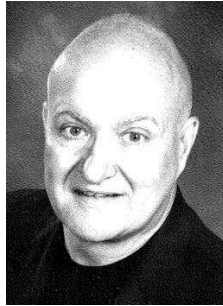


Letting Go of the Past

BY MARK BELLETINI, SENIOR MINISTER, FIRST UNITARIAN
UNIVERSALIST CHURCH OF COLUMBUS, OHIO



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I love to draw, and for well over a decade I attended a drawing group in San Francisco. There, drawing a new model each time, I would produce ten drawings per night on 18x24 inch sheets of tinted paper. Some were quick gesture sketches; some were completely finished with shading and color. I was faithful, and went every Tuesday night. After ten years, despite pieces I had given away or sold, I had collected what felt like a ton of the drawings in the large tablets. They were so big I needed to store them in the hallway of the loft where I was living at the time, an old factory building. I was able to keep them out of the way by putting them into an alcove no one was using.

In 1993, we had a terrible rainy winter in Oakland, where I lived. No thunder, no lightning, which are exceedingly rare in California, but downpours for days on end. Cold rain that came down so hard it hurt to walk in it without an umbrella. Downpours for literally days at a time, causing little rivers along the curbs; the cuffs of my trousers never dried for weeks.

One day I noted that there was a leak in the bedroom that was most unusual. The water ran down the wall like a thin waterfall, a sheet about half an inch thick dripping down the painted concrete wall and through the floor to the loft space below. It was incredible. The whole wall looked as if it was sliding downward. I heard later the workshop down below us was drenched because the water stopped at their floor and flooded it out. In my loft, the water just passed through.

Then I thought of my drawings, stacked in two piles in an alcove in the hallway, so as not to block it. I went out to the hallway in a panic. Same thing had happened there. And had been happening for days, apparently, since all 9,600 drawings I had done were fused into what amounted to a block of papier mâché. Totally lost. Ten years of work. Kaput. Vanished. Forever.

Yes, I did weep. No question. It was so unexpected, so out of the blue. I couldn't focus for days. When people said to me: "Well, at least you're okay. They're just drawings after all," I wanted to scream. I had given 20 drawings away, and friends had kindly framed them, so it wasn't an utterly total loss of my decade of drawing, but those 9,600 drawings weren't "just paper" to me. They were a record of my soul's emotional states, year by year, as I drew. As I buried my friends. As I led funerals for everyone I ever loved during the AIDS years. The predictability of Tuesday night drawing was what kept me going in some ways. It was the one reliable thing.

I couldn't focus for weeks. I wanted them back. They were all I could see. Not my loft, not my desk, not my friends...just the drawings. I managed to keep the clot of fused drawing pads for six weeks, hoping against hope that they might dry and could be partially restored. They molded instead. I had to toss them for good. I was heartbroken.

One day I noticed some neighbor kids playing baseball at the local playground near where I went shopping. One of the younger brothers of the pitcher was sitting with his parents in the bleachers, and he held a balloon. A bright red one just like in that famous French short film many of you probably know, *The Red Balloon*. The game was almost over. As soon as it finished, this little kid, maybe 9 or 10 years old, simply let his balloon go. No fuss. No bother. No crying. He did it deliberately. He watched it rise out of sight without any alarm. His brother's team had lost, and he

All the art of living
lies in a fine mingling
of letting go
and holding on
—Havelock Ellis

A monthly for religious liberals

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felt it was a proper gesture to mark that moment. I was amazed. So were his parents, by the look on their faces.

And that is when I suddenly realized I had been holding on to this loss as if the past could somehow be rewritten, as if I was just waiting for the rain-storm to “unrain,” and give me back my precious work. I realized that I was being foolish, and that unless I let go, and just said to myself, “I have to live in the days to come, not the days that have past,” I wasn’t allowing myself to live, just grasp and resist.

Even though, as I said, I wanted to scream, the man who said to me: “At least you’re safe, they’re just drawings” was 100% half right.

