

**Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church, UU**  
**“Letting Go”**  
**The Rev. Dr. Morris W. Hudgins**  
**May 30, 2010**

**Introduction**

On June 20<sup>th</sup> I will conduct my last service here in Charlottesville. In August I will begin my final interim in Atlanta, GA. Transition is on my mind. Today I want to talk about “Letting Go.”

Roy Phillips addresses this topic in his book, “Letting Go; Transforming Congregations for Ministry.” He writes:

Every transition begins with an ending. As life goes on and we encounter anything that changes—and everything does—we are faced with yet another ending that requires us once again to let go. New things come only after we let go of former things. But letting go of what is familiar is not most people’s favorite thing.

Letting go requires a sense deep down that there is that which can be trusted. That sense does not come to most of us once and for all. It needs to be remembered and recovered again and again in every new phase of our life.

This is the heart of my message this morning.

It is fitting that I have chosen two poems to share with you this morning that have been an important part of my philosophy. I will share them with you now and repeat them at the conclusion of this sermon.

First, is a poem written by Judy Schattner, a grief counselor in Raleigh, North Carolina. Judy and I would lead grief workshops together. It goes like this:

If I can help ease the fall of letting go  
And teach you what the trees already know;  
Treelike, standing with strong roots steadying  
The fall of leaves, one by one, drifting  
Gently, safely to the ground;  
Steadfast, facing their changes, so that  
Fear becomes love,  
Sadness turns again to joy,  
Anger finds compassion.  
With dignity, clarity and courage,  
They lose what they lose, so they can keep  
What they can keep--  
Then trees and love endure.

The second poem is in our “Hymnal” and is by Mary Oliver who writes:

To live in this world  
you must be able  
to do three things:  
To love what is mortal;  
to hold it against your bones,  
knowing your own life depends on it;  
And when the time comes  
to let it go,  
to let it go.

My favorite symbol is that of the tree. I use it for teaching UU History. The roots remind us where we came from, the Christian, Jewish, and pagan roots that led to the birth of Unitarian Universalism. The many branches of the tree represent the diverse theological positions that make up our Association. We are no longer exclusively Christian, but we come from liberal Christianity and many of us continue to be inspired by the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

Some of us, like me, are inspired by Judaism. I have always said that Reform Judaism is my model for ministry. I am first and foremost a teacher. I never thought it was my job to tell people how to live their life, but the minister should be a model for how to treat others. The minister is the person who studies the tradition and passes it on to others. That has been my calling.

Somewhere along the line I was told that the ministry is more than teaching. Leading worship, preaching sermons, administration, pastoral counseling are also important. I have come to believe this. Change and letting go are important to ministry.

Personally, we need to let go of something everyday. At some point we let go of our childhood when we grow up and become adults. We let go of our past struggles as we move on to new ones. All of our lives we are forced to let go of old relationships.

We don't want to. We would love for those relationships to continue all of our lives. I remember the day I lost my college roommate--Skip. He died of lung cancer in his 40's—much too young to die and let go. I remember returning to Missouri and taking part in his Internment Service. I wasn't ready to say "good-bye" but I had to. Life is filled with "good-byes." At the same time, I will always know that Skip named his son after me. We may move on but our memories and our legacy continues.

I also had to let go of my feelings toward my country because of the Vietnam War. My brother, Larry, was in Vietnam for six years, returned home a different person, disabled, and broken. He died as a result of his injuries and conditions, especially agent orange. I was angry at my country for years. I couldn't display an American flag. I refused to visit the Vietnam Memorial in D.C. In my Spiritual Journey classes I encourage participants to face the important events of their lives. One year the participants came to me and said, "Morris, practice what you preach. Go to the Vietnam Memorial. The next year I did and it was one of the most transformational moments of my life. I had refused to go because I knew my brother's name would not be there, since he died after the war. As I entered the Memorial I saw the sign which read: "This Memorial is for those who died in or as a result of the Vietnam War." On that day I let go of my negative feelings of my country. After 9/11 I could again display an American flag.

