and he says, *"You mean you have a set of golf clubs in there, too?!?"* *[Congregation laughs and groans]*

See? It's in the intention to raise the standard! There probably is a lot of room left for that to happen, so ... *[Congregation laughs]*

Maya Angelou said this: *"My mission in life is not merely to survive, but to thrive. And to do so with some passion, some compassion, some humor and some style."* And I really think that the difference – the way I would define the difference between surviving and thriving – is that thriving is about taking the power that we have, and shaping it into our lives into the most authentic version of who we came to be. And living our lives as honestly and true to ourselves as possible. It is about bringing our style, and bringing our personality, and bringing our love and our joy and our beauty into everything we do. To be fully true to who we are and how we express ourselves in the world.

See, to survive is like ... you could make a good life, but is it your life? I know people who've become doctors and lawyers and engineers, and they weren't happy. That isn't what they wanted to do; that's what their family or someone expected them to do, or thought would be a good idea. The fact is: A real, fulfilling life to me – thriving – means being true to who you are. Expressing the gifts and the beauty that God placed in you that you are meant to share with the world.

So I ask you: What is it in you that you're being called to bring forth that you haven't? What does your most thriving, fulfilling life or relationship or work or version of yourself look like? Who do you want to be known for? What qualities do you want to embody? What do you want people to say about how you treated others? Your family members? Your friends? Co-workers? And even strangers. So where in your life do you want to raise the standard and the quality? To not just survive, but to thrive?

The fact is: at times, we all feel powerless. We all feel a little bit knocked down. But at no point does our true power ever go away. So what we need to do to re-empower ourselves is to stop giving our power away. To reclaim our power and accept full responsibility for our lives. And then to raise the quality and standard of life that we know we desire, and that we absolutely deserve.

And if we do that, I guarantee you: not only will you survive, but you will thrive. God bless you all!

[Congregation applauds]

MEDITATION

Rev. Lori Fleming: I invite you to close your outer eyes. To take in a deep, cleansing breath and release it slowly. To take in another mindful breath, beginning to relax your body. Beginning to let go of any busyness we've had to far this morning. Gently moving our awareness within: to that quiet, still center of our being.

As we touch the presence of the Divine within us – as that presence fills us with its goodness, with its love, with its joy of Spirit – that no matter what's going on in our outer lives, we can gently let those cares go. Because within, they have no power. Because within is only Spirit, lifting us up out of the ordinary, everyday to a higher consciousness. To a spiritual consciousness. Recognizing that every moment we are one with that energy that created us. That our bodies vibrate with that health and vitality that is our birthright. That God's light and love are filling our bodies, and every cell is illuminated with peace, with joy, with love, with prosperity. And we are lifted out of the old into a consciousness of Divine Mind with divine ideas that bring solutions to old problems. New ways of thinking! New ways of being. And we are healed in body, in mind, and in spirit.

In this high and holy exalted state of being, we recognize that each and every one of us is part of a greater whole. And, together, we thrive! Together, we see the good in each other and move forward to create a world that works for all.

And so, sweet Spirit, we take just a few moments to move more deeply within as we feel your presence in us, and as us, and through us.

SILENCE

Sweet Spirit, we come in gratitude for this time of prayer and meditation that lifts us up. That brings us together in a spiritual consciousness of the oneness of the all. We're so grateful for all of our blessings; we count each and every one of them. And we're grateful for this time together. And so we say thank you, God; thank you, God; thank you, God! And it is so. Amen.

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