Most of our losses are not of things, but of people, people who indeed are far more precious than paper.

I understand that very well. What I had to say about the loss of my drawings is also something I had to say about the losses of people in the rest of my life. I made a sad list recently. I have personally buried 87 people that I have loved in my life. Loved deeply. And I’ve lost relationships, too.

Although I grieved deeply for every one of them, I have always had to come to the place where I remember that all of that loss is *irretrievably* in the past. I cannot change the past. I cannot undo what has been done. In the words of T. Carmi, talking about the *Shoah*, the Holocaust: “What happened really happened. What happened really happened. What happened really happened. Oh, may I have the faith to accept that what happened really happened.”

Does what I am saying push grief away? Not at all.

I still grieve when I think of any one of those people I love. Many years later I light a memory candle, what the Ashkenazy Jews call a Yahrzeit candle, for my best friend on the anniversary of his death. But I know I cannot have him back, and that the love I feel for

him now has to go out to others, even as I know very well that my gratitude for his life will never go away even for a minute. Grief in all of its forms is essential to a healthy life in this fragile world. But fiercely and stubbornly clinging to singular events and losses in the past is not so much grief as it is a kind of “stuckness” that truly limits the gift of our present life.

**There has been no flawless
life yet in the history
of humanity. But still,
somehow, we choose life.**

We all have losses; we all make mistakes; we all are hurt and we all hurt. There has been no flawless life yet in the history of humanity. But still, somehow, we choose life.

In his book *How Then Shall We Live?* Wayne Muller tells a remarkable story about a man named Frank:

Frank was a child of a violent, alcoholic father. Frank spent a great deal of his early childhood with his mother, while his father was away at war. Frank remembers that when his father returned, in his sharp, clean uniform, Frank hid under the table. He was afraid of his father’s explosive temper. Frank would often get hit and then go away somewhere to hide, to watch, to wait until it was safe. Often he had to wait a very long time.

We may have experienced terrible things when we were younger—hiding from a father’s alcoholic rage by crawling under the table is a powerful image, to be sure. My father was not an alcoholic, but I used to hide under the table from his white-hot temper, too, when I was a kid. It was scary, and I had no way to explain it. However, Muller continues:

Fully grown, Frank is a psychiatrist, thoughtful and gentle in his work with people. One day he told me about his

daughter, Sarah, who was seven years old. He loved her very much. Frank explained that every weekend he would hike up to Sun Mountain, just outside Santa Fe. It is a lovely mountain, with exquisite views of the city—a quiet, beautiful place. He said he was looking forward to the day when he could take his daughter to the top of Sun Mountain with him. As he spoke of his dream he began to weep, and there was a catch in his voice. His deep love for Sarah and his yearning to share the beauty of the earth with her combined to open a raw tenderness in his heart. His love and kindness came from the very same heart that had been hurt by his father. Love and sadness and hope and joy, all from the same spigot.

This is a beautiful testimony to how the wounds and losses of the past, although they certainly shape us, are not omnipotent. They are not ultimacy, and have no final say unless we give them that power. Love and kindness are still possible in the present. Hope and joy are still possible in the present. Sadness does not disappear—no way—and neither do regrets or the hard lessons we have learned. But it can be balanced by an openness to new life in the coming days, to new relationships and new ideas and, in my case, new drawings. Maybe, I want to hope, another ten thousand before I am through. ■

“The CLF has great power and potential in being an agent of transformation in people’s lives, and I’m very happy to support you financially and be a part of that.”

Trudi, a CLF Supporter in Europe

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The Glove in the Subway

BY JANE RZEPKA, MINISTER
EMERITA, CLF

A one-paragraph newspaper article describes a subway platform during the morning rush hour at Grand Central Terminal. A train pulls in; a well-dressed woman gets off.

Before the doors close, the woman realizes that she is holding only one of her leather gloves. She looks back into the train and spots the matching one on a seat. It is obviously too late to dash back in to retrieve it, so with a cavalier shrug, she flings her arm out and, the doors about to close, tosses her one glove onto the seat alongside its mate. The doors shut, and the train pulls away.

