

Wisdom Circles Letting Go, March 2013

Letting go involves a multitude of life experiences most people struggle with. Letting go is part of life – parenting, romantic relationships, and the aging process all involve letting go. Letting go can involve fear, anger, grief, relief, forgiveness. Life is a series of goodbyes. We grow, shift, move, explore, tire, die. It's inevitable, change is constant. Letting go is learning to recognize and acknowledge the many transitions that compose a life, and hopefully finding some love, humor and acceptance in the process. Religious traditions around the world often speak of letting go. Buddhists follow the eight-fold path, in attempts to let go of attachments and cravings and find peace. Jesus instructed his disciples to let go of their earthly belongings and seek spiritual nourishment, as well as to "turn the other cheek" and let go of retaliation. While modern souls might interpret letting go differently, it is an essential part of any spiritual journey.

Knowing you are letting go also comes with an awareness that your heart has been opened to the world. The old adage goes, "Better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all." To care deeply for someone is to recognize that love is not about control, or static states. This is very apparent when dealing with the departure or loss of a loved one. Grief is a process, not a one-time event. Each person has their own unique and important relationship to grieving. For some, it might involve time with friends and family, for others, solitude might be needed. Ritual and spiritual practices might offer additional comfort, or they may take on a different meaning or importance during grieving. It is essential allow space and time for grief, to recognize grief as normal and natural.

Letting go is also an important aspect of forgiveness. Forgiveness is a spiritual practice. All of forgiveness begins with self-forgiveness, which is also often the most challenging. Fred Luskin, a researcher at Stanford University, and founder of the Stanford Forgiveness Project, has spent his career studying the health effects of forgiveness. His work demonstrates that learning to forgive helps people hurt less, experience less anger, feel less stress and suffer less depression. His research also shows that as people learn to forgive they become more hopeful, optimistic and compassionate. He describes how forgiveness is an essential skill in a balance life, and much needed to maintain lifelong relationships with family, friends and in community. Forgiveness does not mean condoning another's actions, but rather recognition that one cannot change the past, but can change one's relationship to the past. Oscar Wilde wrote "Always forgive your enemies – nothing annoys them so much. The wisdom of forgiveness is not just that it releases you from your enemies, but releases you from judgment that is likely causing you suffering.

Letting go is often a journey into the unknown. Like it or not, we all must let go eventually. Forrest Church, a Unitarian Universalist minister and theologian, wrote his final book while he was dying of cancer. His closing words: "Go forth into this fragile, blessed world we share with laughter and tears at the ready. Love, work, and serve to a fare-thee-well. And then, when your own time comes, let go. Let go for dear life."

Spiritual Exercise

Spiritual Exercise in releasing anger

Sit in a comfortable, quiet place where you can be alone. Imagine someone with whom you have tension, or resentment. It doesn't have to be an arch-enemy, it is actually better to start with someone less important in your life. To begin, notice your body sensations (tension, or ease in different parts) and emotional state (Feeling tired? Lonely?) . Close your eyes and see their face in front of you. Repeat the following phrases aloud or in your mind, including the name of person you are working to let go of resentment with. Take gentle breaths between each phrase.

Just like me, _____ is human.
Just like me, _____ has joys and struggles.
Just like me, _____ is sometimes fearful and worried.
Just like me, _____ is loved.
Just like me, _____ makes mistakes.
Just like me, _____ doesn't know everything.
Just like me, _____ has gifts and talents.
Just like me, _____ is human.

Open your eyes, and notice again your body sensations and emotional state. How do you feel in relation to the person with whom you have resentment?

Spiritual Exercise for saying goodbye

Think about someone in your life who you cared for and is no longer in your life. Maybe you don't speak any longer, or they have died. Take a few minutes to reflect on what you loved about this person, and their impact on your life. Write this person a letter, sharing what was meaningful to you about your relationship with them. The purpose of the letter is not to send it, but to communicate what is in your heart. Try completing the sentences "What I miss about you is..." and "I remember you when..."

When you finish the letter, go to a peaceful place – somewhere you feel connected and calm. Read the letter, imagining that the person can hear you, and is listening receptively. Allow any tears, laughter or expressions to arise. Do your best to hold yourself with care. End by singing a song, saying a prayer or in a meditation that is comforting to you.

Questions for Reflection

1. What helps you let go? What practices, thoughts or patterns allow you to let go more easily?
2. What have you been holding on to in your life that is causing you suffering? What makes it difficult to let go?

Words of Wisdom

“All the art of living lies in a fine mingling of letting go and holding on. “ - Havelock Ellis

“Strength of heart comes from knowing that the pain that we each must bear is part of the greater pain shared by all that lives. It is not just “our” pain but the pain, and realizing this awakens our universal compassion.” – Jack Kornfield

“Forgiveness means letting go of hope for a better past.” – Gerald Jampolsky

“Some of us think holding on makes us strong; but sometimes it is letting go.” - Hermann Hesse

“Forgiveness is the final form of love. “ -Reinhold Niebuhr

“It is easier to forgive an enemy than to forgive a friend.” - William Blake

“To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you.” -Lewis B. Smedes

“Creativity can be described as letting go of certainties.” -Gail Sheehy

“When you're passionate about something, you want it to be all it can be. But in the endgame of life, I fundamentally believe the key to happiness is letting go of that idea of perfection.” - Debra Messing

Recommended Resources

Books

Forgive for Good by Dr. Fred Luskin (from Stanford University)

Tear Soup: a Recipe for Healing After Loss by Pat Schwiebert and Chuck DeKlyen (a children's story with some essential wisdom for adults as well)

When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times. By Pema Chödrön

Websites

Dr. Fred Luskin's website - www.learningtofogive.com

Video of Dr. Fred Luskin speaking about forgiveness:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=itrqvqUTHw>

The Art of Letting Go - <http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Buddhism/Galleries/The-Art-of-Letting-Go.aspx>