

Awakening and Recovery
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Our theme this month is letting go, which can be a difficult task to accomplish. In a great scene from Star Wars, Princess Leia tells Grand Moff Tarkin, "The more you tighten your grip, Tarkin, the more star systems will slip through your fingers." Ultimately, she is speaking the truth, as his doctrine of control and fear lead to his own demise as well as that of the Empire.

Letting go leads to freedom, but freedom can be frightening. In letting go, we are asked to let go of the known in order to let in the unknown, to let in potential for change. For me, letting go has a connection to recovery work. There may be some of you out there this morning who also attend recovery meetings or support groups, for addictions of various kinds, or some of you with family or friends who do. For those of us who struggle with addictions, this means letting go of those strong desires, those things we think we cannot live without. But if we cannot let go of our addictions, if we cannot surrender, we are not free to be our best selves.

What can we let go of, lest it drag us down? Perhaps we find the cost of letting go of certain things to be too expensive, whether that cost is emotional, or financial -- but what of the cost of hanging on to things, people, ideas, over years and years? It is a careful calculus we must make.

Can we let go of anger, of hate, of resentments? Because we cling to these things, too; sometimes in compulsive ways -- sometimes we cling to these things because we don't want to face uncomfortable truths, or situations, or people.

I am wearing this brace today because I am dealing with tendonitis in my hand. In a way, this condition is a metaphor for the basis of my talk today -- the tendonitis in my hand was initiated and exacerbated by the repetitive motions of grasping, clutching and holding on to things too tightly and for too long, which tears at the fibers of the tissue creating awful pain. The tendonitis in my hand reflects the painful tendonitis in my heart, soul, and mind, as I find myself performing those same motions with ideas, feelings, and people. My grasping and clutching of feelings, ideas, and people in a way that does harm to myself and others is the basis of codependency.

Codependency can be defined as relationship addiction, where the codependent person locates their identity and self-worth in the person they are trying to rescue or help, generally in a controlling and manipulative way that isn't psychologically healthy. We are all a little codependent – after all, most of us are empathetic and compassionate people who want to be loving helpers to our families and friends, and we naturally want to be loved and needed by others. It is when our own identity becomes enmeshed and tied to someone else's, when our emotions and reasons for living are bound up entirely in another person, that we have crossed the line into codependency. The brace and the medicine I take for my condition allows for the healing of my injured tendons, and my spiritual self-care through my involvement in the Unitarian Universalist church and my Co-Dependents Anonymous group allow for the healing of my soul and spirit. The experience, strength, and hope we share in our recovery group is my medicine, and the fellowship and collective wisdom of both my Unitarian Universalist congregation and my Co-Dependents Anonymous group is my support.

Recovery calls us to participate in the process of growth and change, two things that are frequently painful

endeavors. They also require that we let go of things in order to make room for future growth.

On most Sunday mornings, after church, I can be found taking in the "gospel" at the "First Church of CoDA," as I lovingly refer to it. I attend Co-Dependents Anonymous as a spiritual practice and a gift I give myself every week. My dedication to my practice extends past my Sunday attendance and resonates for me every day, providing a touchpoint I can return to if I "get lost" in trying to desperately control people as well as the minutia of everyday life. When this happens, I have forgotten to place my Higher Power at the center of my life and my being. One of my favorite recovery writers, Mel Ash, a Zen teacher and Unitarian minister, in his book *Zen of Recovery*, addresses this issue with great humor as he writes, "If our Higher Power is present and implicit in each moment, then we can gain conscious contact by becoming aware of our place in the universe. This is a reconnection process, much like paying your spiritual phone bill with mindfulness. Once service is restored, we can hear the sounds of God everywhere we go and in everything we do." When I think of Ash's writing, I remember that we Unitarian Universalists are called to practice compassion for ourselves as well as others by keeping centered.

The Rumi hymn, "Come, Come, Whoever You Are" epitomizes the spirit of recovery groups in general, and in particular the group I participate in, Co-Dependents Anonymous, a 12-step group modeled on Alcoholics Anonymous. Our group is a ministry of sorts: we are all there because we have problems forming and maintaining healthy relationships and we wish to get well. Indeed, ours is no caravan of despair -- ours is a caravan of hope. Our goal, as stated in our opening welcome, is to become "As God intended for us to be -- precious and free." By participating fully in the program, living into the twelve

steps every day, we are agreeing to live in covenant with our Higher Power, our recovery community, and ourselves. Our practice in the program relates to our Unitarian Universalist faith as it affirms the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

Perhaps we can try letting go of things over time, as a spiritual practice: letting go of body shame, letting go of guilt over a past indiscretion or wrong done, letting go of a compulsive thought or old tape running in your head. What could you do if you unburdened yourself of these things? Open your hand, and let it go, whatever it may be -- and you will have made space for something else, or even for nothing at all but spaciousness in which something new can grow.

We don't necessarily need a recovery group to let go of things -- but we do need community. We need the support of other people to hold us in grace and understanding while we wrangle with our compulsive desires to hang on and move toward letting go. Letting go perhaps makes us vulnerable, and vulnerability is scary -- we are open then, and our soft squishy parts are unprotected. If we can find a community, such as this one, where we can interact in love and safety, we can be vulnerable with each other in ways that lead to growth and change through letting go and being able to process the grief of that action, of that loss, in beloved community. Because letting go is not always easy or pain free. In fact, it is frequently difficult and painful -- because it involves separation from something or someone that we have held onto, sometimes for years or even decades, because we are afraid of the consequences -- what will we do without them, or it? How will we survive? The answer is that we can and will, because we are so often stronger than we give ourselves credit for, more resilient than we have allowed ourselves to believe.