What a great image. One could use it, I suppose, as a metaphor for facing the inevitable, or arguing for an orderly universe, or even, with a little stretch, for sharing the good things in life. But, as we move toward the summer season, the metaphor that comes to mind is one of “letting go.”

To throw a favorite leather glove into the oblivion of a moving train must involve small pangs of uncertainty, pangs of some degree of loss, pangs of upset. After a lifetime of struggling not to lose our mittens, then our gloves, cavalier abandonment does not come easy. We need a vigorous and decisive toss about now to free ourselves of the confining gloves of life, even if we love them.

And the train’s about to leave. ■



From A Small Heaven, by Jane Ranney Rzepka, published by Skinner House in 1988.

Letting Go of What We Don’t Have

BY LIZ LERNER MACLAY,
SENIOR MINISTER,
UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST
CHURCH OF SILVER
SPRING, MARYLAND



Oh, letting go. Every so often a minister has to preach on something that is absolutely not a personal strength. And this is one of those times. I’m not a letter-go; I’m an attacher and a holder-on. I hold onto people and relationships I love. I hold onto to souvenirs and mementos. I hang onto old things from my parents or grandparents, even when I have no place to put them. I hold onto and reread beloved books—some I have read 10, maybe 20 times. I have transplanted plants from one house’s garden to another, clung like a vine to bad boyfriends and outworn securities, cherished broken knick-knacks and topless treasure boxes and coverless books—sometimes even books with pages that keep falling out.

When I grew up I put away some of my childish things, but plenty of them are in bags and boxes rather than gone, and some are front and center on shelves in my office, including ridiculous things like a plastic Bambi from an ancient Happy Meal. Even now I have just gotten a puppy because I never again want to go through losing one dog without having another.

But the title of this sermon is “Letting Go of What We Don’t Have,” and you may have noticed that in my list of what I’ve held on to in my life were indeed things I’d already lost, yet still couldn’t let go of. You may have noticed I mentioned transplanted plants—obviously the plant was a symbol for a whole home that was lost and hard to let go of. I also held on to the friendship of a good friend from college long after it was obvious that

she wasn’t a friend I could depend on. I held onto illusions of people I loved because it was painful to acknowledge their flaws and failures.

I lived in Greece for three years and loved it. Loved the place, loved the people, loved my impoverished, fun, challenging, erratic life. I rode a motorcycle with a leaky gas tank, froze in my tiny apartment in the winter, knew my way around most of Athens, spent summer weeks in the beautiful and cheap rooms for rent in the Greek Islands, learned to understand and love the impulsive, outspoken, fascinating, passionate Greek people of the villages and cities. I could only stand to leave by promising myself I would always return. But in leaving, I lost that place of my heart, and though I always return, it will never be mine, and every time I leave I have to let it go again.

But even that was volitional. I had a choice to make and I made it. The hardest letting go is when it isn’t a choice. We’ve simply lost something or someone we loved, against our will, and now we have to let it, let them, go.

Perhaps we would all like to be like the woman at Grand Central station in Jane Rzepka’s reflection. Can’t you just see her? Well-turned out, ready for anything. And then—her one glove, unreachable. Hers is such a great, cavalier gesture. A moment, a realization, a shrug, a toss, a gift to some stranger who will find both these lovely gloves (somehow they are always lovely in my imagining), then look around, also shrug, and take them home for themselves or someone else. Maybe they’ll tell the story: “I found these gloves, just lying on the seat, like someone put them there.”

Or wait—think about it: subway cars are never empty. Someone was probably facing the door, maybe sitting near the seat with the single glove. They saw the moment unfold, saw her fling the other glove into the car. Maybe they looked at her, took the gloves, raised them in a salute, and then the

train slid off and the woman turned away and the day moved on.

