

Letting go of the ego as a spiritual path
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The talk Lisa read at the start of this month's theme made a very important point about surrender that I want to expand on today. The point was that when we let go of our needs for control and perfection we open ourselves to realities and opportunities that lie beyond ourselves. I also want to expand on what Bill shared last Sunday when he talked about how when we are able to let go of our ego we reach a deeper and more authentic self.

I spoke a few years ago about "the five big theological questions" that some of you may remember. One of those big theological questions that all religions seek to answer is the question of "ontology." Ontology is the subject of who we are as human beings; what is the nature of our essence or most vital character? Sometimes the question is posed as, "whose are we?" because no one's identity exists independently of others. We are defined by our relationships, are we not? Today I want to explore the topic of who we are spiritually in terms of "letting go/surrender." Part of what I want to say is that it is not easy to discover who we are in a spiritual sense, and that to get there we need to let go of our conventional ways of thinking about our identity or self-concept. (I am going to use the terms ego, identity and self-concept interchangeably in this talk.)

Some of you who read the UU World magazine might have come across an article by Rev. Fred Muir back in 2013. Muir was decrying the lack of growth of UU and he attributed it to an over emphasis on individuality: Here is a quote: "Individualism led us to the iChurch (congregations overly focused on me rather than us), covenant can open the way to the Beloved Community, where the promise of individuality and justice inspire, empower, broaden, and deepen all." "Beloved Community" was popularized of course by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. I bring this up here because not only may excessive focus on individualism undermine growth of the UU movement, it may undermine each of our own spiritual growth as well. The great sages of the world religions including Islam, Christianity, and Judaism have emphasized that spiritual growth requires "surrender" of our sense of ourselves as separate beings, to God. These traditional religions teach we belong to God and our purpose is to serve God. For those of us like myself who are not theists, spiritual growth is about surrender to the larger reality in which we exist, as each understands that. What we surrender to may vary according to what we each of us believes, but I am asserting we need to surrender to a larger reality in order to grow spiritually and to discover our spiritual self.

UU minister Tom Owen-Towle called UU's "mystics" in the sense that we are, "spiritually attuned to the marvels of the universe and awake to the omens of the divine." UU minister Jacob Trapp said that if we let go of our egos we can be open to, "an ineffable experience of oneness, flooding in to overwhelm our

illusion of aloneness, separateness.” One of our UU sources is openness to mystical experience. The discovery and nurturance of the spiritual self seems to be part of Unitarian Universalism as much as any faith tradition.

Many wise spiritual guides have suggested that we are not who we think we are. Each of us has an identity or self-concept; an idea of who we believe we are. If I were to ask you to tell me about yourself your response would be related to your self-concept. You might describe your family, your education, your work, your physical characteristics, your health, your financial status, your interests and preferences, and so on. We might all agree that is a description of your identity but would it say much about your spiritual self or what some would call your “true” self?”

UU minister Galen Guengerich discussed the spiritual self in a book called God Revised. Guengerich has worked to remove ideas from religion that don’t make logical sense or don’t conform to science. He gives as an example the virgin birth of Jesus. Guengerich describes the spiritual self in a chapter entitled, “Who we are.” One of his central ideas is that the question of who we are cannot be answered meaningfully in terms of the atoms and molecules that make up our bodies. Instead we are more meaningfully defined by our relationships, including our relationships to other people, to the world, and the cosmos.

As human beings, we are constituted by our connections to the people and the world around us: we belong to everything. If we don’t belong then we don’t exist. In fact, the essence of life is not freedom, but its opposite: dependence. We depend upon the world around us for oxygen to breathe, for water to drink, for food to eat. We depend on parents to conceive us, teachers to teach us, friends to befriend us, lovers to love us, physicians to heal us, and so on. For everything whatsoever, from molecules to galaxies, the first principle of existence is not independence rather utter dependence. We owe our very existence to sources formed by a history that we cannot control; our destiny extends beyond a horizon that we cannot imagine. If utter dependence is the first principle of the universe, and I believe it is, then the most profound human error—the most fundamental human sin—is to live as though we are not dependent.

In contrast to what Guengerich is telling us here, our egos, our identities, commonly profess the opposite, namely that we are independent. But who we are (or whose we are) really must recognize all that helped to create, develop and continue to nurture us. We come from, we are the product many, many sources both human and otherwise

As mentioned in the message last Sunday, psychologists such as Carl Jung described the mask or persona each of us shows the world as being superficial and not our genuine selves. Behind the persona, perhaps unknown to us, lies our “real self.” In many religious traditions including Buddhism there is a similar kind

of understanding to Carl Jung's about who we are. When our level of consciousness is altered through for example powerful drugs, prayer and fasting, near death experiences, and meditation, we might come to see ourselves in a less conventional, and perhaps more meaningful, and more spiritual way. While I am not advocating taking LSD, many who have done so have reported profound changes in awareness of themselves. Part of the discovery that results from these experiences is the surrender of the boundary that separates self from other. Here is an account from a person who took LSD: "It begins as an understanding of how I perceive and the nature of the self. I am shedding selves moment to moment, sheaves of them falling away in a spiral around 'me'. ... I experienced what I would later learn to call ego-death.... Questions like, "Who am I?" and "What is fundamental?" led to radical deconstructions of existence...." The radical letting go described here paved the way to a perhaps more radical view of existence and the meaning of life.

