

The Letting Go
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We had a wonderful guest speaker last Sunday – a rabbi who talked about Rosh Hashana, and Teshuva, the period of time Jews observe between the Jewish New Year and Yom Kippur, when Jews are absolved of the times they missed the mark, or sinned, during the previous year.

At face value, absolution sounds like some kind of magic wand we can wave – to be absolved of our sins through some religious ritual. But it's not so simple as that. The Jews understand you have to earn it, and earning it takes work.

Teshuva translated literally means to return. Teshuva is a return to God, or for us religious liberals, we may translate that as a return to our highest self, the person at the depths of our heart we most wish to be. The person who is free, and of service to the world. Not perfect, but free. A healthy person. A forgiven person. A healed person.

The rabbi last week went through the questions we ask ourselves as part of the work of Teshuva. Who am I, and what am I doing? What is getting in the way of being who I wish to be? Often this involves looking at mistakes we've made, and not only acknowledging them, not only apologizing for them, but also doing what we can to fix them. This process helps us heal, and let go. We heal when we let go. Let go of shame, anger, sadness, so such emotions are no longer in our way of our freedom to be who we want to be.

I envy the Jews, who get an annual ritual of this ten days of a spiritual cleansing process. I envy the Catholics who offer other sacraments of absolution throughout the year. We religious liberals poo poo the idea of divine absolution, but we shouldn't throw out the baby with the bath water. Divine or not, if we don't think absolution is important, we miss out on the opportunity to be self-reflective and grow spiritually and emotionally; we miss out on the boost of a fresh start. These are rituals of healing and letting go.

The good news is we can borrow and sample such rituals – it's one of the best things about being a UU – we can try it all on for size, and make up our own versions. We can turn our attention to those challenging questions. What do I need to let go of? How do I need to change? How can I take responsibility for myself? What healing work haven't I done?

One ritual we are going to do later this month as part of our worship theme of healing is a Hallows ritual, similar to the Mexican holiday of Day of the Dead, but of the broader pagan tradition. On Sunday October 30th, make a note to bring in a memento or photo of someone you love who has died. You will have the opportunity to place it on a beautiful altar, an act of remembrance and, especially if the death is recent, a ritual that lends itself to healing, because the ritual is done in community. The presence of each other all

remembering our dead *together* is a comfort because it reminds us that we are not alone in our sadness. We *all*, at times throughout our lives, have to face the letting go.

So integral is the letting go in human life that an entire religion is based on it – Buddhism. Not only does Buddhism urge us to practice the art of losing, like Elizabeth Bishop so boldly suggests in her poem (my all time favorite poem) of *One Art*, Buddhism says letting go is how we must live.

For the nature of the world is one of constant change, and life is often about wanting things to be different than they are. We want a return to the past, when things seemed golden, we want our youth back, we want an uncluttered house, a different presidential race, you name it! Buddhism says if you let go of the yearning, and all the attendant emotions of attachment, you will find enlightenment.

Enlightenment sounds cool, but also lofty and unattainable. I'd settle just for the milestone matters of letting go that signal acceptance, that signal healing, and I think that's something we all want.

It's easy to quibble with an absence of attachment – isn't attachment what makes us human, and makes love possible? Do we seriously have much choice in this matter, if we want to love and be loved?

I don't know, but I know one thing. I for one, and maybe some of you would also say this about yourselves, am not good at letting go. I still pine for friendships that didn't make it. I still miss the friend I grew up with at my home church and for some reason won't return my requests to get together and catch up. Is it because she converted to Judaism and thinks the UUs are a bunch of flakes? Is it because I got married and had kids and she didn't? Is it because there were times I was bossy when we were kids? I don't know.

This is a classic kind of thing that's hard for me to let go of. The type of thing we are powerless over. At some point, I have to accept that it's a loss. I have to let go.

What are the things you've lost that have been hard to accept and let go of? A job, a career? A marriage, a close relationship? How do we let go? I love exploring this topic because like I said, I suck at it, this business of letting go.

It came to my attention recently that I lost something I made, something akin to squeezing blood out of rocks. When I went to college, I fell in love with writing poetry. I took all the creative writing classes, wrote poems fervently, and even based my senior project on poetry writing. After college, I continued to write poetry, in Eugene, OR, where I lived for 5 years, and wrote other things. Now, this was in the 90's, and I had one of those awesome, back-in-the-day Macintosh SE computers that looked like some kind of tall, narrow box. It had a carrying case. It was heavy and bulky, but why the heck didn't I keep the damn thing? Because, eventually, those stupid floppy discs you'd

save your documents on became obsolete, and you couldn't access the data on them – especially after misplacing them.

