

On the Transformation that Comes from Courageous Letting Go

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In this season of Transformation, we explore the critical role of letting go. We will explore why letting go is essential, what makes it so difficult, and how to release our grip through a variety of spiritual practices.

You are likely aware that this past week, on March 19th, was the Spring Equinox. Ah, Spring!--that ubiquitous symbol of rebirth and transformation. But did you know that, according to the National Day Calendar¹ website,

March 15th recognizes Everything You Think Is Wrong Day, a day where decision-making should be avoided, as your thoughts are (according to the founder of this holiday) wrong. It is also a day created for some people to realize that they are not always right.

Obviously, it's too late to observe this holiday this year. Nonetheless, here are some tips from the website for future March 15th's:

The observance may be a time for all to contemplate our own lack of knowledge. It is okay that one does not know everything, and if there is a need to feel as if you do, hold on. Tomorrow will be here soon, and then once again, you can think that you do!

How is this day relevant to this month's theme: The Gift of Transformation? The March Soul Matters worship resource packet has a section titled, "On the Transformation that Comes from Courageous Letting Go," which provided the seeds--and the quotations, and the title--for today's sermon. Receiving the spiritual gift of transformation requires a spirit of not having all the answers. If we already had everything figured out, there would be no need to change.

As Richard Rohr says, "Transformation more often happens not when something new begins but when something old falls apart."² In 12-Step recovery, the first step to transformation from an addiction or codependency is to admit that we are powerless and that our lives have become unmanageable.

¹ <https://www.nationaldaycalendar.com/pop-culture-lifestyle/everything-you-think-is-wrong-day-march-15>

² <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/change-catalyst-transformation-2016-06-30/>

And yet, things-falling-apart isn't always enough to inspire change. With apologies to the rock band R.E.M., I can tell myself, "It's the end of the world as I know it, and I feel fine." Sometimes I resist change even though I don't feel fine. For several years, I experienced recurring bouts of depression. My symptoms weren't as debilitating as some people experience, although they could disrupt my productivity for a few days. At its worst, however, I remember the distinct feeling that depression did not want to get better. My daughter, Amira, describes depression as a security blanket. Amira says, "it feels comfortable believing that there is nothing I can do about my suffering because it matches the level of energy that I am able to give toward life. Hopelessness requires no action. Once one understands their responsibility for themselves, gates open for guilt and shame to pour in and push hope further away."

Author William Bridges observes:

Much as we may wish to make a new beginning, some part of us resists doing so as though we were making the first step toward disaster... We resist transition not because we can't accept the change, but because we can't accept letting go of that piece of ourselves that we have to give up when and because the situation has changed.³

To quote former wide receiver Trent Shelton,

"That broken thing you keep trying to put back together is keeping your life from that beautiful thing that is waiting to be built."⁴

So, what is the wake-up call that opens our awareness to see that we keep trying to put back together the same broken thing? What does it take to tip the scales and motivate a person to freefall from current suffering into the arms of uncertainty?

Anais Nin wrote, "And the day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom." Pain. Pain can be the motivator.

Richard Rohr asserts that most of us would never go to new places without "the pain of something old falling apart." But for many of us, pain can only tip the scales once it reaches a certain threshold. In 12-Step programs, this is known as "hitting bottom." This "chaos" as Rohr describes it, "invites the soul to listen at a deeper level...and sometimes forces the soul to go to a new place because the old place is falling apart."⁵

³ https://www.amazon.com/dp/B004ZY23TS/ref=dp-kindle-redirect?_encoding=UTF8&btkr=1

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<https://www.facebook.com/LikeTrentShelton/posts/that-broken-thing-you-keep-trying-to-put-back-together-is-keeping-your-life-from/292829452208121/>

⁵ <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/change-catalyst-transformation-2016-06-30/>

When things start falling apart, our impulse might be to cling on ever more tightly--as Rohr puts it, "tightening your controls and certitudes." Yet, what we truly need in this time, Rohr asserts, is "patience, guidance, and the freedom to let go." Rohr suggests that we draw inspiration from the biblical image of "Jonah in the belly of the whale." What's necessary, Rohr advises, is "living in the confusing dark space for a while, and allowing yourself to be spit up on a new and unexpected shore."⁶

Notice that the faith-centered approach of living in the belly of the whale and allowing oneself to be spit up on an unexpected shore is in stark contrast with the oh-so-human approach that Frederick Buechner described: of gritting our teeth, clenching our fists, and trying to fix things on our own. Buechner asserts, "When it comes to putting broken lives back together, the human best tends to be at odds with the holy best." According to Buechner, our human efforting to fight against reality prevents us from allowing divine intervention. The very defenses that help us survive also block us out from "being opened up and transformed by the holy power that life itself comes from."⁷

Turning one's will over to a deity can be found in many world religions, including and beyond Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Serendipitously, my yoga class topic this week was the 5th Niyama, Ishvara Pranidhana, Surrendering to God.

