

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie  
 Arlington Street Church  
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## Let Go (**Redux**<sup>1</sup>)

Last Saturday was Swap Day in our little town on Cape Cod. The idea was to get your spring cleaning well underway, haul everything down your narrow dirt road to the nearest intersection with a paved road, arrange it in an appealing pile, and then drive around town looking for new treasure to fill up the empty space. I missed the excitement, but driving by, I did note that people were grim as they unloaded and gleeful as they loaded back up. Also, anecdotally, there was a lot more loading up than unloading going on.

Referring to decluttering rockstar Mari Kondo, Rev. Amanda Poppei, who serves one of our congregations in Washington, D.C., writes, “... All around me, people are asking what sparks joy in their lives. I love this approach — and I can’t possibly utilize it in my own house.... I live with two elementary-age children, and their bar for hanging onto something is not ‘Does [this] spark joy?’ but, rather, ‘Is [it] shiny....?’

“Living with magpies,” she continues, “ — hoarders of the shiny and ... sparkly — has its advantages: I never have to face a day without glitter.... But as someone who likes clean surfaces, it’s hard for me not to throw things away when my children aren’t looking. Surely they won’t remember the rock they picked up four months ago on the way home from school.

“Sigh. They always do. So I’ve learned to ask, ‘Are you ready to let go of this?’ I ... like the question because it assumes they’ll be ready someday. They like [it] because it doesn’t assume that day is now.

“Isn’t that always the way?,” Amanda Poppei concludes. “[We’re holding onto] all kinds of things in our lives ...that no longer spark joy.... [I’m willing myself to be patient,] waiting until the moment is right to say goodbye to that old

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<sup>1</sup> I preached *Let Go* on 11/8/2020, but there’s more to say! Hence *Redux*.

rock. There will be more space on the dresser, ... then, for something new and glittery. Or just for the smooth surface of possibility.”<sup>2</sup>

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This is a sermon about letting go and this is Tennessee poet Wyatt Prunty.

### Learning the Bicycle

The older children pedal past  
 Stable as little gyros, spinning hard  
 To supper, bath, and bed, until at last  
 We also quit, silent and tired  
 Beside the darkening yard where trees  
 Now shadow up instead of down.  
 Their predictable lengths can only tease  
 Her as, head lowered, she walks her bike alone  
 Somewhere between her wanting to ride  
 And her certainty she will always fall.  
 Tomorrow, though I will run behind,  
 Arms out to catch her, she'll tilt then balance wide  
 Of my reach, till distance makes her small,  
 Smaller, beyond the place I stop and know  
 That to teach her I had to follow  
 And when she learned I had to let her go.<sup>3</sup>

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Thanks to my retired colleague and friend Jane Rzepka, who many years ago spotted this one-paragraph newspaper article that instantly became my very favorite example of letting go — I might say, perfect letting go.

A train pulls into Grand Central Station during the morning rush hour. A woman gets off and realizes she's holding only one of her leather gloves. She looks back and spots the matching one on the seat. Too late! As the doors close, “with a cavalier shrug,” she flings out her arm and tosses her glove onto the seat alongside its mate. The train pulls away.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Amanda Poppei,  *Holding On and Letting Go*, 4/22/2020

<sup>3</sup> *for Heather*. Walter Prunty, “Learning the Bicycle,” from *Balance as Belief*

<sup>4</sup> Jane Ranney Rzepka, “The Glove in the Subway,” from *A Small Heaven: Meditations*

Who among us has the capacity for that ease of letting go? I love the image of her flinging arm! Maybe we could walk around practicing like baseball pitchers, imagining that we, too, are letting go.

*Speaking of baseball, you can't steal home with a foot on third.*

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Twenty-three year old country music songwriter Don Schlitz penned *The Gambler* and, in 1978, Kenny Rogers recorded what would become his signature song — a crossover hit that won him a Grammy<sup>5</sup> and, in 2018, was selected by the Library of Congress for preservation in the National Recording Registry. At the top of the pandemic in March of 2020,<sup>6</sup> Kenny, then 81, died of natural causes. I put it on, turned it up, and sang along over and over.

In the song, the down-on-his-luck narrator is riding a train and meets a gambler, who, in exchange for whiskey and a cigarette, tells him his secret to winning. He's talking about cards and so much more. The chorus says,

You got to know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em  
 Know when to walk away, know when to run  
 You never count your money when you're sittin' at the table  
 There'll be time enough for countin' when the dealin's done.

And then the gambler says one more thing:

Now every gambler knows the secret to survivin'  
 Is knowin' what to throw away, knowin' what to keep

This is a piece of advice that's easy to miss if you're waiting for the chorus to come around again:

The secret is knowing what to throw away  
 and what to keep.

Maybe it's shiny, maybe it's a rock,  
 but does it spark joy?  
 And does it serve you?  
 We are the sum of the ways we hold on  
 and the ways we let go.

Rev. Meg Barnhouse, who serves our congregation in Austin, Texas, tells this story of the first time she was in a canoe:

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<sup>5</sup> 1980

<sup>6</sup> 3/20/2020

“... A friend and I decided to take [a canoe] out on a lake. We slid [it] into the water. She hopped in. I [kept] one foot on the ladder [at] the dock and [put] one foot into the canoe, holding onto the dock like a sensible person.

“[I rocked the boat, hard.] The canoe tipped over, threw her out, filled with water, and sank to the bottom.... She pulled herself back up onto the dock, dripping. I was still hanging on to the ladder.

“From this, I learn[ed] that there are some situations in life where it is dumb to be cautious. You just have to let go, put your whole self in instead of hedging your bets. The trick is to figure out when you’re in [that situation]....”

