

## **Holding on and Letting Go**

**By Rev. Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD November 7, 2021**

Remember. Joy Harjo calls us to remember - to hold on. Remember the birth of the sun and its giving way to night - we are called to hold close the cycles of life, each event, each emotion, each joy our upset cycling through the phases of our days and our years. We are evidence of our mothers and our grandmothers and our great grandmothers, and our fathers, all of our parents - called to carry with us the ancestors, each adding crucial elements to who we are on this day, whether or not we ever touched their skin or heard their voice. Remember the earth whose skin we are - as mentioned in Ecclesiastes chapter 3 verse 20, "all are from the dust, and to dust all return," we are called to honor and hold on to our own mortality; and our connection to the earth. Remember you are all people, and all people are you - connected through love, hope, science, and faith to all of those in our interdependent web. Remember.<sup>1</sup>

We need to remember, for our history shapes who we are. And yet just as we remember we are called to let go, releasing that which encumbers us and burdens us. Sometimes we are called to release what we know for the beauty and love and inspiration of the not yet known.

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<sup>1</sup> "Remember" by Joy Harjo

In death, we hold on to memories just as we let go of that physical presence. We hold our beloveds inside of us, hold them in the trees, creating a new kind of intimacy, while letting go of touch and conversation. In death, when faced with our own mortality, we let go of our own lives, accepting our impermanence and transiency, holding on to our beliefs of whatever comes next.

In illness we hold on to the fragility of life, knowing we have limited time, holding on to this time we have been offered. We gain this as a tradeoff of letting go of security, of peace of mind, of taking our health for granted.

And love. In this realm, love will end, whether in death or a parting of ways. We are called to hold on to the beautiful moments, the tender moments, the joy. The more we love the more it will hurt when it ends but feeling true love and letting it go - I believe it is worth it. In death, love connects us to our beloveds in ways unknown and sacred.

Holding on and letting go - a delicate balance that shapes and molds our lives, dictating how we use our history to shape our future, how we emerge from pain and create a life of meaning.

When I was in high school, I had a boyfriend named Jonny whom I cherished deeply. Right before our senior year of high school, Jonny's mother quickly and tragically passed away from pancreatic cancer. Jonny had no local family that could take him in, leaving a grieving child with many unknowns. My mom, who had just lost a sister and

understood grief and loneliness, took Jonny in as one of her own, as a son, and to my sister and me, he quickly became a brother, and I hold him as a dear brother to this very day. Through an intricate maze of holding on and letting go, we created a family. I let go of that high school love and held close to the bonds of siblinghood. We let go of that idea of a traditional family and held on to the beauty and love and special bonds of a chosen family. My mom let go of some of her pain and honored her dead sister by taking care of another grieving soul. In all of this, I found a brother.

Holding on can leave us trapped. I think of that metaphor of trying to retrieve something we need from a jar or like a hole in our Story for All Ages.<sup>2</sup> Slipping our open hand through the rim, we grasp on to what is inside, and through that large, clenched fist, our hand becomes stuck. Only when we let go and tip that jar to the side can we retrieve that which we need.

Holding on creates regrets as we grasp on to mistakes or decisions we have made, trapping us in our ruminations as a glass jar would. What we can hope to find are lessons that guide us in the future, the humbleness of a sincere apology, the graciousness when we are forgiven.

Many of us have songs we listen to on repeat, finding solace in the lyrics that touch our souls in meaningful ways and offer us guidance. Sometimes it feels as if the song was

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<sup>2</sup> “The Mouse and the Crow” by Kelly Weisman Asprooth-Jackson

written specifically for us. When I was trapped in regrets, my song was “Sweetest Decline” by Beth Orton. I’ll share with you those tender lyrics:

What's the use in regrets?

They're just things we haven't done yet.

What are regrets?

They're just lessons we haven't learned yet.<sup>3</sup>

The artist calls us each to do what we might otherwise regret not having done! To learn from those mistakes we hold tightly within us - to hold on to those lessons and release ourselves from that bondage of regret. What lessons can we learn from our past? I wonder.

NPR offered an article comparing regrets to nostalgia; regrets leading to rumination and negative outcomes, while nostalgia helps us rewrite the stories of our lives. We are offered a chance to engage with that history, those formative events, that shaped us. We “chew” on regrets, holding them close and replaying them over and over and over. Nostalgia, in contrast, is that tug we feel in our hearts when we hear that favorite song of ours or recall memories both of love and joy and of loss and hardship. It's not necessarily what we hold on to, but how we hold on to it. Psychology professor Clay Routledge, who studies nostalgia, explored the feelings of nostalgia among British adults who grew up during World War II, those who spent their formative years in fear of

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<sup>3</sup> “Sweetest Decline” by Beth Orton

bombs dropped by the German army. Many were sent away and separated from their families. These children, now adults, in living through tragedy and trauma, were, through their difficult memories, I quote, “stripped away [of] all the nonsense of life and reminded ... how precious it is.” Through their pain they were able to hold on to the beauty and the precarious nature of our own mortality. In reminiscing on their past, they rewrote their stories and cultivated a deep connection with life. Nostalgia keeps us from “retreating into the past,” and, instead, we are called to use it to “mobilize” and “take on new challenges.” Each life offers moments and memories that can trap us in rumination and regrets, but when reviewed through a lens of nostalgia, can help craft a beautiful, invaluable connection to life.<sup>4</sup>