The woman's shrug is key to the story. She doesn't stand there frozen in dismay or indecision. She reads the loss for what it is and in a single gesture, accepts it, deals with it, and moves on. The shrug represents all that. But a shrug is unrealistic, even unnecessary, for a lot of us in our letting-go situations. She is, after all, only letting go of a glove. It's a metaphor, not an on-par example of many of the things we work hard to let go of. Another difference from much of life is that in the story it's immediately obvious she's going to have to let go of a glove: it's her decision to let go of the second glove that holds the surprise.

When we do our work of letting go, and when we repeat that work, there are always grounds for gratitude.

In real life, it's not always easy to know when we need to let go. But there are often signals. One signal that we may need to release something is that we actually find ourselves wondering if it's time to let go. Some part of us knows, because if we're in the act of wondering...well, then it's time to consider whether we need to let go of this thing, this hope, this person, this experience we've lost, or maybe never had. This isn't to say we always need to let go—some of my best blessings have come with persistence.

But no one's life ever goes just as we would wish it would, and for most of us letting go takes a lot more than a shrug. It's almost always work. But the shrug still applies, because it also conveys acceptance, dealing with it, and moving on—three elements that are always part of letting go.

What does the work of letting go look like? It has as many forms as we can imagine.

It looks like thinking about things we'd rather duck. It looks like imagining the future with a reality we need to accept, and letting ourselves anticipate what things will be like, what *we* will be like, when we have let go. It looks like letting in wisdom about what or who we need to let go, wisdom that may be coming to us from others.

It looks like dealing with the details: objects, mementos, situations that keep us hanging on to what we don't have. It looks like letting those who love us know how hard this is for us, and letting them help us when they can.

It may involve other tasks, like writing a letter, or making a phone call or a visit. It may require a trip to the dump or a visit from the Purple Heart organization that picks up old clothing and household items. It might mean a garage sale or a gift to a neighbor.

It might mean *not* doing something: leaving an email or a letter unanswered, a phone call or visit unreturned. It might mean writing something on a piece of paper, screwing it up tightly and sending that piece of paper down a stream, or tying it to a tree with a piece of thread. It might mean making a confession to a family member or friend. Just one letting go may take a number of different forms, all of them important.

Those tasks of letting go apply under many circumstances. But there is a particular feature of letting go of what we don't have, which is that the work is uniquely ours. If someone dies, then the work of loss and letting go belongs to us and everyone else who cared about that person. If we are hanging onto something others don't even know about, then the work is indeed ours alone—perhaps in releasing a secret we have clung to. If we have a long-cherished alternative reality, then it is surely on us to let go of that reality when the time comes.

And the truth is that the work of letting go is never truly done. Things happen

and we are reminded of what we let go, and suddenly we need to do it again. We have to reaffirm our decisions, our choices, the path we've taken and the realities we've dealt with.

But when we do our work of letting go, there are always grounds for gratitude. In fact, gratitude is critical. I don't believe the work of letting go is possible without it. Because usually when we're stuck about what we don't even have, it's because whatever that thing, that person, that circumstance, that yearning is has become so big for us that it gets in the way of our ability to appreciate the other things.

Even when we are struggling with really big things, we always have really big gifts to help us. People who care about us. Opportunities to do meaningful work. A safe home. A strong faith community. Beauty around us. Beauty within us. Hope for the new good things in our lives. And more gifts in each of your lives that I can't begin to know. Those good things are important to value. The things and people we can lean into during hard times deserve our appreciation, including the hard times of letting go.

In the end I love the story about the woman in the train station because of what it represents—the acceptance of letting go, the ability to do it so cleanly and even with flair. Letting go doesn't actually *require* flair, but it does *require* doing. And while it's often painful work, it's also work that frees us and keeps us grounded in reality. We all have something to let go of to free ourselves up for all the good around us and before us. And knowing that we have goodness around us and before us can give us hope and strength to move forward.

