

Holding On Letting Go a sermon delivered at the
Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship, Thunder Bay, Ontario
Sunday, October 26, 2014

Reading #1: "Sometimes" by Sheenagh Pugh

Sometimes things don't go, after all,
from bad to worse. Some years, muscatel
faces down frost, green thrives; the crops don't fail,
sometimes a man aims high, and all goes well.

A people sometimes will step back from war;
elect an honest man; decide they care
enough, that they can't leave some stranger poor.
Some men become what they were born for.

Sometimes our best efforts do not go
amiss; sometimes we do as we meant to.
The sun will sometimes melt a field of sorrow
that seemed hard frozen: may it happen for you.

Reading #2: "Heavy" by Mary Oliver

That time
I thought I could not
go any closer to grief
without dying

I went closer,
and I did not die.
Surely God
had His hands in this,

as well as friends.
Still, I was bent
and my laughter,
as the poet said,

was nowhere to be found.
Then said my friend Daniel
(brave even among lions),
"It's not the weight you carry

but how you carry it -
books, bricks, grief -
it's all in the way
you embrace it, balance it, carry it

when you cannot and would not,

put it down."
So I went practicing.
Have you noticed?
Have you heard
the laughter
that comes, now and again,
out of my startled mouth?

How I linger
to admire, admire, admire
the things of this world
that are kind, and maybe

also troubled -
roses in the wind,
the sea geese on the steep waves,
a love
to which there is no reply?
- Mary Oliver, in her book of poems *Thirst*

Sermon: "Holding On, Letting Go" – SUZANNE

Holding On

SUNG: *Holding on, for dear life we're holding on*

Holding on, precious life we're holding on

Long on dreams, short on time [x2]

Moment by moment by moment [x4]

Judy Fjell

[A story told after a young boy has spent the whole day feeling angry with his older brother]

Two traveling monks reached a town where there was a young woman waiting to step out of her sedan chair. The rains had made deep puddles and she couldn't step across without spoiling her silken robes. She stood there looking very cross and impatient. She was scolding her attendants. They had nowhere to place the packages they held for her, so they couldn't help her across the puddle.

The younger monk noticed the woman, said nothing, and walked by. The older monk quickly picked her up and put her on his back, transported her across the water, and put her down on the other side. The young woman did not thank the older monk; she just shoved him out of the way and departed.

As they continued on their way, the young monk was brooding and preoccupied. After several hours, unable to hold his silence, he spoke out. "That woman back there was very selfish and rude, but you picked her up on your back and carried her! Then she didn't even thank you!"

"I set the woman down hours ago," the older monk replied. "Why are you still carrying her?"

What is it I hold on to? What is it we carry – on our backs, in our minds, weighing down our spirits?

In Canada, these days, it may be hope, for a return to peace, and order and good government.

In our personal lives, it may be hope that our relationships are nourish us; that our work is of use.

We hope for sunny skies and smooth sailing.

We want to hold on to these relatively mild autumn days.

What do we hold on to?

For dear life, this precious life.

We hold on to letters; these days we hold onto emails. Pictures. Old picture albums. Newer I-phone selfies.

Some of us hold onto things – books, stuffed animals, old cars, baskets of yarn, seed packets, heirloom chinaware, vintage tools, whatever calls us to gather, collect, hold on, horde.

We hold on to family, good companions, life partners, old friends.

When violence comes into our world, we may hold on to fear, anxiety. We may hold on to anger. We may hold on to despair.

We may turn to each other, hold on to each other.

In 1998, when American student Matthew Shepherd was beaten, tortured and left to die in a field near Laramie, Wyoming, when Matthew died, singer-songwriter Judy Fjell wrote:

SUNG: *We are holding the soul of Matthew [Nathan; our nation] in our own two hands.*

We are holding the soul of Matthew in our hands.

Though injustice surrounds us, may love prevail.

We are holding the soul of Matthew in our hands.

www.judyfjell.com/backoffice/dbops/news/display.htm?rec=162&ax; accessed 14 October 2014.

[Cpl. Nathan Cirillo killed last week at a Canadian war memorial.]

We hold onto our dreams – some dreams fulfilled, most coming about not quite the way we'd dreamt them.

We hold on to expectations – whether reality based or not.

We hold onto hope.

Sometimes things don't go, after all,

from bad to worse...

sometimes a [person] aims high, and all goes well.

A people sometimes will step back from war;
elect an honest man; decide they care

enough, that they can't leave some stranger poor.

