

**Learning to Let Go**  
Rev. Ken Read-Brown  
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)  
Unitarian Universalist  
March 4, 2018

**Readings**

from the Tao Te Ching, chapter 12  
(translated by Ursula K. LeGuin)

The five colors  
blind our eyes.  
The five notes  
deafen our ears.  
The five flavors  
dull our taste.

Racing, chasing, hunting  
drives people crazy.  
Trying to get rich  
ties people in knots.

So the wise soul  
watches with the inner  
not the outward eye,  
letting that go,  
keeping this.

from “Self Reliance” by Ralph Waldo Emerson

These roses under my window make no reference to former roses or to better ones; they are for what they are; they exist with God today There is no time to them. There is simply the rose; it is perfect in every moment of its existence. Before a leaf-bud has burst, its whole life acts; in the full-blown flower there is no more, in the leafless root there is no less. Its nature is satisfied and it satisfies nature in all moments alike.

But we postpone or remember. We do not live in the present, but with reverted eye lament the past, or, heedless of the riches that surround us, stand on tiptoe to foresee the future. We cannot be happy or strong until we too live with nature in the present, above time.

**Sermon**

An occupational hazard (though I mostly consider it an opportunity) in my line of work is that almost anything – book, film, news event, experience – becomes food for a sermon. As my dar friend and colleague Robbie Walsh used to say about such things: “That’ll preach.”

Well, it turns out that even the flu will preach.

As most of you know, I was among the afflicted for a while last month. And though in the larger scheme of things mine was not a very serious matter, it did punish me with a pretty high fever and all that goes with it for a week or so... and then exhaustion for another week.

In other words, plenty of time for pondering.

Some of that pondering had to do with learning to let go – a learning not chosen... rather, imposed by the flu.

Here's how it worked. Every day I had the idea that the *next* day I'd be able to keep that appointment, teach that class, or go to that committee meeting.

But as the day wore on the flu told me that this actually would not be a good idea, that instead I would have to let go of whatever was on my schedule for the next day. So I would make the necessary calls or send the emails and cross whatever had been scheduled for that next day off my old-fashioned date book page.

This went on for almost two weeks!

Interestingly, though, as time went on it got a little easier to cross things off. I was learning to let go not just of appointments on a page, but of my attachment to all those things, my sense that nothing could be postponed or that I was essential to this or that.

Whereas the reality was this:

Many things could be postponed without terrible effect, and people would be understanding and accommodating in that regard.

Some things could actually be cancelled without any damage to anything – turns out those things didn't really have to be done after all.

And some things could be carried out, and quite well, by others. Not least, your wonderful staff – Beverly, Chris, and Dave, leading the multi-generational worship in my absence on February 11; and Julianna keeping the ship quite well afloat in the office without my presence.

Learning to let go.

One of the harder things to let go of was my running.

One day without running, well that's okay, I do that pretty routinely just to rest up. Two days, that's okay too, no conditioning lost in two days.

But then the days started piling up. Fever? Coughing? Not a good idea to run. And when I tried to run a little prematurely, shall we say, just a couple of miles... it turned out not to be a good idea.

Further, since I'm preparing for the Boston Marathon, this letting go of running was even harder than it might otherwise have been. Indeed, for awhile I thought I might have to let go of the Marathon itself, and certainly let go of any idea of running faster than last year or the year before that. Well... it turned out that just as with appointments and classes, the flu gave me no choice in the matter of running.

Now, here's the next level of this letting go, which I've already hinted at:

It wasn't just about letting go of the particular items written in my datebook or on my running schedule. It was, with the strong encouragement of the flu, letting go of worrying much about any of it. Just was going to be the way it was. Doesn't help to worry about it. Contact the people who need to be contacted, change the schedules, then let go of the worry, relax, let the body do what it most wants to do if given a chance, which is to heal.

This meant that after awhile, instead of lying in bed worrying about this or that, or wishing I could do this or that, I was finally able to lie there and let those worries or concerns sort of drift away. So as time went on (and the worst of the flu subsided) it finally became sort of pleasant, and not even guiltily so. I knew I'd be back at everything before long, and wanted to get back to everything – but meanwhile I could just... well... be!

You see, that drifting away of worries and concerns, coinciding with the crossed off items in my book, led to what we might call yet another level of letting go. This has to do with letting go – at least for a time – of over-identification with the roles and sense of self, many of which are wrapped up in all those scribbles in my book.

I was reminded, to put it another way, that the *essential* nature of Ken Read-Brown is *not* minister, runner, musician... not even husband, father, grandfather, brother, friend. These are simply all parts of what this manifestation of the universe called Ken is currently manifesting.

Now, this does not at all mean that my family identifications or my identification as your minister are unimportant. Not at all.

What it *does* mean is that there is more going on than these roles.

What I'm saying is of course true for each of us.

As I sometimes put it: each of us individual manifestations of the divine, of the universe – whatever word you choose to use for this mystery and miracle of the larger life of which we are a part.