At my last job, my office became something of a storage space, and while I remember at some point placing them safely in a drawer, I realized after moving out that I didn't know where they were. With some poking around, I realized I didn't know where any of my hard copies were either. All the poems I wrote from age 18 to 28 or so, gone.

Of all the things to keep or lose, of all the crap I've kept over the years, how could I lose my poems? How could I have gotten so swept up in my first settled ministry, that I could lose track of something that was so dear? When the full impact hit me of what I'd lost, I felt like a rare seed bank had gotten accidentally destroyed, like in a fire or catastrophic flood. The precious seeds of my young adulthood, forever lost.

When I moved to California ten years ago, I stopped writing poems. Whether it was ministry, marriage, having kids, all of the above, the muse had flown the coop. I'm sharing this with you to evoke your own meditations of precious things, or parts of yourselves that you've lost. Poetry-writing is some long, lost part of me I'd love to unearth. It made me really happy, as I recall, really proud of myself. When I finished a poem I loved, it was some purely accurate reflection of who I really am.

As I recall, in that period of lost poems, I wrote three or four villanelles. Does anyone know what a villanelle is? It is probably the most challenging form of poem one can write. It's 6 stanzas, all in iambic pentameter, which has to do with a rhythm of accented syllables, and of course there's also lots of rhyming. It's really hard, and it takes a lot of time. But there's nothing like the process of making one – you lose yourself in it; you are utterly absorbed, living in the moment. And the results can be profound, like the Elizabeth Bishop poem, which is a villanelle. Within a strict form, paradoxically, you have to be *more* creative, you have to dig *deeper* to make it work, think of all different kinds of word patterns, which is the essence and goal of great poetry.

I bring up the form of the villanelle because there is very relevant spiritual wisdom in living within a strict form. Because life is filled with so much loss, with so much constriction – for example, the diabetic who has to adhere to a strict diet, the alcoholic who can no longer drink, the overweight man who can no longer indulge – because living within a form is often the human norm, you do have to make choices, like Brian alluded to in his Pastoral Thought – one option is you can bury your head in the sand, and all of us do, at one point or another, or sometimes even our whole lives. We can all think of a relative or dear friend who currently has their head in the sand.

You can either be miserable in the strict form life has dealt you, or, like submitting to the rules of the villanelle, you can dig deep inside yourself, and see what reserves of strength and creativity and hard work you are able to unearth.

This is a metaphor for enduring any kind of loss. An untimely death. After a significant loss, like losing a job we loved, or a relationship. After the period of mourning, and

healing and letting go, we are faced with the form in which we must live our lives. We can say, no, the form is too hard, it's too much work! We can be miserable. Or, we can work. We can try, we can engage the form, work with it, and see where the hard work might lead.

And we don't work in obscurity or in a vacuum. We share our work, we find others who toil purposefully in the same ways we do, we read our poems to each other, we share our stories. I love Brian's line, about how, yeah, it can suck, but look at the results!

What I learned when I wrote those villanelles was that, yes, it's hard, but I can do it. And in the end, I let go of those poems because it wasn't the end product that mattered as much as the process. I still want them back, goshdarnit, don't get me wrong, I still hope I find them someday – but for now I have to let go.

Of course, it's really about facing the letting go of my youthfulness, and entering middle age and all that fun stuff. I'm realizing there will be more need to let go as I age. Not only must we let go of the days of no cellulite, we let go of more friends, loved ones, and our heroes, as they leave this world. There's talk of how difficult it will be when the baby boomers start to die in earnest because it will happen within a short period of time. I don't mean to be doomsday or depressing, quite the opposite. I seek to motivate and inspire you. Because we know it's coming, because it's a form we'll need to compose our lives in, we might as well work at getting more proficient at letting go.

And this is where our spiritual lives come in. The work of healing and letting go is on a spiritual plane, because losses imprint our spirits. We collect losses like scars throughout our lives, and those scars hurt when they get touched. We will never be entirely over the big losses. The trauma is imprinted, like a villanelle, the form is strict, it never totally lets us go. But the great mystery and beauty in life is that we as human beings, are, barring injustice, given the gift to find freedom within our limitations. It is sacred and holy, the choices we each are given. In adversity, to make lemonade, to decide what's truly important and worth working hard for. In tragedy, to discern what positive can come of it. In discord, to find our part that we need to own and makes amends for, and heal relationship.

Again and again, life is about letting go. There is the letting go we must do as a part of daily living. We let go of each moment. There is the letting go we must do in order to heal ourselves personally, be that letting go of an addiction or a health concern. There is the letting go we must do after a death or an important ending. Big losses and little losses, together, they create the form of our lives.

The life well lived chooses to live well within the form we are given. Always working, always healing, always giving thanks for each day we must let go.