

Being Born and Letting Go

Sermon at the Unitarian-Universalist Church of Belmont, MA
4 December 2016 (Earlier: 17 February 2013)

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READING (read by Eloise McGaw)

She Let Go

She let go. Without a thought or a word, she let go.

She let go of the fear. She let go of the judgments. She let go of the confluence of opinions swarming around her head. She let go of the committee of indecision within her. She let go of all the 'right' reasons. Wholly and completely, without hesitation or worry, she just let go.

She didn't ask anyone for advice. She didn't read a book on how to let go. She didn't search the scriptures. She just let go. She let go of all of the memories that held her back. She let go of all of the anxiety that kept her from moving forward. She let go of the planning and all of the calculations about how to do it just right.

She didn't promise to let go. She didn't journal about it. She didn't write the projected date in her Day-Timer. She made no public announcement and put no ad in the paper. She didn't check the weather report or read her daily horoscope. She just let go.

She didn't analyze whether she should let go. She didn't call her friends to discuss the matter. She didn't do a five-step Spiritual Mind Treatment. She didn't call the prayer line. She didn't utter one word. She just let go.

No one was around when it happened. There was no applause or congratulations. No one thanked her or praised her. No one noticed a thing. Like a leaf falling from a tree, she just let go.

There was no effort. There was no struggle. It wasn't good and it wasn't bad. It was what it was, and it is just that.

In the space of letting go, she let it all be. A small smile came over her face. A light breeze blew through her. And the sun and the moon shone forevermore.

~Rev. Safire Rose

39 **KATHARINE:** Today we talk about transitions in life. Stories about change are as
40 old as the book of Genesis, in which Adam and Eve were forced to leave Eden, as
41 described so poignantly by John Milton in *Paradise Lost*. Milton writes of the
42 departure from the garden:

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44 Some natural tears they dropt, but wiped them soon;
45 The world was all before them, where to choose
46 Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:
47 They, hand in hand, with wandering steps and slow,
48 Through Eden took their solitary way.

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50 While not all changes are as momentous as the exodus of these archetypal figures,
51 we too will have our share of loss, uncertainty, and beginning again. We can expect,
52 if we live long enough, to pass through birth, puberty, middle age, and into old age.
53 These transitions occur whether we are ready for them or not. Other transitions we
54 choose: a profession, intimate relationships, whether or not to have or to adopt
55 children. Still other transitions, some difficult ones, come to many of us: losing a job
56 or a marriage, recovering from addiction, giving up on a dream, building a new
57 friendship, coming to terms with a chronic illness, and countless others. This
58 morning we focus on just few of the transitions common to many. There are a
59 multitude of others we will all face; some major, some less so. Some will be losses
60 that take years to recover from, if at all. Others will be transformative, either
61 suddenly or gradually, over time.

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63 **EDWIN:** Each major life transition leads into strange territory, a new country, which
64 forces us to look around with fresh eyes. Each transition is a kind of birth, an
65 involuntary adventure that forces us to *let go* of comfortable habits. Hence our title:
66 *Being Born and Letting Go*. We see life's transitions as a sequence of compulsory
67 commands: QUOTE: "Let go of the past! Be born into a new world--NOW!"

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69 **KATHARINE:** The first transition is, in fact, birth. We leave the warm, dark,
70 completely sustaining, embracing womb and one-ness with our mothers to face the
71 cold light of day and the need to wait for comfort and food. These earliest days of life
72 outside the womb are just the beginning of our lifetime journey of letting go. For
73 mothers, too, the baby's leaving our bodies is the first step in separating from our
74 newest beloveds – a gradual letting-go that will play out over decades for both
75 parents and children.

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77 **DAVID:** On my first day of kindergarten my mother took me to the school for the two
78 hours or so of class time. I remember the boy who cried loudly during the entire
79 time. But I thought things were just fine.

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81 On the second day of kindergarten my mother took me to the bus stop. I got on the
82 bus and looked out the window at her and saw that she was crying. Suddenly I was

83 scared to death; my mother was crying! What's going to happen to me? I cried all
84 the way to school.

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86 Thirty-two years later I put my daughter on a bus for her first day of kindergarten
87 and, as the bus pulled away, I cried.