In reflecting on nostalgia, I am reminded of my mother’s jewelry, in particular, her necklaces. She owns a locket held delicately on a long, silver chain, tucked within it pictures of my sister and me when we were very small children. I think of the bulky, silver cross she owns, held within it ashes - the cremains - of her sister. I think of the various pendants I have purchased for her on trips I have taken, offering her a token of the beauty and joy I experienced, and the reminder that I take her with me no matter where I go. Tangible pieces of memories held with nostalgia - her young children, cherished sister, and tokens of our adventures, looped through simple chains that allow her to carry them on her very body; delicate reminders of the beautiful and difficult things that were formative to her - her own history. Can we each carry with us memories on delicate chains, held on our necks or tucked away in our hearts and souls

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2018/06/14/607757718/looking-back-reflecting-on-the-past-to-understand-the-present>

- pieces of nostalgia we can pull out and carry with us again and again and again when life gets hard or we need reminders of the love and pain that makes us who we are, stripped of nonsense and mobilized for what lies ahead? Things from our past we carry with us, day after day after day - calling upon beauty when we are immersed in pain. Holding on when we feel like letting go.

Mary Oliver wrote,

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. <sup>5</sup>

To me this poem speaks poignantly and eloquently of love, death, mortality and release.

How we hold our history and shape our future. Loving what is mortal leaves us

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<sup>5</sup> "In Blackwater Woods" by Mary Oliver

strikingly vulnerable, because it carries with it the truth that this love, in this realm, will ultimately come to an end. And yet we grasp on to that love because that love is what gives us life. Love of a partner, a sibling, a friend, a child, love of nature! And yet, as we spoke of earlier, whether by death or separation, we let this love go. A time will come when we let it go. Mortality is the ultimate letting go - whether saying goodbye to the one we love or slipping from consciousness ourselves. And yet we can hold each person we love in that locket we carry with us, nostalgia for the memories that we need to live in this world.

We let so much go with this acceptance of mortality. We let go of the promise of tomorrow. Of the assurance of a long and fruitful life we desire for those children we love so deeply, for anyone we hold dear, for ourselves. We let go of the promise to see our dreams come to fruition, to the commitment of an everlasting love. And yet we gain so much as well. Without the promise of tomorrow, we are called to live fully today. Without the assurance of a long life, we are called to see and engage with the beauty all around us - to hold on to what is good, true, and joyful. We can choose to love more deeply knowing that love won't always be there.

And yet even in loss, we hold on. The dead are in the sunrise and the sunset. In the budding trees and the fallen leaves. When we have a secret for them, we can whisper it into the wind, sharing our joys and our heartaches with them, whether they entered another realm or transitioned back into dust. While their physical life has ended, their memory, their spirit - this we hold on to in perpetuity.

What can we learn from those who have no choice but to let go? Those suffering from Alzheimer's, living daily with memory loss - this involuntary letting go can teach us so much - so much about the power of those seemingly simple stories, and of living in the now. Dr. Alan Dienstag, a psychologist who has led support groups with early Alzheimer's patients, understood that in the early stages of Alzheimer's, his patients weren't losing their memories, but giving them away. Giving memories away - as a gift. We learn that our lifetimes of experiences, those stories we have collected since birth, this wisdom is a gift to share, and our narrations color lives. Let go of what we have within us and gift it to others who can hold on. What do we do when time is running out? Dr. Dienstag says there is something heroic in those grappling with this - those he works with declaring "I'm going to tell you who I am before it's too late. I'm going to tell you this story about picking lilacs from a tree with my mother."<sup>6</sup> Simple stories become elevated - become meaningful and cherished - because soon they will be let go of. Not forgotten but gifted to loved ones to cherish forever more. How buttercups sustained us in childhood, or the delicate smell of a grandparent kept us safe when we felt lost. The gift of giving away little pieces of oneself, soon to be departed, but never gone, as expressed by poet Alyea Pierce. This wisdom offered to live in the now - not remembering a past and not assured of a future. All that is offered is now. Between those memories we give away, and that ultimate end looming ever nearer. Let us make our time - our "now," as beautiful, as wonderful, as possible.<sup>7</sup> Before we lose our memories or depart from this life, we can cultivate our "now" as we choreograph the

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<sup>6</sup> <https://onbeing.org/programs/alan-dienstag-alzheimers-and-the-spiritual-terrain-of-memory/>

<sup>7</sup> "Pieces of My Memories: a Poem to Alzheimer's" by Alyea Pierce



dance of holding on and letting go - of creating chosen families after the loss of a mother, or using a childhood shaped by war to hold ever closer to this precious life. Letting go of that promise of tomorrow.

Remember your birth, how your mother struggled to give you form and breath. You are evidence of her life, and her mother's, and hers.<sup>8</sup>

Ancestors shape us - no matter what our lineage may look like. Our history shapes us. Our decisions of what to cherish and what to release - this shapes us. Let ours be a life of love, a love so deep we feel it in our bones, cherished as we hold that inevitability that, sooner or later, it will slip away.

May it be so, and Amen

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<sup>8</sup> "Remember" by Joy Harjo