The second (and only other time) Meg Barnhouse was in a canoe — this time, she’d actually made it all the way in — she almost ran aground. “The water was so shallow,” she says, “that I couldn’t get much pressure with the paddle; it kept slipping through the water or knocking against the rocks on the bottom.

“‘Try paddling faster,’ [instructors shouted upstream to her].

“‘I stepped it up,’ Meg says. The canoe moved maybe a foot....

“‘I come from a culture that believes in trying hard. I was taught that success is ten percent inspiration and 90 percent perspiration. And it’s true, of course ... except when it’s not. I paddled, fast and furious, on that drought-stricken stretch of river, until I noticed the instructors laughing.

“‘You can get out and just walk it down here to where the water’s deeper,’ they shouted.’

“Oh.

“Sometimes we try too hard or in the wrong way. We ... poke at things too much, take on things that aren’t ours, take over when we’re not supposed to,” Meg Barnhouse concludes. “I’m going to plan ... not to try so hard, in water that’s too shallow....”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Meg Barnhouse, “Paddling, No Water,” in *Did I Say That Out Loud?*

I know someone who says that everything he ever let go of has claw marks on it. Is that who we want to be? What would it mean to practice wholeheartedness and open-handedness? This congregation knows a lot about generosity — we are joyful givers and we get a lot of practice engaging our whole hearts and opening our hands. But maybe giving money is easier than, say, letting go and giving trust, or love, or forgiveness.

This is *Let Go* by Rev. Lo Van Leer, who serves our congregation in Eugene, Oregon:

Let go  
 Of all that binds you  
 Of all that burdens you  
 Of what you carry  
 Of all that shames you  
 Of fear  
 Of trespasses and transgressions  
 Of woundedness  
 Let go of guilt  
 Let go of anger  
 Let go of small-mindedness and pettiness  
 Of ways of being that no longer work for you  
 Of compulsions that consume your living  
 Let go of what you cannot change  
 Let go of regret  
 Of that which haunts you  
 Let go of pain  
 Let go of ways in which you missed the mark  
 Let go

O, easier said than done. But it's clear we're going to have to make our way there if we're going to be joyful ... if we're going to be free. Is it that we don't let go of people who are not good for us and experiences that are almost too painful to recall because that would sever our last tie and end it all? Who would we be without this burden of woundedness? Someone I knew called it "the economy of grudge-bearing." Even a grudge is a way to stay connected. Psychotherapist and author David Richo writes, "When you begin to let go, try letting go a little more."

The secret is knowing what to throw away  
 and what to keep.

Maybe it's shiny, maybe it's a rock,  
 but does it spark joy?  
 And does it serve you?  
 We are the sum of the ways we hold on  
 and the ways we let go.

I want to tell one more story from one more colleague — itinerant interim minister Mark Worth. He writes,

“My father was born on the Cornish coast of southwestern England in 1906. His hometown was a little fishing village [in Cornwall called] Mousehole. It's spelled Mousehole, but the natives pronounce it ‘Mawsel’....

“When my Dad was... eight years old, he found a sixpence and, being a good boy, took it home to his mother. She took the sixpence to the blacksmith [and bought] a hoop.... [You've probably seen pictures of] “hoop rolling” or “hoop trundling;”... [a child] would push [their hoop] along with a ... stick, and it would [roll out] in front of them. [One photo of this] on the internet says, ‘If you remember this, you're probably already dead.’

“Dad was very pleased with his new ... hoop,” Mark continues, “and he took it down to the harbor to show the other boys. After a while, one of [them] said, ‘Let's go across the harbor ... to my uncle's fishing boat.’ So [they all] piled in[to his rowboat], and my dad took his new hoop. [When they reached the larger boat,] the rowboat slipped away and ... Dad fell in.

“He was still holding on to his new present, the [metal] hoop. It was heavy, and it was pulling him down to the bottom of the harbor. He wanted to swim back up to the top, but he couldn't let go of [his] hoop. He loved [it,] but it was drowning him.

“He was lucky. Someone yelled ‘Man overboard!’ Dad was proud to learn, later, that they had called ‘Man overboard!’ for a little boy like him. [One of the older boys] jumped in ... and pulled him out, still with the hoop in his hand, and carried him home ... to his mother.

“... Years later, my parents ... and I took a trip to England, [to Mousehole].... One day, [my father] and I took a walk [and] Dad became confused at a fork in the road. Luckily, a man came down the lane toward us, and we asked him directions.... My dad told him, ‘I was born here. I lived here before

the First World War.’ They talked, and the ... man said, ‘[Wait!] You aren’t Larry Worth, are you?’ And my father said, ‘Larry’s my older brother. I’m Freddy Worth.’

“I had never heard my father call himself Freddy before.... [To me,] he had always been Fred. But he was home, and he was little Freddy again.

“And then an amazing thing happened. The ... man said, ‘Why, then, you’re the little boy I pulled out of the harbor [from] beneath the [boat]!’

Mark Worth says, “This was the man who had saved my father from drowning [when he wouldn’t let go]! ....He had saved a life, and made our family possible.”<sup>8</sup>

When we let go, the life we save may be our own.

Beloved spiritual companions,

May we practice knowing  
what to throw away and what to keep  
and seek out the smooth surface of possibility.

May we let go of all that binds and burdens us;  
practice wholeheartedness and open-handedness;

fling the glove  
and whatever else doesn’t serve us anymore;  
let go of what weighs us down  
so that we may rise.

Ask, Does it spark joy?

*Amen.*

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<sup>8</sup> Mark Worth,  *Holding On and Letting Go*, 6/11/2017