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89 Crosby Still and Nash song Teach Your Children contains the lyrics:

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91 "And you of tender years/ Can't know the fears that your elders grew by/
92 And so, please help them with your youth /They seek the truth before they can die."

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94 When that song came out I knew that I was one of those "of tender years"; today, in
95 the mind of the then song writer, I would count as an "elder". But I still feel like that
96 youth.

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98 **EDWIN:** If we are lucky, as a child we live in a family that is loving, empathetic, and
99 celebrates our accomplishments. This celebration extends to our First Church
100 community: In our annual major musical there is a often a smallest participant who
101 wanders out onto the stage, looks around vacantly, falls behind his line of tiny actors,
102 flubs his small solo, but gets the last three words right and everybody cheers and
103 claps. This is wonderful, but cannot last. At school, teachers insist on objective
104 performance, bullies roam the playground, and friends become competitors. Like
105 Adam and Eve, every child is expelled from the Garden of Eden and loses the
106 blessings of innocence.

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108 I did not enjoy my adolescence. I had no idea who I was or how to behave. My
109 hormones urged me to actions abhorrent to my Puritan background.

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111 We are proud of our church for offering to our young people a course that covers
112 sexuality. In adolescence our children begin to make decisions for themselves,
113 which can frighten parents. When Carla and I met parents before we started
114 teaching the fore-runner of this course, we said to them, "When your children make
115 decisions about sex, we will not be there and you will not be there." Eloise McGaw
116 growled, "I will be there!" Eloise's adult son has long since made these important
117 decisions for himself.

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119 **KATHARINE:** For parents like me and like many of you, a new stage in life begins
120 when our children leave home. For those of you who aren't parents, you may be able
121 to identify with the empty nest phase if someone who was once central to your
122 existence is no longer part of the routine you've come to rely on. At these times,
123 we're forced to let go of our beloveds' physical presence and rebuild our daily lives
124 without them. While this new chapter *can be* liberating, we will also experience loss,
125 as we realize that our relationship with our cherished companions has forever
126 changed.

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My daughters are now in college. One recent fall evening after a church meeting, I stepped outside into the cool dark night. A light blanket of leaves covered the ground. Suddenly, I found myself re-living similar nights years ago, leaving church with my young daughters after choir rehearsals. As I walked toward the car, I was flooded with memories of earlier times: Evenings of bustling energy as I witnessed my girls' active participation in this community – a community that was all the richer for me because I shared it with them. Today, even though I remain close to my daughters, talking and spending time with them often, I sometimes yearn for the years when our beings were more intertwined. Life now is good in many ways. My energy and focus has shifted in positive ways, yet I still miss the closeness of those early years in my daughters' lives.

EDWIN: Harvard professor Erik Erikson says that each stage of life takes place between two poles; for old age his two poles are Integrity and Despair. Integrity and Despair: I feel the pull of both. The mental decline that terrified me three years ago is now taking place. After ten years of work on our general relativity book, I have turned over the major responsibility to my co-author, who is frantically busy with competing responsibilities. Result: Whether my life's masterwork is published or not is now out of my hands. I must let go. Instead, I work on a series of short pamphlets; the most recent is "Experiencing the Pyramids," which some of you have read. [11 o'clock: Mike Healy, the gifted designer of this pamphlet is in the audience here today.]

I find two major advantages of old age. First: many worries simply drop away. I am 85 years old and have 40-year shingles on the roof of my house. You do the math.

The second major advantage of old age: Some satisfactions deepen. Past conflicts in my marriage with Carla are resolved, no longer make a difference, or are forgotten. There is now not as much seduction as both of us would prefer. We anticipate our inevitable separation, probably within the next decade, unless we have the pleasure of dying together in a common catastrophe.

There *are* rules of engagement, but because our marriage is solid, Carla and I can now say immediately whatever we feel, without restraint. We have to be careful where we are when we yell at each other. To the outsider it sounds like a terrible fight between squabbling, ill-matched partners. To us it is the ultimate expression of mutual security.

Some in this audience do not have a partner. Carla's brother-in-law Dale now lives alone. A small whiff of his resulting independence is contained in his proud boast: QUOTE "I am the absolute and complete master of the video controller."

