

Letting Go on the Path to Spiritual Maturity
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This month in our congregation we are exploring the theme of letting go. The reason it matters is because it is crucial to our physical health, mental health, and spiritual health. I hope that the message you take home today is that: *as we mature spiritually, we learn about deeper and more subtle ways of **letting go**. When we do that, our inner lights **shine** --- connected to that Light that permeates *everything* in this world.*

I invite you to consider the image of person learning to ride a bike. At first, they probably ride a tricycle, with three firm wheels. Next, they progress to riding a bike with training wheels---a bit more unsteady, but still with support. Then, as a next step, they are likely to ride the bike but with someone holding on and helping them steady the bike. Until, eventually, that person finds their inner keel and can continue on their own. Then, the supportive and encouraging person lets go.

In healthy growth and change, three dynamics are in balance:

- holding on
- letting go
- continuity

(Credit to Stephen Ivy and Elizabeth Liebert for suggesting this model in their published works.)

Only “holding on” doesn’t work.

Only “letting go” doesn’t work.

If the helper kept holding on forever, the person would never learn to ride the bike. If the helper only let go right from the start, the person would fall over and hurt themselves.

So, there is a balance, and learning a new continuity.

These three are in balance during learning to ride a bike, learning to drive a car, learning a bus system, learning to navigate all sorts of journeys in life.

Let’s try another image. A young couple gets married. They want to start careers and families. One is in the military and is transferred overseas. The new spouse goes, also. Their attempts to conceive children don’t work out. They let go of that dream and decide to adopt. In order to be near supportive grandparents, they leave the military and return to the United States. Now, in this short example, we can see that they’ve held on, let go, and reintegrated. They have held on to their marriage --- confirming it. They have let go of part of their dreams --- dealing with challenge and contradiction. They have reintegrated that dream into the family that they have and gone back to stay put where they were raised --- finding continuity.

These three dynamics of confirmation, challenge, and continuity need to also be constantly at play in the life of a healthy church congregation. Yesterday morning, our Leadership Development Committee held a wonderful gathering in which we learned about what is going on in the church and who is doing it and what nuts and bolts we all need to know. Wisely, one of the opening activities was to ask each person to reflect on how much they are already involved in the church. Even more wisely, each person was also asked to reflect whether they want to get more involved, or less involved. And most wise of all, these people were asked to raise their hands so we could all see them. There was quite a bit of laughter and compassion in the room when people raised their hands as ready to be less involved, and we were looking at the President and Vice-President of the Congregation. Their plates are full! I am grateful that our Leadership Development Committee knows that not only do we need to help people get more involved, but we need to help current leaders move on, let go and remain integrated while continuing in new roles.

But what about growth and change on a national and global scale? My heart breaks with the continuing news of people fleeing violence in Syria. In my attempt to listen to many viewpoints, I read both right wing and left wing websites. Some people call for our country to *welcome* refugees, while others call for our country to *limit* refugees. Some of them explain that communities hosting refugees need accurate information and resources in order to integrate them. Other points of view argue about religious diversity and so-called “enforcing multi-culturalism”. Still other points of view demand that we should help humans who are in need and to share what we have. Clearly, we are in a messy place with regards to holding on, letting go, and reintegration. As a country, we are not in agreement about how to do that gracefully.

What I do know is that we, as Unitarian Universalists, must hold on to values of inclusion and respect. We take a stand against religious discrimination. In Danville, Virginia today, there might be a rally called “Global Rally for Humanity.” A few dozen such rallies are being organized around the country, in response to the 20th Anniversary Million Man March on Washington. Some of these rallies are being held in front of mosques and are advertising themselves as anti-Muslim. Our congregation’s Director of Administration, Chris Rivera, called the Islamic Center in Danville to ask what we can do in solidarity and support. They have asked for our prayers. In the growth and change of life, our core values do not change.

My friends, I have offered you these three aspects of growth and change:
holding on, also called confirmation;
letting go, also called challenge or contradiction;
and staying also called reintegration, or continuity.
We can see how they apply to learning to ride a bike,
how they apply to vocation and family,
how they apply to congregational life,
and how they are much more messy to apply to nations and politics.
If we don’t take these chances for change, we end up stuck.
But, here we are this morning in a sanctuary.

We have sung about Turning the World Around, we have sung about the Seasons Turning.

We are people who believe in something beyond us.

Something transcendent.

A Grace that is greater than we are.

Each time we grow and change in life, we have a chance to allow the Spirit to guide us. Whenever we pause to evaluate---whether it is an annual evaluation in a workplace, or walking the labyrinth at New Years, --- we have a chance to revisit our vision. Our spirituality includes imagination, longing, and dreaming. These take us beyond ourselves. These show us what is possible beyond our previous seeing. Prayers from religions all over the world say, "Help me to see what I can not see."

In this way, we expand our image of ourselves.

We expand our images of our world.

We expand our image of the Holy.

Part of spiritual maturity is to expand beyond what we need just for our own survival and protection and to see what is good for all interrelated creatures. We learn not to be fused in stuck relationships, and learn how to have healthy relationships with room for growth and change. We learn healthy self surrender on deeper and deeper levels.

Earlier, Cypress read a poem about man coming to terms with growing old. His poem names the loss of career, the loss of his wife, the loss of other things that gave him identity and solace. He realizes that his path will be eased, and that he will be empowered, by learning to let go.

This is probably why so many world religions also have a prayer saying "Help me let go of what gets in my way."

This is how we move from one stage to another.

