



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

A “Letting-go” people

Clay Nelson © 27 June 2021

How good are you at letting go? Personally, I find it a struggle even when it involves letting go of negative things in my life.

There are plenty of things to practise on. I think of derogatory or critical things people in authority — parents, teachers, coaches, ministers — said to me that I let define or limit me. I can think of things I didn't try or insufferable things I endured or bad choices I made because I didn't let go of those diminishing words. If I ever find out who instilled in me that my purpose in life was to meet others' expectations, I have a few choice words I want to share. Yet, I have to ask myself why I didn't let go of something so toxic to my well-being long ago? It took someone I loved and trusted to point out the obvious, before I could let go and be fully my authentic self.

It is letting go of the positive aspects of our lives that is most challenging. Letting go of those things requires accepting change. None of us welcomes that, for letting go can leave us stuck in grief. No one wants to go there so we hold on tight. The things we are holding on to tightest because we can't imagine life without them are in truth our fears. Instead of letting them go we hoard fear's illusions that blind us to a life worth living.

In my musings about just how do we let go when it is so difficult, I was surprised by an insight that it might be accomplished by living a generous life. Let me offer two stories that make the case. The first is quite personal.

After four years together, something unexpected happened while Rachel and I were enjoying our summer break. We decided to get married to celebrate five happy years. Not a big deal. I hear lots of people do it. But it was for us. One of us had a less than ideal record of successful relationships. The other was reasonably suspicious of the patriarchal aspects of the institution of marriage itself. For reasons I still don't quite understand we felt a need that summer in the Bay of Islands to commit an act of generosity by publicly giving ourselves to each other in marriage. To do so we had to let go. I had to let go of fear of failure. She had to let go of her fear of the institution. Making the decision was freeing and at first felt like the end of the story, except for planning the wedding. Easy peasy.

Acts of generosity don't have a use-by date. They take on a life of their own. As we thought about the wedding we realised what would make us happiest would be making it a gift to those we love, be they family or childhood friends or those we share our passions with in this our Unitarian congregation or colleagues in the union movement. We wanted to throw them a great party that was not about celebrating the bride and groom but the communities we support and which have supported us. I've heard planning weddings can be a source of stress. For us it was a source of joy, except for worrying about how we were going to

squeeze everyone into this sanctuary. When the day came one of the highlights was seeing the two communities of which we are a part comingle — laughing, dancing, eating and drinking together. It was a great wedding gift courtesy of generosity.

There was one challenging question we had to decide before sending the invitations. That was what to do about wedding presents. In blending our lives, we already had two of everything. We certainly didn't want three. Our first thought was simply to ask on the invitation for no presents please. Then it occurred to us, "Who are we to deprive others of the joy of generosity?" So we invited our guests to make a monetary gift that would be shared equally with our Peace and Social Justice committee and UnionAID, an organisation that funds programmes to enable people throughout our Asia-Pacific region to have decent work, giving them and their families the opportunity to live in dignity and free of poverty.

While we weren't surprised by our guests' generosity, it still far exceeded our expectations. That generosity allowed for many acts of generosity to children, the disabled, the homeless, the oppressed, the impoverished, the sick and so many more. As generosity begets generosity, who know how far that initial act of generosity Rachel and I thought we were just making to each other has reached. All it required was letting go.

Perhaps that story makes the point sufficiently. But I found another this week I can't let go of without sharing it first. The Revd Daniel Kanter tells the story:

There is an old story about a man who was dying who called his family together and said to them he believed they were wrong, that he could take it with him so sell everything and when he died they were to bury him with the cash. They thought he was crazy but they did it and he died and went up to the hereafter and there the angels met him at the gate and he said, here I am, and here is all my money...they told him cash didn't matter at all they only took receipts...

There was an old woman who may have heard that story and found it amusing. She had more than she needed and certainly didn't want to take it with her. Her children had grown and passed on. But she had been a teacher so she had many children she loved.

In her retirement she loved to grow tomatoes. She watched as her tomatoes grew and some made it to the table and to her neighbours table, others like some of her students fell to nothing. But she thought a long time about that and watching her tomatoes on days she couldn't hoist her body out to the garden they fell. And as she watched them drop she realised they weren't wasted just because they didn't end up in a salad. They were seeding the next generation by planting themselves in the self-nourishing pile of rotting tomato.

Her neighbours would say she let the drops go to waste. Mr Davis who came by once a week from church and mostly talked about his life would say she ought to collect them. But she was through with oughts and shoulds. She was enjoying the notion that some of her crop would feed her friends and some the soil.

While not listening to Mr Davis wax on, she had a thought, “What if my life is like those tomatoes. Once I fed many with my words and lessons. Now I am more like the fruit that hit the ground, could I still have something to give?”

So she called her financial advisor. He said she was crazy and she would starve. She said she would get along. So she sold everything, even her house...with one condition, that she could live in the garden shed which had room for a bed and running water and that she could continue to grow her tomatoes.

The children of the family that bought the house came to see her, curious about the resident in their backyard and the garden. She showed them how to tie up the vines and prune the leaves so they let sun in. They helped her dig the soil and they brought her vegetables they harvested.

And her days passed by watching the garden grow and the children learn. The neighbours thought she had lost her mind and stopped coming by including Mr Davis, she thought thankfully.

When she died the children and the family scattered her ashes in with the tomato plants as she wished. And then one day a few weeks later they got a box just addressed to the house, no name on it. Inside the box were thousands of letters all addressed to the old woman. They were thank you letters from children. They were from children who were students at a school in a rough part of the town where the woman had grown up. They wrote to say how grateful they were to the old woman for creating such a perfect school where they could learn how to grow plants and study math and English and peace studies.

You see the old woman had sold everything she owned and created this school where it was needed most. And she had passed on two charters that the school: 1) always have a garden to teach children how to grow things, and 2) that they use the curriculum she had developed over 50 years of teaching social studies on how to make peace.

Many of the letters had pictures children drew of faces on tomatoes and larger than life stink bugs eating the corn. The family decided that to honour the old woman they had to do one more thing. So they took the box of letters and stapled every single one of them on the walls and ceiling of the shed so the inside looked like a jewel box decorated by crayon drawings and cards of smiling vegetables and happy slugs. And then the family invited the school to come visit them. And one class at a time came and marvelled at the shed as they found their cards on the walls and they toured the garden and could name every plant. Then they sat on the porch and heard the story of the founder of their school who sold everything for them.

This is not a story requiring explanation. It is just a reminder that letting go is a life-long journey made possible by our acts of generosity.

Meditation / Conversation starter: How has generosity helped you let go?