

“Let Go and Let Google”

August 2013 Neighborhood Unitarian Universalist Church

I'd like to begin with a disclaimer-- I am not getting any kind of secret bonus from Google for this sermon.

On our vacation this summer my family and I were driving from Tucson (where we visited family) to Solana Beach in northern San Diego County. We had just reached the outskirts of San Diego and I was navigating my husband with the goggle maps on the iPhone. It says take the 67 to the 52 to the 805 to the 5. Michael kept repeating every direction, every freeway, confirming it multiple times with a very incredulous tone. “Really? Are those actual freeways or just two lane highways? Don't we want to go to the 805 directly?” I kept trying to explain to him what I thought google maps was doing and why it was the fastest route, but I was quickly getting exasperated.

I had also been deep in reading for my Hebrew Scriptures class, my bible and textbook and notebook spread out across my lap. I really just wanted to get back to reading. I looked at him and said “Honey, I am just the reporter here, not the creator of the directions.” And then, inspired by the spirit of the moment (and my reading), in a tender but mildly snarky tone I said “Let go and let google.”

These are rare moments of humor for me, I felt proud of myself and at least it cut the tension. Interestingly the google directions got us there, fast and simple.

I liked my little pithy turn of phrase and Michael suggested it would make a good sermon title, so here we are. But it got me thinking about the implications of the metaphor, about releasing the need to be in control of every moment of life, to question the directions, the path I am on, the map in front of me and just let go. Creating space for a light breeze to blow through me.

For it is in the letting go when we open ourselves up to the experience and to the spirit, to inspiration, to love, to life, to the universe to any number of possibilities. So we might get a little lost once in a while or stuck in traffic, but what might we be giving up by holding on too tightly?

Of course, this is easier said than done. Letting go is not always easy. It takes trust and patience. Trust that you are on the right path or that abandoning the one you've been on the last 20 years is okay. Trust that it doesn't have to be “right” the second time either. Trust that people are good and will help you out along the way or trust that when they don't you will still be okay.

Anne Lamott, the author of our second reading said that everything she has let go of in life has claw marks on it. Oh yes, that is how I felt some days, like a cat clinging to the ball of yarn thinking to myself, “But it is supposed to be THIS WAY!” or how about “I am supposed to be GOOD at this,” as if the thing I am obsessing about in that moment is **THE THING** that will define me for the rest of my life. Letting go means knowing it will not and allowing it to be true.

Letting go takes opening yourself up to failure and disappointment which for many of us, I know for me, is terrifying. Because it is so easy to talk about an ethereal sense of letting go and how nice it is to release whatever we're holding on to and how it can make us more calm and happy and free of stress, but it is hard!

My first career choice did not work out. I did not succeed at the thing I had set out to do with my life despite my deep passion and commitment, perseverance, hard work, lots of money and time and loads of rejection. For a long time I felt like I had failed. I felt this sense of loss that followed me everywhere despite my best attempts to cover it up. Who was I if I wasn't what I had set out to be from the age of 10? How would I face those people to whom I had proclaimed this was how my life would go? What would I do now?

Letting go of that failure and that disappointment took a long time. It did not happen with a breath or a thought, "I need to let that go." It happened gradually, over time, as I began to slowly shift my focus and attention to other pursuits, to myself and to my new family.

As I look back, I realize I carried it with me for a long time—longer than I needed to. Now that I have some distance and have let go, I am able to see that that part of my life led me here, prepared me for this new career path I am on and gave me a host of skills that I use all the time.

Leonard Cohen said, "This world is full of conflicts and full of things that cannot be reconciled. But there are moments when we can ... reconcile and embrace the whole mess, and that's what I mean by 'Hallelujah.'"

Sometimes we have to move through the depth of the experience and the feelings in order to be able to let go, we have to sit in the darkness for a while. Sometimes letting go accompanies great loss and grief. A woman who recently lost her husband said to me, *"I think **Grace** is when you are in the depths of loss and grief and can still feel gratitude."*

Anne Lamot (author of our second reading) also reminds us that there is freedom in hitting bottom because that is where restoration begins. Hallelujah.

