

## Preparation for Letting Go (theme for February)

Holding on. Letting go. Holding on. Letting go. We do both throughout our lives, and both are needed. The right combination varies from person to person, and finding the right balance is tricky. We receive many messages about holding on. “Hold fast to your dreams.” “Persevere.” “Reuse and recycle.” “Work on your relationships.” Sometimes these messages are valid, and holding on strengthens our lives. Many times, though, we hold on to that which no longer has meaning for us or is hurtful to us.

Many religious traditions suggest that our desire to hold on is actually an illusion of control, in which people believe that they can influence things they really have no control over. In our culture, the saying “Let go and let God” reflects a belief that God is ultimately in charge of our destinies. Jesus reminds to “consider the lilies of the field” and let go of our insistence on worrying about the future. Many eastern religions, such as Buddhism, encourage us to embrace non-attachment and impermanence. Non-attachment is not escapism or avoiding life but instead not letting material items, past experiences, and relationships define oneself. Without attachment, our selves are not at the center of every situation.

The dilemma of attachment can be as concrete as our stuff. It would make no sense to buy/discard, buy/discard, and buy/discard. Yet many of us have houses filled with things that we no longer need and that no longer have meaning for us. What is it that keeps us holding on when letting them go would simplify our daily lives? Whether to hold onto or let go of relationships is another problem. If we let go of friends, relatives, and partners every time we are hurt, we would only have superficial, transitory contact with people. On the other hand, we sometimes find ourselves staying involved with people who are continually hurtful to us. What makes us hold on to them even when they bring pain instead of joy?

Some of us hold on to aspects of ourselves that keep us from being who we want to be. “I am an introvert so I can’t ...” “I am a capable person so I must ...” Sometimes we participate in activities we no longer enjoy. We may hold assumptions about life that worked well in the past but now keep us from moving into our futures. We sometimes hold on to pain and resentments. Why is it so hard to free ourselves of that which no longer serves us and let ourselves become who we are right now?

As we age, life forces us to let go of many things. Our opportunities diminish and we realize we will never achieve some of our dreams. Our bodies don’t work as well and we must give up some activities we love. Some of us will face the loss of our mental abilities and our independence. Society changes and things we love and believe in are now passé. More and more frequently we lose loved ones to death. Finally, we will all face death, the ultimate letting go.

As we face uncertainty, change, loss, and death, the path of letting go can offer spiritual deepening and growth. Everything is impermanent, but if we can live with mindfulness, we may find acceptance and contentment. If we can accept that everything – material goods, thoughts, relationships, pain, and joy – is transient and ever-changing, then we can perhaps embrace uncertainty and impermanence, even our own impermanence.

Holding on. Letting go. As you ponder the topic, here are some thoughts from others.

And we may start to feel that this is a time of always letting go, of one thing after another after another: Our waistlines. Our vigor. Our sense of adventure. Our 20/20 vision. Our trust in justice. Our earnestness. Our playfulness. Our dream of being a tennis star, or a TV star, or a senator ... At several points in our life we will have to relinquish a former self-image and move on. *Judith Viorst*

Surrender is not giving up on life but giving up fighting with life. And, when you're not fighting with it, you're working with life. *Joshua Kauffman*

The birds are molting. If only man could molt also – his mind once a year its errors, his heart once a year its useless passions. *James Allen*

Life is just a slide. Back and forth between loving and leaving, remembering and forgetting, holding on and letting go. *Nicole Lyons*

We deal most fruitfully with loss by accepting the fact that we will one day lose everything. When we learn to fall, we learn that only by letting go our grip on all that we ordinarily find most precious – our achievements, our plans, our loved ones, our very selves – can we find, ultimately, the most profound freedom. In the act of letting go of our lives, we return more fully to them. *Philip Simmons*

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.

*Mary Oliver, from "In Backwater Woods"*

## Questions to Ponder

1. In the past, what have you successfully let go of in your life, and what do you think made letting go possible for you? What did you gain from letting go?
2. Think about aspects of your life in which letting go might be freeing. Consider relationships or dreams that no longer feed your spirit, ways of being or thinking that no longer fit who you are now, resentment or pain in your heart, or that closet full of stuff you no longer use.

To what are you holding on for dear life, and what would you like to let go?

3. What has life forced you to let go of, even though you haven't wanted to? How have you coped?
4. Nicole Lyons suggests that life is a "dance" between holding on and letting go. How do you balance holding on and letting go in your life?
5. What for you are the spiritual dimensions of letting go?

## Words of the Day

What is something in your life that you might be ready to let go of? For the Gathering, think of a word or a phrase to complete this sentence: I am ready to let go of ...

Some quotes and questions are partially based on material in the February *Touchstones*, "Surrender / Letting Go."