

Letting Go

This sermon was written and presented by Gail Hardenbergh, a longtime member of First Parish Sudbury on Feb 24, 2019.

The theme of our worship this month is letting go.

Right at the onset, I wish to name the elephant in the room to state that I don't believe in letting go of my outrage about the extensive history of racism and murder in our country. Names must be named and not forgotten. But work must be done now to change what happens today and going forward, including being present for people who are so lost in their private terrified shame that they endlessly seek to harm others so they can feel better. If my outrage overwhelms me and I wallow in it instead of letting it inspire action, I don't believe that is useful to anyone. Especially not useful to me. It would cause me to suffer a great deal to endlessly embody that kind of rage and tension. There would be no purpose to it.

Lesson - letting go of the self indulgence around my outrage is useful. Instead I wish to let the outrage propel me to be of use in the world.

Back to Letting go....letting go...
What does that even mean and how does one do it?
Is it even advisable?

In this sermon I'm going to describe my point of view of letting go, what some big roadblocks are and how one might drive right through them, never exceeding the speed limit.

I had an opportunity to experience letting go a couple of weeks ago. Somehow I incorrectly thought for months that the worship theme for February was prayer. I learned just a couple of weeks ago that it was "letting go". At a crossroads, I had the choice of continuing my prayer sermon or shifting to letting go. BUT I WANTED to do a service about prayer!! How delightfully subversive and actually very meaningful to me!

It's funny how often the universe lets me experience a demonstration of the very lesson that I apparently need to learn in that moment.

Lesson- Universe exclaims, "Please open yourself up to the new present. Please let go of what could have been."

The first time I naïvely signed up to be a worship host of a summer service I missed the email that outlined my duties about how to prepare for the service because I had been on a trip outside the country and didn't notice it. Blithely showing up at the service 20 minutes before it began that Sunday I quickly realized that I had not done what I was supposed to do. I immediately began to sweat profusely and feel very awkward and embarrassed. It was like one of those dreams - I'm naked somewhere or I show up to class and learn that the final is TODAY!

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But because I had recently learned that stress can be handled by taking 10 to 20 deep breaths in a row I went into the bathroom and tried it. Shockingly, it worked amazingly well and my nervous system calmed right down. When I got my wits about me I saw that the theme of the day was perfectionism. I was able to use the experience from the preceding half hour and wrap that into the service in a joyful welcoming way. I completely went with the humor of the situation that the universe was sending my way. Lesson - Ride the wave of reality in the here and now. Experience the roller coaster of feelings that are real right now! It might even be OK.

Aren't those nice stories? Gosh darn!

But what about situations which feel deeply challenging? What about those? What about something that I feel afraid to let go of? What about a situation where I might have to disregard something that I deeply believe? What about a situation where the sadness and disappointment I might feel if I let go of something feels like an option that I don't even want to consider taking? It might even feel like I shouldn't take it. It would be wrong. It might even feel risky to take it. It might feel stupid to "let go." What about those?

So what does one do to let go? How does one even do that?

Let's ask the important question in each unique situation- Just what it is that I'm actually letting go of? Can I hear the answer or am I too stressed to hear it?

When we are afraid the blood doesn't flow so easily to the pre-frontal cortex of our brains and we don't think very deeply. This leads us more to our animal reactions rather than our analytical thinking.

But here's a good way in. Why not think of it this way?

Isn't it in our humanity to create a story to explain the world to ourselves no matter how small or large the question? We are all born scientists asking WHY something occurs.

Sometimes these stories are accurate and sometimes they are not. The mothers of Columbus's crew knew their sons would fall off the edge of the world and die. At one time that was a "true story" which very few people doubted.

Those stories became beliefs.

I find the word **story** useful because it introduces the possibility of doubt. Beliefs might not have doubts but stories can.

Of course, when my own story becomes a belief somehow it seems right, real, obvious and important to me. I have no doubts.

So I'll often ask myself - Just what is the story that I am believing right now? A very useful question. I get to stand back a step.

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This is important because when one's thoughts become beliefs, when I start believing my own stories I react to them as though they are deeply correct. The brain affects our ability to do that.

Here's an example.

Any of us can think of some future calamity that could happen. If we stay with that imagined idea long enough (truly not very long!) our bodies begin to react as though the story is real. As a result I can begin to feel anxious, hopeless and vigilant. What if the plane crashes? What if I become a widow? What if, what if? And then this... and then that?? The longer I linger there the more my body reacts.

It's the physical feelings we have as a result of our thoughts which cue us to believe that our stories are real. Does that make sense? Our physical reactions feel like proof. When we feel afraid the trigger for the fear seems genuine.

And it is shockingly common that I don't even realize that I am essentially the author of my own misery here. My thoughts became a story. The story scared me. My body reacted as though the story was real. I start to believe my own story. I suffered.