One possible word, for example... Tao – as we heard in the first reading. Each of us an individual manifestation of the universal Tao, the universal Way of universe.

In this regard, I particularly appreciate Ursula LeGuin's translation of the chapter we heard earlier.

The opening lines of the chapter are translated in similar ways by various translators, suggesting how easily we are led astray by too much attachment to the senses and to accumulation of stuff. But then, though LeGuin doesn't change the meaning of the conclusion in her translation of the final lines, I think she clarifies it, suggesting (as I read it) that the wise soul lets go of the trivial, keeps hold of the essential.

letting that go,  
keeping this.

I hear the same spirit in very different language in the hymn (Dear Mother Father of Us All) we sang a short while ago out of the Christian tradition. It is one of my

favorite of the old hymns. The hymn tune itself is peaceful, and the words also, all of which is part of the appeal.

But the words of this hymn are not *only* peaceful, they are also gently challenging.

For “forgive our foolish ways...” is I think another way of naming the ways in which we get wrapped up in what the *Tao Te Ching* called the “racing, hunting, chasing (that) drives people crazy... trying to get rich (which) ties people in knots.” And it is not easy to extricate ourselves from all this.

So most of the rest of the hymn suggests another way to live, *letting go* of these “foolish ways” and instead (slightly paraphrasing): living in our rightful mind, with deeper reverence, held by the silence of eternity, a deep hush subduing all.

Then the beautiful final verse as a sort of prayer that we might embrace this other, better way of living:

Drop thy still dews of quietness  
till all our strivings cease;  
take from our souls the strain and stress,  
and let our ordered lives  
confess the beauty of thy peace.

All this leaving us... where else but in the present moment, where we actually do live. This, rather than how we too often live. As we heard Emerson put it: “with reverted eye lament the past, or, heedless of the riches that surround us, stand on tiptoe to foresee the future.”

Then Emerson, too, inviting us to learn to let go – to let go of too much regret and too much worry, to let go of thinking the riches of life are somewhere else other than right in front of us.

Now, we must name, not incidentally, that none of this is to suggest that we human beings don't need a certain level of material well-being, shelter, food – or to suggest that the injustice of too many people who do not have enough doesn't need to be addressed. Rather, living in the present *includes* addressing such injustices and inequalities. That was certainly the message of Jesus. Who on the one hand admonished us, as in the quote at the top of your order of worship, to *stop worrying so much* about our own clothing and food, and elsewhere admonished us to *feed the poor and clothe the naked*. These are not contradictory ideas. For it all has to do with recognizing what truly matters in this life of ours, and letting go of what doesn't matter nearly as much as we might routinely have thought.

Well... there is one final form of letting go, yet to be mentioned this morning: The final letting go that is ordained for us mortal creatures the moment we are born.

And it seems to me that the more we learn to let go in all the ways I've suggested today, sometimes pretty modest forms of letting go, sometimes more substantial, the better prepared we will be for the final letting go – that time when all appointments are cancelled and all our worldly identifications go the way of all flesh.

Again, this is not to say that the appointments don't matter or that our identifications and roles in life are unimportant. I love being a husband, father, father-in-law, grandfather, brother, friend. I love being your minister. I love running. I love playing the banjo.

But if I hold too tightly to any of this I just might be missing the present moment... which often has absolutely nothing to do with any of this.

As Thoreau put it in *Walden*:

Time is but a stream I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains.

Well, Thoreau was young and healthy when he wrote *Walden*. But the writer Bradford Smith, though also relatively young, just in his 50s, wrote near the end of his journey with cancer. And in one and the same passage he offered on the one hand gratitude to the "Author" of creation for what he called "the dear gift of life" and noted that it is clear as could be that "life is tough – that is one of its conditions" and that "disease and accident happen without regard to moral worth."

In this, I hear Smith letting go (and therefore encouraging us to let go) of inadequate and often outright incorrect ideas as to how life should be or how we want it to be ("letting that go") and embracing life, "dear gift of life," on its own terms ("keeping this") however sometimes harsh those terms can be.

This final letting go then? Another way of putting it is to say it is a letting go of an over-identification with life itself, life manifesting in an individual form... and letting go into some larger life: the energy of the universe, universal soul, cosmos. In this spirit, Bradford Smith also wrote:

If immortality is universal instead of particular, does this not elevate us to a life that is far grander than we deserve? Would we exchange it willingly for a pinched and narrow personal immortality?

Finally, then, for this morning, weaving much of this together:

Humanity's spiritual traditions encourage us to begin to let go into this larger life – Brahman, Buddha nature, body of Christ – *in the midst of* this individual life. Which we can do each moment that we let go of lament and worry, let go of the to do list, let go into the moment.

Like *this* very moment... here in this remarkable ancient house of love... here with each other... part of the larger life we call our Old Ship community, part of the larger life we share with all that is.

Blessed be.