The art of losing, the flung glove, whether done with or without flair, will almost certainly be work, but let not one of us doubt that we can let go, if we can let ourselves bear knowing when the time has come. ■

The Roots We Choose (Excerpt)

BY MARK STRINGER,
MINISTER, FIRST
UNITARIAN CHURCH
OF DES MOINES, IOWA



We don't get a say in the roots we inherit, even as they stretch beneath the surface of our daily lives and contain within them countless stories—of danger and survival and elation and heartbreak—that inform our living in ways we understand and ways we do not. No matter if we spend a lifetime tracing what we can learn about our family's branches of these roots, or if we do all we can to ignore or even abandon these roots, they will remain there all the same, connecting us to the past, and in a sense, to each other.

They are the roots that instill in us our first notions of what family is, what safety is, what possibility is, even what the future might be. They are the roots that reveal to us our first and perhaps most enduring understandings of "home"—understandings that influence, in ways both obvious and subtle, the kind of home we may create for ourselves and for generations that will follow us.

Some of these roots are helpful to us, in that they simplify our options and allow us to make sense of what can be an unwieldy and overwhelming life. These roots are the places we can return to when our branching out has left us feeling adrift. But these roots can hold us down, effectively eliminating from our lives the possibility of growth, keeping us from becoming the people we are yearning to be.

These are not the roots we have chosen. These are the roots that, we could say, have chosen us.

So what about the roots that we *can* choose? What about the commitments that we *can* make to our lives and to

the people around us, the commitments that *are* within our reach?

Raised in the Protestant tradition of my mother and her mother and her mother's mother, I was expected to go to church on Sunday mornings, to sit in the pews, and restrain myself from making a scene with my adolescent impatience. To pass the time, I drew on the orders of service and the offering envelopes and daydreamed about the people around me.

Still, I loved the people I knew in the church. I saw them as kind and gentle. They always had a smile and a soft word for me. But over time, I began to pay more attention to what I was hearing, and saying, in the services. The spoken creeds were no longer just words we recited together. They were words that meant something. Words that I was starting to question—not with animosity, more with wonder and confusion. Hell, the Holy Ghost, the Virgin Mary, judging the quick and the dead. Lots for a developing mind to ponder in those words.

"What does it mean when I say these things?" I asked my mother as we stood side by side, doing the dishes one night after supper, a time when we often discussed big questions. "I don't think I believe that stuff," I told her.

Maybe she had wrestled with some of the same doubts. I'll bet she had, as she did not choose to shame me or to suggest that I had better get my understanding straight if I hoped for eternal life. She was religious, but, thankfully, not that kind of religious. No, all I remember her saying is that religion is not about always understanding. It is about trying to understand.

I liked that. I still do. Religion is about *trying* to understand.

What I was beginning to understand at the time, however, was that I shouldn't be participating in the portions of the service that troubled me because I didn't think they were true. At any rate, I couldn't convince myself they were

true, and no amount of trying to understand would change that. My concerns were serious, heartfelt, and, even with the non-judgmental love of my mom as I wrestled with it all, a little scary. And so, I resolved to live with more integrity at church. I would still go, as my parents expected, but I would withhold from saying and doing things I didn't believe.

Then came a week when the congregation shared a communion. The tradition was to pass trays with little squares of bread, everyone taking a piece and waiting to put it in their mouth at the same time. The bread came and went and I declined to participate. So far, so

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good. Next, trays with tiny glasses of grape juice were passed, and I again refused. Then the words were said and the people in the pews, in unison, drank the juice, their heads going back as if the room had been picked up and tipped to an angle for moment and then back. My head stayed still.

And this is where the revelation of my own understanding became terrible.

