

Let. It. Go.
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What does it mean to be a people of letting go?
A hundred Unitarian Universalist congregations
across the country are using the same themes each month,
and the ministers of these 100 churches have an electronic
group to share ideas.

A few weeks ago, someone wrote in,
"Can we all promise that we won't use 'Let it Go' in
worship?"
And I wrote back as fast as I could,
"No way! We're totally using it."

I said, "It's multigenerational - the kids know it -
and it captures the spirit of what I want to say today so
well."

*I don't care
What they're going to say*

*It's funny how some distance
Makes everything seem small
And the fears that once controlled me
Can't get to me at all!*

*It's time to see what I can do
To test the limits and break through*

There's a version of this, a parody of sorts, online,
in which the chorus is slightly changed —
instead of singing "let it go,"
she sings — well, I can't say it from the pulpit.
Something like "screw it all."

If you are not a parent, grandparent, aunt or uncle,
you might not know the basic story line of *Frozen*,

so let me catch you up.

Elsa has the power to turn things to ice, and when she is angry or afraid, it happens.

In terror of this power, she isolates herself.

But things go wrong, and it happens anyway. And so she runs away into the mountains.

This song is when she decides to use her power, who cares what everyone else says.

It marks the turning point because — spoiler alert -- she learns to control it, and use it for good.

Eventually.

There's more singing first.

I'll spare you that.

*Sometimes it takes
a great sky
to find that
first, bright
and indescribable
wedge of freedom
in your own heart.*

That's what it takes, right?

A moment comes when we get up off the dirt,

or we uncurl from the fetal position,

or we just decide, "screw it all"

and we start being ourselves.

We find the bright and indescribable wedge of freedom in our own heart.

David Whyte's poem, "The Journey," is a riff on Mary

Oliver's poem by the same title —

both poems speak of this realization:

one day you finally knew what you had to do, Oliver wrote, though the voices round you cried,

"Mend my life!"

And David Whyte's point is that when you make this journey,
when you leave behind all those people who expect you to be a good girl,
when you walk away from the anxiety and reactivity of others,
you're not leaving;
you're arriving.

Arriving at yourself.

I want to talk about letting go of anxiety this morning -
letting go and being yourself.

Acute anxiety is normal - we get anxious sometimes.
It's fine - the body and the mind working to make us more alert,
to give us more energy and focus.
The big interview, the car that swerves in front of us, the health crisis -
these things naturally produce moments of anxiety.
But, normally - as we get more information,
or as the moment passes,
or we just remember to breathe in and out,
and let go of our stress -
these moments of acute anxiety fade away.
At least, that's the idea.

But it doesn't always work, does it?
Sometimes we live with chronic anxiety.
And this becomes normal for us.
In fact, we become so accustomed to chronic anxiety that we start to depend on it.
If we weren't worried about something, we wouldn't know what to do with ourselves.

There are different kinds of anxiety. Acute, chronic, and also, medical.

There is a mental health issue, a chemical imbalance some folks have -

anxiety, fear, produces certain chemicals to help you through the stress,

but some brains produce that without any stimulation, so you need to balance that out somehow,

through a lot of mindfulness work, exercise, and/or medication.

I'm not talking about medical anxiety today,

and I don't want you who suffer from this, or who have loved ones who do,

to think that I'm saying

"let it go" to a medical diagnosis of anxiety disorder.

My doctorate is in ministry, not medicine.

This is not a sermon about mental health.

No, what I'm talking about today is free-floating, non-specific anxiety.

Chronic anxiousness.

Reactivity.

Everything makes us panic.

Everything is a crisis.

We're on edge all the time,

so on edge that we don't know what to do when we're not on edge.

Joseph had this lousy job.

He was stressed about it all the time.

So, he got a new job.

"That's great," I thought!

He even had two weeks off between the old job and the new one,

I said, "hey, you can relax for a while!"

But no, he was anxious about having nothing to do during that time;

totally stressed out while he should have been on vacation.
And then the new job started, still totally stressed out.
Months later, still stressed out.

Eventually one starts to see that it isn't the job, or the
circumstances.

Some people are just anxious.

Joseph was anxious. And it didn't matter what the job was
or wasn't.

It was him.

It's not just people who can be anxious, either.

Some families are all drama all the time.

Like they're auditioning for a reality TV show.

Know any like that?

They say it is temporary, but there always seems to be
something else next.

Always drama.

And some churches are like that too.

I have colleagues who serve congregations
that are having a fight every week.

Drama! "Can you believe what so-and-so said?! OMG!"

Everyone is on edge.

What if the budget doesn't come in?

Who is going to make coffee? No one is signed up, we
better panic!

The sky is falling.

And, the classic:

"So-and-so is upset about something."

"What about?"

"Nobody knows, but they're upset."

"Oh goodness, we can't have that!"

"The pastor better go visit them, and quick!"

"It's her job to make everyone happy all the time!"

To which I say,

“the cold never bothered me anyway.”

It's not that I don't care about your happiness,
or want to solve problems in the church.
And if you come to me and want to talk through something,
I'm totally here for you.
But I will not intuit your frustration,
or rush in to manage every interpersonal dynamic,
or change the mission to suit one person's personal desire.
I won't do it.

I could say, “it is because I want to treat you like adults,
who are responsible for your own feelings.”
But I don't even treat my kids with kid gloves -
at least I try not to.
“I will help you solve your problem,” I tell them,
“but I will not do it for you.
And if you want something, ask nicely.”