170 **KATHARINE:** From my emptying nest and other times of loss and letting go, I've
171 learned a couple of things that have helped me to manage transitions. First, as hard
172 as change can be, I've come to see that my experience of it is constantly in flux.
173 Sometimes this is small comfort, but the older I get the more I trust the universe's
174 tendency to lighten difficulty with gradual healing, a new understanding, or another
175 chance.

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177 Second, while my struggles are my own, I don't have to bear them by myself. I can
178 find others to offer solace and companionship.

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180 Finally – and this is a lesson I continue to work on – I am learning to be more tender
181 with myself. This makes it easier to allow the various feelings that letting go brings
182 and to move through them with greater ease and acceptance.

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184 **DAVID:** Transitions in life, we all know these moments; small moments of dying and
185 of being born.

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187 The greatest transition, the greatest letting go, is death. When a loved one dies the
188 loss is devastating; when we think of our own dying, the sense of loss can be
189 paralyzing.

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191 For me, as for many of us, death is the end. It is the end of consciousness, the end
192 of relationship, the end of life. I will return to the earth, to the cosmos from which I
193 arose; but I shall not be.

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195 To know that we will never again feel the warmth of the sunshine, or feel a breeze
196 in our face, or hear the voice of a loved one is too overwhelming a thought to fully
197 absorb or comprehend; and it leaves me feeling a kind of anticipatory grief and
198 nostalgia. I suffer from the transition before it has even happened.

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200 We have differing beliefs about what happens after death. While I have no belief in
201 ongoing life, and mourn the fact that there are things I will never see or know, I also
202 believe that I did not exist one hundred years ago and have no fear associated with
203 that lack of existence; and when I project one hundred years into the future, I have
204 no fear about my non-existence then. So I do have a sense that I arise from the
205 Cosmos and return to it and that this is part of the story of life.

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207 Still, I already miss what I will not live to see.

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209 For some us there is life after death of some kind

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211 •It may be eternal life in heaven;

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213 •It may be in a form of rebirth, a reincarnation on this planet or elsewhere;

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•It may be in a less formalized sense of one’s spirit living on in some unspecified manner.

To hold such a belief is a great comfort in the face of death. It means that there is a possibility that we will see our loved one’s again or that we ourselves will continue to know joy or love. Finding comfort in our own belief system is part of our journey human beings and as Unitarian Universalists.

But beyond our personal theologies and beliefs there is or can be other comfort. Community can help us. Shared Ministry is a term you may have heard here. Partly it is about recognizing that in community that we can find healing and strength. Religious community offers us rituals of transition. It offers us a place to be with others in community as we acknowledge the great transitions in life: birth, coming of age, marriage and parenthood, loss and death.

But more than rituals, religious community offers us a place of support and strength as we pass through the transitions of life. And it offers us support and strength when we either choose--or find that we do not have the opportunity to choose--one or more of those transitions.

When we share our joys and sorrows, when we share the moments in our lives that build our spirits or tear at our spirits, and when we listen to the sharing that others do, we strengthen ourselves, we strengthen others and we strengthen the bonds of community.

That is one reason for a common suggestion in our Unitarian Universalist congregations that every committee, every group or program in the congregation begin its meeting with at least a *brief* check in. It is to strengthen the bonds of community and shared ministry.

Sometimes we try to cope with transitions or life events on our own and, ironically, it is sometimes those who are most willing to help others who are also the most reluctant to accept help from others. I would urge us all to find ways to share our life stories within this community, not just to bring hope and comfort to ourselves, but also to do so for others.

Life is a continual process of being born and letting go. How can we support one another as we go through these transitions? A few thoughts:

•We can be open about our own transitions; that lets others feel free to do the same.

257 •We can join program like the Small Group Ministry where we give and receive
258 support.

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260 •There is a Lay Pastoral Care training program coming up for members of the
261 team who will provide pastoral care and build connections.

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263 •The Caring Connection is seeking volunteers to be committee members and
264 to be care coordinators for those for whom we provide meals and rides.

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266 •After candle lighting, let people know that you saw them light candles, that
267 you heard what they said.

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269 How will we support one another within this community?

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271 **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:**

272 Jacquelyn James, Eloise McGaw, Niti Seth, and Wayne Wild gave us helpful advice
273 on this sermon.