And this is how we can relate to the people who depend on us --- whether you are raising children, supervising people at your job, leading people here in the congregation, or organizing in the community --- we can get out of the way so that others can learn their own potential.

Imagine again: a person learning to ride a bike: they must eventually find their own wheels.

This model applies theologically also. I would like to read you a passage from a book about life patterns and spiritual development. It is by Elizabeth Liebert, who is a scholar and Christian theologian. (Changing Life Patterns, Chalice Press, 2000. P. 142)

I quote: "Human persons need to participate actively in decisions which affect them, to author their own presence and actions, a need which exerts a powerful developmental pull. Theologically speaking, though human beings are created and contingent, they still possess the potential to become co-creators with God." What she is saying there is that in her view, humans are made by God and dependent on God, but can also co-create with God. Hm. Let me read on. "When this possibility is systematically stifled, the self, the

mind and voice remain largely those of others, not one's own, and the potential to cocreate with God lies dormant." So, she is concluding that we need to get out of the way of people who are ready to grow and blossom. Especially, that we need to make sure our religious institutions give opportunities for people to take the lead in ethical reflection, justice work, and sacred ritual. And so I ask you, have you felt a call to do that recently? Are you holding onto a bike that someone else is ready to ride?

When we make regular time for spiritual practices, we will hear the still small voice inside that tells us when to move. We have wisdom that helps us let go in the right time and the right way. Mention that Erik preached on this last week and both the audio and print copy are on our website.

But sometimes, this life is rough. On the cover of your order of service, is a quote that says, "My barn having burned down, I can now see the moon." There is an error on the order of service --- the poet's name is not Mister Misahide, although my computer's auto-correct thought that made sense. The name is Mizuta Misahide, who was a Japanese poet who was born in 1657. "My barn having burned down, I can now see the moon." We can imagine this was an old barn, which he was planning to tear down anyway, and he is grateful to finally see the moon. Or, we can imagine, this barn held all the crops that would feed his family for the winter and he is now facing a crisis. Or, could it be neither or those, and, this poet is pondering....was it time to let go anyway?

Sometimes we have to let go of something against our will, or at a time when we are not ready to let go. Shock is a common response to sudden death. Or, if it is an expected death, sometimes the response is awe, because we come face to face with the cycles of nature, and are humbled. At times of shock or of awe, our intellect and ego tend to recede. We are not operating in a usual day-to-day manner. It is a time of being raw. Hence, we are more tender. These tender times are vulnerable, and are also valuable. I would not wish for someone to live an entire life of raw vulnerability; and yet, I wish for each of us to have times when we are tender and vulnerable. In the spiritual life, we learn to observe these seasons and changes. We learn to create a safe container for these vulnerable and tender times. *[In some of these situations, such as a death, our friends and family are paying attention, and do things like bring us food or give us time off of work. But often, life doesn't work out that neatly. We have private losses or invisible changes, and need to ask a trusted person for help, or find our own ways to make space and time.]*

Then, slowly, over time, the tender and vulnerable feeling passes, and our ego and intellect return. That can lead to more security and stability. And, yet, we may be less in touch with the fragility of human nature.

The reason that vulnerable times of letting go can be valuable is because the tenderness, without armor, may be a time when we know the Divine more closely. This is a time when art and poetry get created, when loving words finally insist upon being spoken.

We can practice our whole lives to cultivate a balanced state in which we are touch with tenderness and yet able to continue in a stable way with daily life.

There is a famous meditation teacher from India named BKS Iyengar, whose teachings are appreciated around the world. In one essay, he points out that while we can sometimes get rid of self-illusion and be selfless, that ego is like a rubber band that will always pull us back. He teaches that regular meditation helps keep ego at bay. With ego out of the way, he says we will be able to naturally sense where the sacred is guiding us on our journey in this world. (Light on Life, Rodale Press, 2005. P. 263)

But my friends, as the last section of this sermon, I want to discuss one more angle --- follow with me here: Sometimes, holding on and letting go is not part of our spiritual life. There are some times to just **be**. This is a tricky thing, and some folks have been asking me questions about it recently.

One form of spiritual service that you may find yourself doing sometimes is being with a person who is suffering.

For example, this might be... When a friend has a great loss.

When you are in a job to help people who are struggling.

When your family members are in crisis.

When a congregation member is sick.

You may wonder, Is there anything you can do?

What you can do is listen; you can help meet their physical needs; you can pray for them; you can tell them you care; you can share art, music, and nature with them.

You may ask, What if you fail to do that?

There is a force for healing in this world. That force will find ways to heal. The Divine Light uses us as instruments of peace. Sometimes it might choose you, (*gesture*) sometimes it might choose you (*gesture*), or you (*gesture*). And someday you might be spiritually awake enough to allow yourself to be that vessel. And other days, you might stubbornly or obliviously get in the way. Then, that healing force will find another route.

Still, you might be afraid, What if the suffering gets too great to hold?

The Sacred is a force that *moves* through the universe. We don't have to hold suffering, and so we don't have to let go of it. You don't even need to try to hold the peace. If you go to visit a friend who is deep in depression, or aching from addiction, or sick with remorse, your friendship does not require you to suffer also. But whatever place you find the teeniest glimmer of hope, faith, love, let that glimmer spread.

I'd like to tell you about a research project that studied prayer in hospitals. One group of people tried to send their own healing energy to someone who was sick. Those people generally ended up exhausted. But another group of people prayed that some form of divinity would help the person who was sick. That group of people did not report feeling depleted.

There is a Sacred Light in this world, and it will shine whether we try or not. May we co-create with it.

Blessed be. Amen.