



Message

I can imagine there's been a lot of letting go happening since the Iowa Caucus this past Thursday. Tried and tested methods are being hung out to dry. Things previously cast away are being put back on the table. What to keep? What to leave behind? What will work is anyone's guess. There are no guarantees on the campaign trail.

And, there aren't in our lives either.

When David Shapiro was 18 years old, he had this grand vision of leaving everything and hiking across Canada. But after he'd crammed his backpack full of essentials, there was lots of stuff he just couldn't imagine living without - a set of wooden flutes, the I-Ching, a brass lockbox, his journal, his special pen to write in his journal, a camera, extra glasses, the packet of letters written by the woman who was the reason for his journey, and finally, his hash pipe (It was the 70s after all and he was 18!). He crammed all this into a smaller knapsack and strapped that onto his backpack and set off.

David didn't get far. Thirty miles north of Toronto, exhausted from the weight of his pack, he tipped over and couldn't get up. Lucky for him, a pickup truck pulled over and out stepped two locals. He was pretty embarrassed because he knew how ridiculous he looked. But, the two men got him out of his gear, threw it in the back of the truck and offered to take him as far as they were going.

Years later, David Shapiro and friend Richard Leider coauthored the book, "Repacking your bags: How to live with a new sense of purpose". The theme of the book is holding on and letting go. What do you hold on to? What do you let go? And what values guide you in deciding what gets cast into the flames and what you hold close?

Shapiro and Leider are convinced that most of us have overpacked for the journey. Sometimes its material stuff, often its emotional stuff like expectations, desires, memories, hopes and dreams, disappointments and resentments we can't let go of, things we can't forgive ourselves for - all those emotional patterns that have developed over the years.

When David's ride dropped him off, he grabbed his backpack and headed off down the road, realizing, in horror that he had forgotten his smaller knapsack. He ran after the truck, begging for it to stop. When they saw him, the two couldn't believe he wanted that pack. It was exactly what was keeping him from getting where he wanted to go, and yet, he could not do it. David took the pack, clutched it to his chest and continued walking.

What was he so afraid of? Perhaps he feared losing himself were he unable to write in that journal. Perhaps he feared living without the direction of his I Ching. Perhaps he was feared the connection to the woman he loved would weaken without access to her letters. Perhaps he feared facing reality without the soothing release of his pipe. Whatever it was, clearly he feared something big would be lost if he let go of that knapsack.

How many of us are like David, carrying a heavy load even though it's clear we're not going to get where we're going unless we lighten it. And yet, we all basically want the same thing - wholeness - wholeness of body, wholeness of mind and wholeness of spirit. Why does it seem so hard to get there? Why does the load get so heavy trying to get there?

Perhaps it's because the human species, unique among species, has this hunger to live a meaningful life. We have consciousness. Because of our consciousness, we can see a bigger picture, we can make decisions and choices, and then be aware of the consequences of those choices. We know we have one life to live, and it may be short in the bigger picture of things, but it's what we have.

We need our lives to matter. From the smallest child to the oldest adult, human beings need a sense of worth and value and meaning and a sense that we have contributed to this world. David Shapiro and Richard Leider believe that one of the biggest fears we have is that our lives will be meaningless. That it won't have made a difference that we lived. And so we fill up our lives. With responsibilities. With commitments. With dreams. With memories. With things.

Not that these are bad thing. We need responsibility, we need commitment. We need a sense of our own history and a vision of what where we want to go. Without these we are separated from ourselves and from the human community. But there has to be a balance.



David was so focused on protecting the heavy load he carried that he could not truly be present to where he was. Instead of being able to treasure the journey, he spent all his time taking care of his stuff. And I'm wondering how many of us do that.

It is absolutely essential for us to make the act of letting go an integral part of living itself. We need the phoenix. This is why the ritual of the Fire Communion has become so popular in Unitarian Universalist congregations. For many, it has become one of the most significant rituals of the church year. There is this spiritual hunger to weed out the extraneous and get to what really matters. We need love. We need a purpose for our lives. We need connection with others. We need a sense of home.

We are in need of emptying so that we can enter that place of grace I talked about in the fire communion. And that means constantly evaluating what we let into our life and what we let go. It's an ongoing process of house cleaning where you look at your values and how the commitments you make bear out that those values.

Let me give you an example of what this might look like. This congregation has done a lot of that kind of house cleaning and it began long before I got here two and a half years ago. Several years ago, Emerson Chapel decided to become a full service church. The members wanted a real sanctuary and they wanted a full time minister. Everyone knew it would take a lot of work, a lot of additional time and money from members and friends. It also meant letting go ... of old assumptions of what was possible and what was not possible. Letting go of the whispers of low self-esteem that are so often part of small church culture. Instead of asking, "Can we do that?" it meant asking "How can we do that?"

Well, look what happened. This church has grown from 62 members in 2002, to 93 today. Emerson has moved from having student ministers, to a half time temporary minister, and now a full time permanent minister. And there's more. We now have a 60% time Director of Religious Education, an 11 member youth group, and seven covenant groups. In March Emerson is sending 27 members and friends to New Orleans on a work trip. Clearly, this congregation's ministry is growing.

This church grew because a critical mass of the membership built a vision, and let go into an uncertain future with no guarantees of success. It's really pretty amazing how much courage there is in this congregation and how much letting go it has taken. We could have been throwing flash paper into that flame for the next hour if you wanted to show how much has been let go. In the emptying of what was, to the filling of what is, there has been a walking into grace, the kind of grace that feeds the soul, nourishes the spirit, and fortifies the mind.

That's what letting go does. It feeds the soul, nourishes the spirit, and fortifies the mind.

And it hasn't stopped. Letting go isn't something you do just once, it is an ongoing process, a way of living. Just this year, Emerson took another huge step. It moved from a one hour Sunday morning with worship and religious education happening at the same time, to a two and a half hour Sunday morning, with worship first, and religious education for all ages after that. It has not been an easy change. When it was first discussed, you could smell the fear in the room. People responded very emotionally, and for good reason. We were considering letting go of a comfortable, well-loved pattern for something that was new and untried. But over time, the resistance and fear transformed into something else. People began asking not, do we want this, but how can we make this happen.

Through these letting go times, Emerson has gradually moved from a culture of convenience to a culture of service. In a culture of convenience, it's all about you and it's all about what's easiest. A culture of service looks beyond individual wants and desires and asks us to make decisions about what is best for the community as a whole. It's another level of maturity and much more effective at creating a meaningful life than living for yourself alone. It opens you up to that internal grace, where the true fullness of living becomes manifest in your whole being.

The change of the last year has been easier for some than for others. What's clear is this. At this time, continued growth depends on the commitment of individual members to continue the internal spiritual shift from a culture of convenience to a culture of service. Institutional change takes personal change.



**"Letting Go and Holding On"**

Rev. Krista Taves

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Emerson UU Chapel, Ellisville MO

And that's what letting go is really about. It's about welcoming change. It's about questioning your assumptions and looking with new eyes at what you want and how you're living. It's about getting down to the basics of what you believe, what you stand for, and what you're going to do about it.

How do you decide what stays and what goes? You decide with your values. Do you value family? Well, are your choices reinforcing that? Do you value community. Well, are your priorities helping to create community? Do you value unconditional love, honesty and fairness. Look at the choices you make in your relationships. Do you value generosity? Look at how you spend your money, and where you give your time? The greatest values don't amount to anything if they aren't lived.

The spiritual process of letting go is about clearing out all those things that are keeping you from living your values. Whether it's a church or your personal life, that's what letting go is all about. Re-ground in your values, let go of what is holding you back, and step into that place of grace.

May it be so.