Sometimes our best efforts do not go
amiss; sometimes we do as we meant to.
The sun will sometimes melt a field of sorrow
that seemed hard frozen...

["Sometimes" by Sheenagh Pugh]

We hold onto our values our principles – of compassion, equity, human worth,
interconnectedness.

Universalist minister Olympia Brown asks us to “Stand by this faith....hold on “to
this faith which has placed before us the loftiest ideals... Which has comforted us in
sorrow, strengthened us for noble duty and made the world beautiful” [#569, Living
Tradition]

When a loved one dies we hold on to memories, loving hearts and deeds, the legacy left.
When a loved one dies we may hold on to anger, sadness, resentments, grief,
disillusionment.

We hold on to the pure and the impoverished, knowing that life and love are filled with
ambiguity, filled with paradox, filled with opposites.

But, if we are lucky, we can hold on to the ten good things.

It is not so easy to know when to hold on, hold on for dear life, and when to let go.

I invite us to enter into a time of reflection on what it is we hold on to – the
nourishing and life-giving, as well as the not-helpful.

Letting Go

And what is it we let go?

Self-defeating attitudes, old habits. If we're lucky.

Monk and theologian Kilian McDonnell OSB reflects on Psalm 101, that tells us: ("I
will walk the way of perfection." Psalm 101:2)

I have had it with perfection.
I have packed my bags,
I am out of here.
Gone.

As certain as rain
will make you wet,
perfection will do you
in.

It droppeth not as dew
upon the summer grass
to give liberty and green
joy.

Perfection straineth out
the quality of mercy,
withers rapture at its
birth.

Before the battle is half begun,
cold probity thinks
it can't be won, concedes the
war.

I've handed in my notice,
given back my keys,
signed my severance check, I
quit.

Hints I could have taken:
Even the perfect chiseled form of
Michelangelo's radiant David
squints,

the Venus de Milo
has no arms,
the Liberty Bell is
cracked.

"Perfection, Perfection" by Kilian McDonnell, from *Swift, Lord, You Are Not*.
© Saint John's University Press, 2003.

Unitarian Henry David Thoreau, in his extended essay "Walden," urges us to
"Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a
hundred or a thousand." [61]

Let go extraneous noise and busyness, tasks and duties, strict attention to lists and
to time. Broaden the margins of our lives [75], so we may live our lives fully and faithfully.

Buddhists ask us to let go of the idea of permanence. All is change. All is illusion.
Nothing stays the same.

Who can say
 I am Japanese
 American

African
Canadian

when in the next day
s/he may be a butterfly
[In *Zen Telegrams* by Paul Reps]

Mantras, chants, help us release the things that no longer serve a purpose in our lives; help us embrace the new, the peaceful, the powerful, the nourishing.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1XgzVgyZKKM>; accessed 24 October 2014.

SUNG: *I release, and I let go
I let my holy spirit flow.
And we're one in the spirit,
and we're only here for love.*

Music and lyrics by Michael Beckwith and Ricky Byars

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4zYDUxQqVH>; accessed 24 Oct. 2014

The *Peanuts* dog Snoopy is looking up at a falling leaf.

In the second panel of the cartoon he thinks: "Well! The first falling leaf of the season." [The first leaf to let go.]

And he continues: "The first leaf to make the courageous leap! The first leaf to depart from Home! The first leaf to plunge into the unknown!

He turns around, starts walking away, and concludes: "The first leaf to die!!"

Poet Mary Oliver writes: To live in this world you must be able to do three things: to love what is mortal; to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it; and, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go.

SUNG: *In life, practice only this:
Letting each other go, letting each other go.
Holding on comes easily, we don't need to learn it.
Holding on comes easily, we don't need to learn it.
Practice letting go, letting go, letting go. [x2]*

Harmony Grisman

I invite us to enter into a time of reflection on what it is we have let go, have not let go of, need to let go.

"It's not the weight you carry
but how you carry it -
books, bricks, grief -
it's all in the way
you embrace it, balance it, carry it

when you cannot and would not,
put it down."

So, may we go
Practicing, practicing .

Linger
to admire, admire, admire
the things of this world
that are kind, and maybe

also troubled -
roses in the wind,
the sea geese on the steep waves,
a love
to which there is no reply?
- Mary Oliver, in her book of poems *Thirst*

May we embrace, balance, carry
What we cannot and would not put down.

May we go practicing, practicing – holding on, letting go.

May it be so. May we make it so. Blessed Be. And Amen.