In my recovery community, we are exhorted in the last step, step 12, to a ministry of sorts: "Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to other codependents and to practice these principles in all our affairs." This is an exhortation to in effect "Spread the Gospel," or "Have you heard the Good News?" without knocking on people's doors (though we do have pamphlets!).

Mel Ash tells us that we are not called to believe in anything in at all, even in the presence of a hypothetical Higher Power, in order to participate in a 12 step group -- all we are asked, in effect, is to have faith in ourselves and in our potential for belief. It is a kind of restoration of our childlike faith. In Co-Dependents Anonymous as in Alcoholics Anonymous, and as in the Unitarian Universalist Church, religious faith in a traditional idea of God is not demanded. These recovery groups are not religious programs – but they are spiritual programs, as in they work on a basis of spiritual revelation and re-connection. But, there is no one definition of "Higher Power."

For me, re-connection happens through my daily reading from *Courage to Change* (an Al-Anon publication), as well as from Melody Beattie's text "The Language of Letting Go." These books provide subjects for my morning meditation and prayers, and have served me well on the road to recovery.

My Co-Dependents Anonymous fellowship is an important part of my spiritual path. We are a fellowship, a congregation of survivors and people in recovery, and we minister to each other in witnessing to other people's narratives and in sharing our own stories. Experience, Strength, and Hope are our watchwords, our tools, our gifts, and it is with these three concepts that we carry out our recovery ministry.

Perhaps that is why Unitarian Universalism appealed to me in the first place, aside from the all-inclusive nature and attitude of inquiry as a spiritual practice -- the dedication to service to others, to social justice, and to simply learning to bear witness to others, whether it be in pain or in joy or in something else entirely. The practice of being present is inherent in every Unitarian Universalist service and recovery meeting I have attended.

Another of my favorite writers, Anne Lamott, talks about being present in the moment and the value of narrative in her text "Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers:" "Details are being revealed, and they will take you out of yourself, which is heaven, and you will have a story to tell, which is salvation that again and again saves us, the way Jesus saves some people, or the way sobriety does. Stories to tell or hear -- either way, it's medicine. The Word."

We are indwelling our stories, our stories of recovery and journeying toward wholeness, and it is in the telling and retelling, over and over again, that we eventually begin to heal. It is also how we avoid relapse into old programming or old survival behaviors. We share our stories, we support each other in our individual and collective journeys, and in so doing we embody the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. In my recovery fellowship, we recognize that no one person, or book, or faith holds the truth for any given individual. We have an axiom that is oft repeated: "Take what you want and leave the rest."

We are always rewriting our personal narratives, as we let go of parts of our old narratives, perhaps toxic beliefs and behaviors, to make room for new chapters. It has been said that our past is our story, and our story is our past. I don't think I quite agree with this statement, as I think that while our past informs our current story, it doesn't have to

take it over -- we can wrest control of the pen and write new verses as we grow into healthier lives.

In my chaplaincy work, I talked with a man once in the hospital who told me the very sad tale of his illness -- how he wound up in the hospital, and how it had upended his life. He said to me, several times, "That's my story." I listened and then I asked a few questions. "Are you willing to participate in a different story? What if I told you that maybe, instead of re-inscribing the story of your life to this point, that you could write a different story?" My point to him was that we are always in the process of rewriting our narratives, constructing our stories as we go along. Different people play different roles in our stories, and at different times we too play different roles. If we don't like the way our story is going, we can change the narrative by making different choices. It is a trade-off, of course -- we let go of one thing, one action, or one viewpoint -- and we adopt another one; and whether it is a small shift or a large-scale move, things change.

I'd like to pose some questions to us, as a congregation: Can you let go of resentments and forgive? Can you be like the monk in the story who lets go of any anger or irritation with the ungrateful woman whom he carried across the stream? If we don't let go, we get stuck, mired in the muck of anger and resentments, disappointments, frustrations and compulsions. It is exhausting to carry all those burdens with us for years and years. If we let go of them, we will have so much more time and energy to spend on the things that bring us joy and contentment. The older monk in our story is practicing living in the present moment. If we live in the moment, in the now, we can exercise choice. We can choose when and how to address our emotions -- we don't have to be ruled by them, like the younger monk.

Each moment is an opportunity to begin again. In recovery work, we are reminded that each moment is a new moment, full of possibilities, including the possibility to start again. If we have fallen down in our spiritual practice, if we have fallen down in our dedication to our recovery, we can start again, right now. We don't have to wait for a certain holiday, like New Year's day, to make a resolution to try again. In recovery, we live in the moment, in the now -- as this present moment is all we have.

Beginning with the present moment, we can let go of our compulsions, including the codependent compulsion of letting other people define our worth. We can find peace and harmony by recognizing that we have worth simply because we exist, because we have life. We don't need to locate our self-worth in other people, or in causes, or in organizations, or in our work -- we are worthy of love and respect and all those things simply because we are here, we are alive, we are unique and precious creations of something larger than ourselves -- whether that something is a higher power or the grace of science, the marriage of cells.

I am practicing what I am preaching today. I am in recovery, and as I and my fellows share our experience, strength, and hope, we create beloved community one person, one story, one meeting at a time. In the 12th step of recovery we are asked to "practice these principles in all our affairs," just as we are exhorted to live out our faith as Unitarian Universalists through our guiding principles. In the spirit of recovery, just for today, let us strive to be present in the moment, and share our experience, strength, and hope with each other, as these are our most unique and precious gifts to give.

Thank you and Blessed Be.