

Getting to no: Space for yeses to grow

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [September 18, 2007](#) issue

A few years ago I bought a book on leadership called *Getting to Yes*. I think it was about moving from win-lose situations to win-win situations in which everyone involved has an easier time “getting to yes.” I cannot say for sure since I never read it, but the title alone proved worth the price. Just seeing it on my bookshelf cheered me up. Yes is a great word, a word capable of changing a life through the utterance of a single syllable.

“Yes, I want the job.”

“Yes, I will marry you.”

“Yes, it is my desire to be baptized.”

At least part of the pleasure of saying yes is knowing that someone wants you—wants to be with you, wants you to do something that you do well, wants to do it with you. Saying yes is how you enter into a relationship. It is how you walk through the door into a new room. It is how you create the future.

This may account for the seductiveness of the word, especially in a can-do culture in which the ability to do many things at high speed is not only an adaptive trait but also the mark of a successful human being. As much as we complain about having too much to do, most of us harbor some pride that we are in such demand. We admire people who can keep even more balls in the air than we can. When they drop one, we instinctively avert our eyes. We feel their pain.

Meanwhile, technology opens up more opportunities than ever to say yes. Messages from high school friends you have not seen in 30 years show up in your in-box. They found you through Google and are eager to be back in touch. Political action groups want you to sign and circulate petitions for very good causes. Friends from work want you to read their blogs, or they send you links to someone else’s. You cannot even sign on to Amazon.com without being shown the covers of some books that,

given your previous purchases, you might like.

For these reasons and more, I have become interested in the spiritual practice of saying no. Part of it is my age, I am sure. When I was 20, my life was a cruise ship. There were all kinds of places I could go on it, with plenty of time and room for everything. Now I am in something closer to a small houseboat. The accommodations are still comfortable, but my horizons are limited. To bring anything new on board means getting rid of something else. Saying yes requires saying no.

I call it a spiritual discipline because saying no involves *resistance*, *discernment*, *ego-evacuation* and *compassion*—all of which I recognize as spiritual disciplines in themselves. *Resistance* most often has to do with declining the blandishments of a consumer culture. No, I do not need another pair of shoes. No, I do not have to work seven days a week. Given how many times the culture shouts “More!” or “Now!” I get lots of practice in responding with “No, less,” or “No, later.” (Or, as one of my favorite cartoon captions has it, “Never works for me. Does never work for you?”)

Discernment involves understanding that I am rarely called to say no to overtly bad things. Illicit sex and drugs do not come my way very often. Few people offer me chances to invest in so-called sin stocks. I am much more likely to be presented with choices between good things and better things, saying no to something as worthwhile as after-school tutoring in order to tend a friend who is dying. This is much harder than saying no to bad things, since declining an opportunity to do good means taking a cut in my sense of my own goodness.

This brings me to *ego-evacuation*, which is not the same thing as self-denial. Whereas self-denial involves saying no to something that gives me pleasure, ego-evacuation involves saying no to all outsized versions of myself, including those bloated by my faith in my own importance. Saying no whittles me down to size, giving me daily opportunities to remember who is God and who is not. Facing other people’s disappointment in me lets some of the gas out of my self-image. This is no more pleasant than any other kind of evacuation, but it remains a good plan for avoiding disaster.

In my own discipline, the practice of *compassion* has been essential to the practice of saying no. It took me a long time to realize that loss of relationship was one of my greatest fears in saying no. To say no to someone felt like saying, “I don’t want to

dance with you.” Plus, I was so poor at saying it that my “No!” tended to come out with an exclamation point on it. The extra force seemed to be the only way I could get it out at all, so that it often sounded as harsh as it felt. I am not over this yet, but I spend a lot of time hunting ways to say no that I hope honor those doing the asking, while honoring my own limits as well.

Learning to say no is how we clear space for a few carefully planted yeses to grow. Saying no to lesser gods is part of saying yes to God. Saying no to one neighbor, at least until the next dance, is part of saying yes to another. Getting to yes includes getting to no. While saying yes may always be more satisfying than saying no, both are sacred words in the mouths of those who want to get to God.