"When I find myself in times of trouble, there is still a light that shines on me. Shine until tomorrow, Let it Be."

Let it be, let it go. Hear the words of wisdom.

This year's TED Prize winner Sugata Mitra, did a bold thing. He cut a hole in the wall between his technology office building and a neighboring slum in New Dehli. In it he hooked up a computer and a mouse with internet connection set to a certain internet browser. It was all in English and he filmed the children over the course of two months not only did they teach themselves how to use the browser, but they reported back to Mitra that they needed a faster processor.

His further Hole in the Wall experiments yielded surprisingly similar results including a very poor group of Tamil speaking children learning about DNA replication.

He calls these groups of children Self Organized Learning Environments. A recent essay of his boasts the title, "Advent of Google Means We Must Rethink Our Approach to Education." He's right and much of his discoveries deal with exciting education innovation . . .but this sermon is about google, right?

Okay. Here are some of the lessons he learned from watching the children interact with the hole in the wall computers. They did not say, things like ‘we can’t use this, or we don’t know how to work this.’ When they did ask him what it does, he responded with what he says was the best pedagogical technique he knew. He said, “I don’t really know, what do you think it does?” and “I’m leaving now and won’t be back for a few months.”

He learned that children will teach one another, they will help each other (remember that part about trusting in humanity?). He learned that a sense of wonder and natural curiosity is infectious and critical.

He also discovered something that significantly increased the children’s learning—praise and encouragement. He deployed Grannies in the Cloud, British grannies who would skype into a room of children and do what he says any good granny does, regularly offer words of praise and encouragement. “Oh that’s good, tell me more, great work, what does that do? Very well done.” As a result the children’s tested learning increased an additional 20%.

I think I’d like my own Granny in the cloud. Wouldn’t that be great? When we’re feeling stuck or down, in need of some embrace you just buzz your granny and she gives you some encouragement and the presto—I am a new woman capable of letting go of that thing that was keeping me stuck. Okay it may not be quite that simple, but the emphasis on positive encouragement is critical. Don’t you think we all do better in a positive environment as opposed to a negative one?

He made the corollary that a good teacher sets an idea in motion and then steps back and watches the learning unfold offering appreciation and support along the way. He observed the power of letting something—like learning—happen instead of making it happen. What an extraordinary implication for our educational system *and* our personal, spiritual systems. We even cling to systems that no longer serve us rather than letting go, standing back and watching where natural curiosity, wonder and imagination might take us.

A couple of weeks ago when Jim was in the pulpit he talked about being a vessel—it was Emmylou Harris who described herself as a vessel for the deeply spiritual music we were blessed to hear. And as Jim reminded us, we are all vessels for the spirit, containers for the wisdom of the world to work within us and upon us. We are vessels for one another’s stories and pain and joy and reverence.

But in order to fully BE those vessels and keep them in good, working order we need an occasional emptying out—a good cleaning. We need to let go of the old stuff, those experiences, feelings, ideas, truths that no longer serve us in order to make room for the new stuff, for wisdom and inspiration and spirituality and faith.

We might also turn to prayer. Perhaps not in the same way as others might, perhaps just naming it out loud—giving voice to the struggle, the need, the hurt. Perhaps with just one word, Help.

Like Mitra’s findings, we adults also create Self Organized Learning Environments. We are one right here at church. We choose to come here for any number of reasons, community, spirituality, intellectual thought, justice work, great music, the list goes on. But here we are gathered together to be part of this larger vessel. And we teach each other. We encourage each other. We teach each other all those things that draw us here—compassion, forgiveness, justice, science and reason, love, letting go.

Following the example of the children in India in Sugata Mitra's study--awe and wonder make natural companions to letting go. Tuning into the simplicities of life, to the present moment are also good strategies. See things out loud, "This is the time when the daffodils are blooming." This is the time when the butterflies are flying.

When we let go – even just the tiniest bit we make space for dancing and singing, for standing upon the earth, for breathing deeply, for taking risks and making change in the world.