It is challenging to let go of a belief, even if it's an untrue story. Some scientist telling the mothers of Columbus' crew that the world is round probably didn't immediately help them relax. You can begin to see that in certain instances, letting go of an untrue story would be quite challenging, once it became a belief. If I don't take the time to explore that - forget it! And as each of knows, my own stories are real.

Lesson - it can take courage to examine my thoughts and beliefs.

I'll share such a story of my own creation and what eventually happened as a result.

I have one sister who is two years older than I am. When I was a senior in college she ran away to Singapore to get married, essentially never to return to live in the States. That was back in the day when people wrote letters and seldom used the phone for expensive transatlantic calls. As a younger sister who was studying psychology and relationships I truly believed that I knew exactly what my sister should be giving me in order for us to have a good relationship.

Perhaps you can recognize someone you know in some of what I'm about to say.

I knew that my sister should treat me like a dear younger sister, eternally caring. She should join me in my pursuit and curiosity of psychological education and understanding. She should use psychological language and that should make sense to her. She should have a limitless capacity for listening and believing everything I said. And of course, she should do all this while living halfway around the world and barely seeing me. Lest you think these are the ravings of a three-year-old, let me assure you they were not. This is what my twenties consisted of with her. This all seemed so reasonable to me and I didn't see much beyond it. What follows happened when I was 36.

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Luckily at the time I had a wise therapist who suggested that when my sister came to town on an upcoming work trip, she stop in for a session with me. I was delighted that my therapist was going to explain me to my sister - finally! Instead I left that powerful meeting shocked at how my sister had been explained to me. After I was led to think about her life and what my behavior might feel like coming towards her I was stunned. After the meeting I straightforwardly told her I was going to change my outlook and I did. I gave her some sincere apologies and really did change my behavior starting with visiting her in Singapore for the first time ever within the year.

So what was actually I letting go of here? My powerful wishes. A kind of know-it -all energy. A cluelessness about the beauty and necessity of mutuality. My certainty that I knew exactly what I needed to make me happy. And most of all, the belief that she had to be a certain way for me to be ok. I always call that the Vidal Sassoon School of Mental Health.

I'd like to say it was wonderful. Yay! Letting go is so wonderful!!

But I'm introducing a complication instead.

Actually what followed was a sense of loss and emptiness. I knew what not to do but I didn't know what to do. I had been so certain of my own story. I believed it was completely correct. It never occurred to me that my certainty itself WAS my problem.

I was shocked at the loss and emptiness because everyone speaks about letting go as such a euphoric experience. For me, that wasn't the case. In retrospect I realized I entered a time of grief.

So here's one thing you might think prepare for. Letting go can bring grief.

Letting go of what seems fundamentally true to us is rather huge.

So if part of us knows that letting go is truly the right thing to do and we may even sincerely want to but we really shouldn't be surprised that there is also another part of us that feels differently. Very sad.

Luckily grief is something that humans mostly recover from, isn't it, if we keep our eyes open? What I mean by that is this.

I had been so focused on what my sister should do, I really barely noticed what she actually was doing. During my period of grief I really tried to keep my eyes open about what was real and right in front of me. Carefully looking, especially while I was visiting her in Singapore, resulted in feeling much more settled in a realistic and loving sisterly relationship. I could see her being loving in her own particular way, which turned out to be quite wonderful. And isn't that what each of us does anyway, love another in a way that feels right to me?

There was true mutuality, which couldn't have happened had I not been willing to let go of my previous beliefs.

Lesson -Being willing to take a chance to see WHAT IS in the real world rather than continuing my path of certainty that I needed to control events is what can help me let go.

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So how was I able to do that? What enabled me to turn on a dime and acknowledge that I had made mistakes after spending so many years not being troubled at all about my beliefs. I suppose the short answer has to do with the resilience of the human spirit. We sometimes enjoy moments of sudden clarity, don't we, even when by rights they "shouldn't" appear. I was flooded with the knowledge that I had been deeply mistaken.

But what one does with that moment of clarity is really the question, isn't it? I suppose I could have seen the truth in it and run screaming from the room with my head in my hands. So what enabled me to stay with it rather than be overwhelmed by shame and embarrassment about it?

I think that self-compassion is really the key to living well, especially when one is letting go. Self compassion is not the same thing as self-pity. It is not selfish. It is not conceited. It is not grandiose. It is not defensive. It is simply caring about oneself in a similar way to the way that I care about anyone I love.

The opposite is harsh self judgement. When I experience that, I become entirely self focused. I likely become defensive in response to my own self judgement which ratchets up the pain of the overall experience. I am less

emotionally available to be with the person I have wronged because harsh self judgement distracts us away from others.

If I develop a habit of treating myself kindly, letting go becomes much more possible. It's less frightening. Less shaming. It actually enables me to be way less self involved. If I have less fear looking clearly at how I have hurt someone, I am less overwhelmed by the experience.