Aside from taking a psychedelic drug, which is fraught with danger, it seems to be fairly difficult to let go of the self-concept or ego. One of the barriers to letting go is anxiety. Our egos provide a kind of grounding for us and keep us from feeling lost. We actually need our identities in order to navigate the world, I believe. No sensible spiritual guide would advocate for the total elimination of the ego. In fact many meditation gurus recommend maintaining a healthy, balanced identity as a precursor to doing "ego-dissolution" work. There seems to be an opportunity for spiritual growth in what we might call taking a vacation, from time to time, from our egos.

Because I am a psychotherapist I work with people who need to let go of problem behavior; negative thinking, painful feelings and the like. I have learned that most people have a hard time letting go even of problems. This seems counterintuitive, that people might not want to let go of problems, but often it is hard to do. Some of the reasons psychotherapy clients might have difficulty in letting go may also apply to people in general. I can think of a couple: For one thing most us, psychotherapy clients or not, find it challenging to let go of what is familiar in the face of the unknown. What we don't know often stirs up anxiety. Consider moving to a new city or starting a new job for which we have not had much prior experience. These situations commonly stir anxiety along perhaps with excitement. For another thing, if we are getting some value or advantage from the thing we are contemplating letting go of, that makes it hard to do so. If I like who I am, my usual sense of myself, my identity, why would I want to give that up? There is a kind of security or reassurance, and other rewards that come from what is familiar. To help with this transition or letting go process we need to keep in mind that the surrender of the ego does not have to be permanent. It might be best to think of the letting go of the ego as a vacation.

Buddhist and psychologist Jack Kornfield describes the whole self as a kind of film projector and the images that are shown. Kornfield asks, if the real self, or the essential part of this whole self is the collection of images, meaning events

and experiences of our lives, or is it the projector that shows the images? Are we most importantly, the memories, or the person experiencing? At deeper levels of meditation, the concentration and awareness are entirely devoted to sense experience alone without any thinking or attachment whatsoever. We are the projector rather than the images. The projector is the constant while what is projected keeps changing. Buddhists have described this as a state of awareness in which there is no separation between subject and object, me and not me, inside and outside. It is called nirvana or enlightenment. Many have described the sense of oneness with all creation in this state. There is no longer a self, identity or ego. For some this experience can be frightening. Even if frightening, to be able to experience the letting go of the ego, can transform one's spiritual life and our understanding of who we are. We can carry the insights gained from letting go of our egos into how we behave in our ordinary lives.

Here is what psychiatrist and theologian Gerald May said about surrendering the ego:

Willingness implies a surrendering of one's self-separateness, an entering into, an immersion in the deepest processes of life itself. It is a realization that one is already a part of some ultimate cosmic process.... In contrast, willfulness is the setting of oneself apart from the fundamental essence of life in an attempt to...manipulate existence.... Willingness and willfulness ...reflect ...the underlying attitude one has toward the wonder of life itself. Willingness notices this and wonder bows in...reverence to it. Willfulness forgets it, ignores it, or...actively tries to destroy it.

Here is what Buddhist guide Sharon Salzberg said about a practical approach to "letting go" in an interview with Krista Tippet:

There's no doubt that the idea of "letting go" — the advice to "let it go" — has become more popular in recent years. Especially in light of the popularization of meditation and mindfulness, it seems people are starting to see that there is a profound *power* in the act of surrender. In a layman's example, people are starting to realize that gripping tightly to stress doesn't make you happier. But, there is a difference between surrendering and succumbing, between letting something go and hurling it away from us. Letting go is gentle, but it is not characterized by passivity; it involves intention, patience, and a willingness to challenge habits of mind. In other words, letting go isn't so easy — whether it be letting go of an annoyance at work, a nagging thought during meditation, something you regret in the past. Similarly, it's difficult to let go of good things — an amazing day with a friend, a wonderful meal, an engaging book — in order to move on to be open to the next good thing.

Salzberg is talking about the Buddhist idea of "attachment." For Buddhists enlightenment happens when we do not attach ourselves to experiences whether positive or negative. The more we can let go the more we identify with the

projector sense of self that Kornfield spoke of rather than the experiences that are projected.

My answer to the question of “who are we?” as human beings is that we are here to witness, acknowledge, and connect with the wonder of creation. We are the universe becoming aware of itself. We are a creative product of the universe and as Guengerich stated we are completely dependent upon it. If that is who we are in the spiritual sense than how do we grasp the state of consciousness to experience that? We let go. In the words of Jon Kabat-Zinn, meditation leader: We need to “realize the essence of who and what we actually are in the only moment we ever have to realize it, which is never some other moment.” That is in fact letting go, and that is how we find the spiritual self or what some call the “no-self.”

I will close with a quote from onetime Catholic nun, philosopher, and Montessori teacher Bernadette Roberts. Beginning at the age of 15 she began to have mystical experiences. She compiled them in a book, The Experience of No-Self. Here is a description of one experience:

The moment was unheralded, unrecognized and unknown; it was the moment “I” entered a great silence and never returned. Beyond the threshold of the known, the door upon the self was closed, but the door upon the Unknown was opened in a fixed gaze that could not look away...the mind was restricted to the present moment...life is not anything; rather all things are in life. The many are immersed in the One. No longer distance between self and the other...individual objects give way to reveal that which is the same throughout all...God is all that exists --all except of course, the self.

Roberts tells us that our true, spiritual, selves exist beyond our ordinary selves. The experience of this happens when we are able to let go. Meditation is one well-established way to let go. I hope that all of you have an opportunity to have an experience like this and I hope it adds meaning to your lives.