Letting Go is an acceptance of the inevitability of change. We all know that change comes about in many ways. We aren't all the same and we do what we can in our own way. One of my favorite Unitarian Universalists was Frank Lloyd Wright the architect who changed the architectural landscape forever. He may have had some person issues, but his contributions to architecture will never be forgotten. Change is not just inevitable. It is good.

Roy Phillips refers to change in the context of "the good not our own." This good not our own,

. . .has been and is at work in the world inspiring springtime grasses and flowers and all manner of creatures great and small, including persons, to come into being, to blossom, and to bear fruit. . .we have energies to exert, will to assert, decisions to make, and things to do so that existing structures won't fall apart and so that new realities can come into being. (p. 2)

As new ministers come to Charlottesville, they will want to do things differently. I encourage you to welcome their differences. Not everyone in a UU church is going to look at things the same way. This week I saw a bumper sticker that is now my favorite. It said, "Get Real: Like Jesus would ever carry a gun and vote Republican." I love that but also realize there are Unitarians who are Republicans and support the right to own a gun. If there is one thing I wish would change for Unitarian Universalists, it is more respect for our different political views.

There is much too much desire in this world to be right. I wish we would emphasize less being right and more being good. My advice to every church I serve: Sometimes we have to let go of our personal agendas for the good of the larger community. Roy Phillips says it this way:

Putting together our power with power not our own is perhaps life's greatest challenge. To assert oneself and then to let go. To connect with others and to let go. To hold on to what we cherish and to let go. Every parent has to learn this, as does every teacher, leader, friend, lover, family member, and every person who works for organizational transformation and community change—everyone who has a ministry.

There are some things in life we should not let go. We should not let go of those we love. In our modern world we are moving and leaving all the time. Here I would like for you to practice what I preach, not what I do. We ministers, especially interims, are not allowed to keep in touch with the churches we serve. I encourage you, as members of a church, to keep in touch with your friends, and return when you can. I also encourage you to never let go of your dreams. Whether it is your personal dreams, or your dreams for your church, keep them in your minds, don't let them go.

However, there are many things in life we let go. We need to let go of old hatreds—people we have hated in the past, old relationships that were difficult, memories that haunt us even today. I must admit that I have had bad feelings in the past about the Catholic Church. I have been angry at the Catholic Church for looking the other way when priests abused children.

When I was minister in Cincinnati I had to let go of those feelings when I had the opportunity to work with a Catholic priest, Father Jim. When Pope John Paul II died I baked a pie and took it to his home. When I left Cincinnati, I received a card from Father Jim, saying he would not be able to attend my going away party, but he wanted me to know I would be missed. He wrote: "You have made a difference in this community. Thank you! You are in my prayers."

Father Jim also sent me a statement of faith which I would like to read to you. I can affirm everything Father Jim says in this message. The card reads like this:

- I still believe that generosity is its own reward  
that kindness will prevail  
that might does not make right  
that a soft answer turns away wrath
- I still believe that there is power in gentleness  
that there is more to us than flesh and bone  
that life will bring more happiness  
if lived for peace and not possessions
- I still believe people of gentleness and faith can change the world  
one unseen unsung unrewarded kindness at a time  
and nothing in this world can make me stop

These words are part of my basic philosophy of life. What I wish for you in the coming years is,

- ❖ that you will treat each other and those who choose to come in these doors with gentleness and kindness.
- ❖ that you will bring more happiness to the world around you
- ❖ that you continue to believe that you can change the world.

The world is changed not always by large numbers of people, but people who believe they can make a difference, who are committed to their cause, who work together for the larger good, who treat each other and the larger world with respect. I leave with you the two poems I shared earlier. First, the words of Mary Oliver:

To live in this world you must be able to do three things:

To live what is mortal;  
To hold it against your bones  
Knowing your own life depends on it;

And when the time comes to let it go,  
To let it go.

Also, the poem by Judy Schattner:

If I can help ease the fall of letting go  
and teach you what the trees already know;  
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the fall of leaves, one by one, drifting  
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With dignity, clarity and courage,  
they lose what they lose, so they can keep  
what they can keep--  
Then trees and love endure.

So may it be. Blessed be and Amen.