My choice to abandon the rituals and the understandings of my clan in that moment felt like a leap into nothingness. It felt as though I had ripped myself from the roots that had previously offered me a sense of identity, even in my confusion and lack of belief. My commitment to authenticity required that I refuse the communion, but the disorientation I experienced as I let go of my culture was painful and real. I instantly wept. My mom held my hand, sensing the leap that I had taken, perhaps wanting to hold on to her son as I went bounding into an adulthood of my own choosing. ■



From Your Minister

BY MEG RILEY
SENIOR MINISTER,
CHURCH OF THE
LARGER FELLOWSHIP

My uncle had lost his powers of speech by the time he died. In his hospital bed, surrounded by his loved ones, he used a bead board to spell out what he wanted to say during his final days. At one point, my cousin told me, everyone leaned in close because it seemed like he wanted to say something important. C-H-A-N-G-E—the whole family sounded out the word—change!—and wondered what important words might follow. T-H-E O-I-L F-I-L-T-E-R eventually came through. He was reminding my aunt to do a job he had always done on their furnace. For some reason, letting go of this detail was critical for him as he departed the planet. These were some of his final words.

My mother, who weakened and died slowly from cancer over three years, was very focused about cleaning up the house and other affairs before she went. Once when I came to visit she asked me to go to the huge mess of a basement and clean it up. “Just throw it all away,” she told me. I spent the afternoon straightening and cleaning, but quite quickly realized that the “everything” she was telling me to throw out was my father’s stuff—my father, still living, still planning to stay in the house. When I told her I wasn’t going to get rid of his stuff, she got really mad and, uncharacteristically, yelled at me that I wasn’t helping at all. Stunned, and tired and grimy from several hours of hard work, I yelled back, “You get to die, but I’m still going to be here with him, getting blamed for his stuff being gone!”

My mother was clear about what she gained from letting go of old baggage. For decades my parents, both teachers,

had owned a farm in central Ohio, where they spent many of their summers. Once a family center, with huge gardens and dozens of aunts and uncles and cousins in and out all summer, this was now an abandoned mess of tall weeds and brambles, surrounding a fallen barn and mouse-eaten house. After my parents sold it, my mother said, “As long as I worried about the horrible state the farm was in, I couldn’t remember any of the good times we had there. The moment we sold it, I got it back! Now I can savor memories of all those summers I loved so much.”

After my mother died I saw better why

We each walk very different paths when it comes to grief, as we work our way through the complicated process of figuring out what we can best hold on to, and what we need to let go.

she would want to just throw out my father’s stuff. He was a hoarder. He kept certain rooms locked so that none of us could see in them; when he died we discovered they were full of giant rubber bins of papers, ranging from critical financial and legal documents to newspaper circulars from 22 years before. In the ten years that he lived after my mother died, the entire house began to resemble those locked rooms more and more.

When my father died, I was tasked with finding and sorting all of the financial documents in the house. This took over a week. I couldn’t just look in a drawer and say, “Nope, this is family photos,” because every single drawer, every single folder in a file drawer, every single closet, was filled with such a random assortment of

things that you never knew where you would find something essential.

After my mother died, my father lost interest in tending to details such as filing taxes or responding to collections agencies. So we never knew what might be necessary to close out his estate. At some point, I definitely felt as if we should just throw everything out—or, more precisely, have an estate sale company come in and clean it out, sell what they could and empty the place. I was so overwhelmed with his stuff—my mother was right, most of it absolute trash—that I couldn’t access my grief. Like my mother with the farm, my stress about dealing with his stuff blocked my ability to hold on to memories of happier times.

My sister, however, had a different path to grieving. She needed to touch every item in the house. And so, my brothers and I backed away, benefiting from this need of hers as she spent week after week sorting and examining. I never asked my sister how much of his stuff she took to her own over-

stuffed house, because I really don’t want to know. I do know that while she cleaned my father’s



house, I was at home taking bags and boxes of my own excess stuff to the thrift store, cleaning out old files, and otherwise trying to divest myself of whatever I could.

We each walk very different paths when it comes to grief, as we work our way through the complicated process of figuring out what we can best hold onto, and what we need to let go. It is my hope that there is always room for many different ways to live—and to let go of—our brief and precious lives. ■

May 2014

REsources for Living

BY LYNN UNGAR, MINISTER FOR LIFESPAN LEARNING, CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP

Have you ever had an all-out, melt-down, full-on temper tantrum? I don't remember having major hissy fits when I was little, although if you asked my mom you would probably learn that's more about my faulty memory than my good temper. I certainly have been witness to some raging temper tantrums as a parent. My daughter's frequent tantrums in her younger years pretty much always grew out of wanting something that she couldn't have—either because we weren't willing to satisfy her desire, or simply because couldn't find the thing that she wanted. Either way, you could watch her brain dashing around and around in a tiny little circle: "I want it! I don't have it! I want it! I don't have it! I want it! I don't have it!"