The third step of Alcoholics Anonymous reads, "Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood him." (I acknowledge that the gendered language here is problematic--and that the God language can be a barrier for some UUs.) In case monotheism is not your jam, 12-step program participants are invited to surrender to a higher power of whatever form works for them, be it a deity, the universe, or even a trusted ally who has their best interest at heart-- even when they themselves might not. What's important is admitting that we don't have all the answers--admitting that "we were powerless ... and our lives had become unmanageable"--and then courageously letting go.

Courageously letting go. One question I grapple with is, "When is letting go courageous, and when is it resignation?" Am I letting go because I'm truly powerless, or am I giving up because I'm exhausted? 12-Step programs invite us to seek guidance through the Serenity Prayer:

Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2019/1/15/humanly-best>

the courage to change the things I can,
and the wisdom to know the difference.

Even when we know it's healthy for us to let go, how do we actually do it? My acupuncturist has been working with me toward being "passionate and unattached," as she puts it. Recently, she coached me to use the tag phrase "and you don't have to"--when making a request. Despite my squirmy resistance, I gave it a try in a recent plea to a loved one. It's funny how I felt as if I were turning over my power just by saying "you don't have to." As if, before I said it, I had any level of control. What was the outcome? Actually, the whole point is letting go of the outcome.

This reminds me of Erik Walker Wikstrom's tenet--in his book *Serving with Grace: Lay Leadership as a Spiritual Practice*--that your 'no' is as sacred as your 'yes'.⁸ Recently, Dan Vallone, chair of the Stewardship Committee, called me and said, "I invite you to serve on the Canvass Team. I also invite you not to serve on the Canvass Team." Dan took a risk, creating sacred space for a 'no.' In fact, I did say no. I simply didn't have the bandwidth to do it this year. Dan could have said, "We desperately need you to do this." But Dan's letting go transformed the experience. Instead of feeling guilty for saying no, or resentful for being asked, I felt good about it. Feeling guilty or resentful might have diminished my desire to participate in the future. Instead, Dan's approach made me want to say yes in the future. This is an example of the transformative power of courageous letting go.

The universe is trying to tell me something about letting go. It's coming up in yoga, in acupuncture, in stewardship recruitment conversations, in SoulMatters sermon topics.

Channing's Clearing As a Spiritual Practice group has also been working on it for the past few years. Following the writings of Stephanie Bennett Vogt, the Clearing Circle addresses the challenges of letting go in its various forms.

- Throwing away a photo of cattle that my parents took on their 1956 vacation,
- Repurposing a threadbare souvenir tea towel as a rag
- Donating a scratchy ill-fitting top that I clung onto because it was once a favorite,

These may not appear to be the types of letting go that require courage.

However, letting little tangible things go can be a practice that helps us learn to let go of the bigger things in life:

- A habit that interferes with healthy living,
- A relationship that isn't serving you,

⁸ <https://www.amazon.com/Serving-Grace-Leadership-Spiritual-Practice/dp/1558965629>

- A persistent fear that is paralyzing your progress toward a goal.

For those bigger challenges, Stephanie Bennett Vogt offers a variety of spiritual practices. One practice is a “Letting Go Altar and Ritual”⁹:

1. Place a small table or shelf in a quiet area of your home.
2. Decorate it with a few favorite objects.
3. Gather items that symbolize what you wish to release.
4. Light a candle and take a moment to center.
5. “Call in a divine presence or higher power to hold a space for you and help anchor your intentions.”¹⁰
6. As you breathe, imagine your energy field expanding as you repeat this blessing: “May this...be fully released for the highest & best good of all concerned. And so it is. And so it shall be.”¹¹
7. Allow yourself to feel any emotions or sensations that arise.

I also came to my altar in prayer:

God, my fervent prayer is
that You give my loved one enough hope to call for help,
and that that call will be answered,
and that that answer will help,
and that that help will lead to a path of healing for a full, beautiful life for the best
and highest good of all concerned.
If that's not too much to ask, God--And You don't have to. Amen.

I could simplify my prayers: “Help!”

So, can any of this really lead to transformation? My Altar of Letting Go? My prayers? My yoga? My acupuncture? My catchy taglines? How does letting go lead to transformation? Perhaps it is mostly a matter of attitude. A change from within. Letting go is a way of saying “yes” to life, just as it is--and just as it isn't.

In the words of Unitarian Universalist minister Rev. Naomi King:

Transformation is life, including the transformation that results in death and decay. We can pretend that is not so. We can hold onto denial and hold onto rage and hold onto bitterness and hold onto the illusion that somehow we are exempt from change, or as perfected as we are going to be. But then the

⁹ *A Year to Clear: A Daily Guide to Creating Spaciousness in Your Home and Heart* (2015) Stephanie Bennett Vogt. Hierophant Publishing, San Antonio, TX.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

breaking comes, as it inevitably does. Transformation happens, because it is part of life, no matter what we try, deny, or do. ... For example, I did not choose my genetic disease or my osteoarthritis. But I can choose how I adapt to and learn from the changes they bring. I can transform for bitter or for better.¹²

Like the stream in our Story for All Ages, you're not going to stay the same either way. Might as well surrender and let yourself be transformed for better. Help the universe along a little instead of fighting against it. Besides, do you really think you have a better way?

May it be so, and Amen.

¹² <https://www.questformeaning.org/spiritual-themes/transformation-is/>