Our church isn't perfect, but I think we're actually
reasonably healthy,
and I think part of that is that most of the leaders here
function the same way I try to.
I can think of conflicts we've had in the last few years,
and each time, the leaders said,
“we'll hear you out, treat you with respect,
but we won't decide based on who is more upset or
anxious.
We'll decide based on the mission.”
I get the impression it didn't used to be this way around
here,
but I think it is now,
and I'm proud of all of us for this.
It is one of the many reasons I love being your minister.
You are not chronically anxious.
Some congregations are.

Here is some of the best advice I've even been given:
Don't feed the anxiety loop.
Just don't do it.

Let. It. Go.

Church, family, work or civic life.
When the most anxious person in the room gets to set the agenda,
well, the results are never good.
It's the truth and we all know it.

So, what can you do?
If you are feeling chronically anxious, or you feel caught in a chronically anxious system,
what can you do to let it go?
It's one thing for me to say, let it go,
but how do you actually do that?
There are books and books, but just three little suggestions for you.

First.
A little distance makes everything seem small.
Elsa's right about that.
Get away from the situation.
It's amazing what a little time and space can do.
Steinke says that when you are stuck in anxiety, you are always reacting instead of creating.
Stop reacting.
Leave the house.
Take a vacation.
Go for a walk.
Build in time, every day, away from the most anxious place in your life.

Let me say -

TV doesn't count. Neither does Facebook or twitter, as much as it pains me to admit.

Sorry.

People say, I'll unwind by watching TV.

But the brain doesn't work that way. It won't work. Promise.

Let go of your need to be entertained or distracted.

Let go of the chemical push that anxiety, conflict, and drama provide.

You're going to feel symptoms of withdrawal, and you'll be tempted to re-enter the IV of franticness, but resist that urge.

Trust me, I've been there.

Unplug for long enough, however, and you may come back and wonder

what you were all worked up about in the first place.

Get some space.

Take some time.

Second.

Don't take responsibility for other people when they can do it themselves.

And 95% of the time, they can do it themselves.

Anxious people, generally, need someone to take care of, or someone to take care of them.

Get off that treadmill.

Anxious systems are all about everyone taking care of everyone else -

and no one taking care of themselves!

I'm not saying don't save someone who is drowning.

But, as every therapist is taught, if you're doing more work than the client,

you're doing it wrong.

Part of this involves letting go of our need to be perfect, our need to not make mistakes.

We will make mistakes.

If we let other people do things on their own,

they might not do it the way we want them to.
But to become less anxious, we need to stop taking
responsibility
for everyone else.
Let it go, and let it be enough.
You can set expectations, if that's your role as a boss or
parent or teacher.
But they have to try themselves.

Third.
Cultivate a spirit of adventure.
A good leader - in whatever context -
encourages others to take chances, risks, to imagine more.
Be the flea who believes they can fly.
Why not?
Notice how the more cautious flea does, actually, follow?
And in the end, is willing to think about taking more
adventures another day?

If the adventurous flea let the anxious one set the agenda,
neither of them would have seen anything but the backside
of the dog.

One of the things that folks who do this work write about is
how essential playfulness is
in combating anxiety.
Anxious systems can't take a joke.
Everything is serious all the time.
Everyone is on edge, ready to be offended.
Friedman says the main way you can tell an anxious system
is by its lack of playfulness.
Laugh!
Play.
Try, trip up, try again.
Instead of thinking,
"what could happen if I do this?" (fearful)
think

“what could happen if I do this?!” (wonder)

It’s an attitude shift.

It’s letting go of what is deadly so you can live in what is life.

This quality of letting go of anxiety is essential -
for leaders, for systems, and for individual people.

It is essential, but it isn’t easy.

It’s takes practice —

and here is the good news.

Well, two pieces of good news.

First, it gets easier.

Just as a reactive anxious system forms a feedback loop,
a non-anxious, adventurous, playful, mature system forms a
feedback loop too.

If you don’t give in to anxiety,
anxious people will stop hanging around you.

It’s true. It really is. You’ve got just got to stick to it long
enough.

If you take adventures, then others can come along or stay
behind, and that’s up them, not you.

If you take responsibility for yourself, others will start taking
responsibility for themselves.

Or they won’t, but it’s not your problem every time.

It gets easier.

And the second piece of good news —

well, that’s why this is a sermon and not a lecture about
psychology.

God, if you will, is a non-anxious, adventurous, responsible
force.

Or divinity, or the spirit.

Or the universe itself.

Instead of seeing the holy, seeing life, seeing everything
as tightly wound, as controlling and directing,

we can let go of that illusion - that suffocating security blanket.
Let the river of peace flow through you,
let the soothing waters flow; not stagnate, flow.
Let the power of life flow freely,
let wonder and awe and love flow freely,
and you will be so much more in touch with wonder and love and life,
so much more in touch with the spirit.
Let it blow where it will,
be open,
let go of the need for all the answers, for safety, or harmony,
and instead listen, lead, and follow with love and hope, with possibility.
Be free.
Fly.
Don't think,
"what is going to happen?"
think,
"what is going to happen!?"
Practice, keep at it, breathe in, breathe out,
and who knows, before you know,
you too
will feel like you can fly.
Let's sing.