From outside the little track her mind was racing around at top speed, it was pretty easy to see that she wasn't getting anywhere. But I can tell you from painful experience that trying to use logic ("You'd be more likely to find what you wanted if you calmed down and looked for it.") or consequences ("If you don't go to bed now then you won't be able to play with Savannah tomorrow.") got me exactly nowhere, except more frustrated that my child wouldn't listen to sense or reason.

The sad fact of the matter was that once she had reached tantrum mode, her mind was completely clamped on to whatever it was that she wanted, and there would be no letting go unless she got what she wanted or simply wore herself out. Sheer torture for everyone involved.

Luckily for all of us, she has pretty much moved beyond her tantrum years (and into teen eye-rolling and snarkiness). But I wonder how many of us, whatever our age, manage to



work ourselves into the same state of desperately clinging to the idea that we simply must have something that is just not avail-

able. Maybe it's a relationship with someone who isn't ever going to feel about you the way you feel about them. Maybe it's an image of perfection or wealth or beauty or fame that is slamming up against the reality of ordinary life. Maybe it's wanting your children or your parents to be different people than they are ever going to be.

I wonder how many of us, whatever our age, manage to work ourselves into the [tantrum] state of desperately clinging to the idea that we simply must have something that is just not available.

One way or another, it's all too easy to get yourself hung up on holding on to things that you have no power to control. I, for instance, have been spending a lot of time and energy lately obsessing about the drought where I live in California, in spite of the fact that there is absolutely nothing I can do to make it rain.

Thousands of years ago the Buddha declared that all suffering arises because we are attached to getting the results and the things we want, because we hold onto our desires rather than accepting reality as it comes. We suffer when we expect things to be different from how they actually are. Many people have managed to get themselves out of tantrum mind by practicing Buddhist meditation, spending hour after patient hour practicing letting go, over and over again. Learning to let go, it turns out, is the work of a lifetime.

When you're a two-year-old screaming because your parents won't buy you candy, it's awfully hard to find your way out of the need to clamp onto something that you can't have. And it's not so easy to let go as an adult, either. But there are ways to learn to loosen your grip. For instance, you can start asking yourself questions: What in this situation *can* I control? What can I do to make the situation better, even if it doesn't come out the way that I imagined it? What *can* I have? Anything that lets in a little fresh air, a little possibility of change, can help to loosen that death grip on whatever it is that you're holding on to.

For instance, although there is nothing I can do to make it rain, there are certainly things I can do to conserve water. Of course, my choice to put in drip irrigation, or collect the water that runs before the shower gets warm, or put drought-tolerant native plants in my yard, won't stop the forest fires and the loss of the water that is needed for both wildlife and farmers to survive. It won't have any significant effect on climate change, and the strong possibility that drought will simply be a way of life for billions of people around the world. The grief for these losses is real, and won't go away if I just take shorter showers.

But holding on to the things that I can change, the choices I can make—finding new ways to live in the world that acknowledge the reality of things as they are—gives me just a bit of a chance to slip out of tantrum mind and let go of the way that things *should be*, so that I can put my effort into finding what I lost, or into making something new. ■





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A Stone to Hold On To

BY **TAQUIENA BOSTON**, DIRECTOR OF
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It was the weekend before I was scheduled for a biopsy. Marta spent the morning gathering stones on the beach. Later that evening, she pressed a smooth round stone into my hand and said “I know that when you’re facing a challenge it helps to have something to hold onto. I chose this stone especially for you so you will have something to hold onto this week.” On the plane going home somehow I lost the stone, but during my biopsy I held on to Marta’s love. ■