One of my favorite sayings is, "Seemed like a good idea at the time."

That is often the way that I look at past decisions that turned out to be mistakes. I recognize that at the time, that was what I was capable of and I hold onto that while I simultaneously feel regret for something I have done. I try to make amends and change my behavior in the present.

Actually, and perhaps you will find this ICKY, but I actually call myself sweetheart in my head.

There are some common roadblocks to letting go. One is the sense that it would be wrong to do so. What am afraid would happen if I did let go? It's not unusual to fear that something awful would happen if we did let go.

Sometimes it turns out that loyalty is a major component of this dilemma. We tie things together in our hearts and worry that we would be disloyal if we were to grow and change. And therefore letting go can be a very hard thing to do.

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An example of this is Derek Black, a young man who grew up in Florida in what is essentially the royal family of White Nationalists. His father had been a Ku Klux Klan Grandmaster and founded Stormfront, a neo-nazi web site. David Duke is his godfather. As a teen Derek famously hosted a daily radio show promoting these ideas to other young people.

But when Derek went to college he developed real relationships with fellow students who were Jewish and Muslim. A few of them knew what he was and insisted on treating him as a person of value anyway. Over time he realized he could not continue spouting the family line. Could he let those ideas go? What would the cost in loyalty be? Spoiler alert - he did part with his family's beliefs and now has a PhD in Muslim history.

But I wonder what was it like for him to let go of his ideas? Certainly Derek must have struggled with challenging loyalty issues.

That is an extreme example, yet many of us struggle with the same concern. If I let go, whom do I gain and whom do I lose? Whom do I please and whom do I disappoint? Will we no longer be connected if I move away from someone else's beliefs? Often it makes no difference if the loyalty is to a deceased or living family member. And to make matters even more complicated we may not consciously realize how much loyalty is affecting us. We just know it doesn't feel right to change.

Another roadblock to letting go is the dread of embarrassment. Well, if I let go of that idea, what does it mean that I believed that all those years? What does that say about me? How does that make me look? How humiliating. I'm not sure I can handle that. Especially if I am a person who grew up in a family that tossed shame around like a hot potato, where blame was the family currency, that consequence of letting go can feel excruciating.

And then there is what I call magical thinking about how the world really works. People have said to me on many occasions with a straight face-

"I can't give up control of that."

And of course most of the time the blunt response to that would be -

"Um, you aren't giving up control, you are giving up the illusion of control."

Who among us can really control anything important? I can decide to drink tea or coffee at breakfast but have no say on the health of anyone I love, do I?

In my work as a therapist I have from time to time gently given that blunt response only to see the client panic about the truth of what I had just said. There are many people to whom that essential truth had never entered their minds. These might also be the people who make silent bargains. "If I constantly worry about someone, that will make them safe." Many people hold such beliefs. I'm not making this up. They cling to those bargains as though they are real. Fear is a powerful motivator, isn't it?

And what about age related challenges - acceptance of what I can no longer reliably do?

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As a woman in my 60's I certainly know the speed of retrieving information from my memory bank has slowed down. Are there other things I can no longer reliably do? I am willing to admit it? Do I fear it would bring too much grief or humiliation into my consciousness?

What does letting go look like in those situations?

The answer lies in what my beliefs are.

Back to our original question - just what it is that I'm actually letting go of?

What are my beliefs?

Do I believe "Old people have no value - so I don't want to be one?"

All I have to do is remember Nancy Moore's delightful conversation to counter that.

Do I believe that I will be blamed and pitied if I am old?

Self compassion addresses that.

And how about the slogan, "It's better than the alternative" which points out that early death is the only solution to aging.

Letting go in this circumstance is actually Letting go of the denial I have about it.

Perhaps letting go of the denial of aging can lead to feeling graceful and loving about it. If I let go of denial I can more readily attend to anything that can support the quality of my life every day until my last. I certainly hope so.

In this sermon I started with the idea that sometimes letting go can be exhilarating and easy. Then I invited us to consider all the times that is not the case.

The first step in a more challenging example is slowing down, by defining what letting go is by asking the question -

Just what is it that I am actually letting go of?

Looking at our beliefs and considering that they might be untrue stories opens me up.

Learning that the brain and the body play a part in this feels calming to me- I'm not unique or crazy because I do that - I'm normal.

Learning that grief might follow letting go can help me feel less blindsided by it if it occurs. I can anticipate it as a phase of the process. During that time I benefit by keeping my eyes wide open.

We connected Self-compassion to well-being in the midst of these challenges by looking at what harsh self judgement does instead. Self-compassion has many benefits to those around us, as well as ourselves.

We looked at some specific roadblocks as well as what might help us with them.

It has been a privilege to share with you my thoughts, stories and beliefs today.

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