

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
Arlington Street Church
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Letting Go

On Tuesday afternoon, I left Nancy Gleason's deathbed heartbroken for Herb, who was losing his best friend of 55 years. Letting go is one of the greatest spiritual challenges. How do we let go, and go on?

The Buddha and some monks had just finished eating lunch at the edge of a forest that bordered a wide field. A farmer approached them in great distress and asked, "Venerable monks, did you see my cows come by? I have a dozen cows, and they have all run away. On top of that, I have five acres of sesame plants, and the insects have eaten every last one. I don't know what to do; I can't go on like this." The monks responded with great compassion, sorry that they had not seen the cows.

After the farmer had walked on, the Buddha turned to his monks. "My friends, here is a reason to be happy," he said. "You have no cows to lose."¹

I'm positive that I have derived the wrong lesson from this teaching, but I will tell you what I think: I am happy to have loved Nancy Gleason. I am grateful for having my own version of "cows to lose."

The great Zen master, Shunryu Suzuki, summed up all of the Buddha's teaching in just three words: *Not always so*. He meant, Cows get lost. Everything changes.

It would not go to waste if we were to practice letting go. I think of it as a deep dive and then surfacing: To let go, we dive deeply into the full catastrophe of our attachment – our love, and all the other complicated emotions of being in relationship, in community – and only then do we come back up, break through the surface, and open our hands to grace. Mizuta

¹ Jack Kornfield, *After the Ecstasy the Laundry*, p. 53

Masahide, wrote, “My barn having burned to the ground, I can now see the moon.”²

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Morrie Schwartz was a professor of social psychology at Brandeis. When he was dying with Lou Gehrig’s disease, his last student, Mitch Albom, took good notes. The result was the best-selling book, *Tuesdays with Morrie*.

“What I’m doing now,” Morrie tells Mitch, “is detaching myself from the experience.... You know what the Buddhists say? ‘Don’t cling to things, because everything is impermanent.’

“But wait,” says Mitch. “‘Aren’t you always talking about experiencing life? All the good emotions, all the bad ones? How can you do that if you’re detached?’

“Detachment doesn’t mean you don’t let the experience penetrate you. On the contrary, you let it penetrate you fully. That’s how you are able to leave it.’

“I’m lost,” says Mitch.

“‘Take any emotions,’ [Morrie continues].... ‘If you hold back on the emotions – if you don’t allow yourself to go all the way through them – you can never get to be detached. You’re too busy being afraid.... You’re afraid of the vulnerability that loving entails, ... afraid of the pain, ... afraid of the grief.

“‘But by throwing yourself into these emotions, by allowing yourself to dive in, all the way, over your head, even, you experience them fully and completely. You know what pain is. You know what love is. You know what grief is....’”³

Morrie concludes, “I know you think this is just about dying, but it’s like I keep telling you: When you learn how to die, you learn how to live.”

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Have I ever told you about Hayes?

² Mizuta Masahide was a seventeenth century samurai physician and poet

³ Mitch Albom, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, p. 104

Hayes was a gifted landscape painter. Standing behind his easel, back to the sun, perched in the sand dunes above the open ocean or wedged against a sidewalk hedge on the outskirts of town, committing his vision to oil on canvass, he was a part of the Provincetown landscape itself.

He must have made a living selling his paintings – if thirty years of cigarettes and hard liquor and not much more could be called living. He never seemed unfriendly – everyone knew his name, and he always returned my greeting – but I don't believe that he had a friend in the world.

One afternoon, as I left the meeting house, I saw that Hayes had set up just inside our fence. I'd never seen him in the center of town; I wondered what had brought him in.

As I came closer, he spoke first.

“Hope this is okay.”

“Whatever we can do for the arts, Hayes,” I answered.

“Have a look,” he said.

Now we were having a conversation.

I looked. Emerging on his canvass was the front of the church – the lawn, the side garden, and the first floor, with the great door open.

“Hayes” – I went for broke – “Would you like to come in?”

“Sure,” he said, as if we'd been planning to meet like this and it was time. He put down his brush and wiped his hands on a turpentine rag, dissipating the smell of smoke and booze that hung in the air around him.

I took him upstairs to the sanctuary. The grey walls, painted in *trompe l'oeil* – “trick the eye” – shone in the late afternoon sunlight that slanted through the high windows. He glanced around and looked at me, expectantly. It occurred to me Hayes had seen it before.

“How do you like it?” he asked.

“I love it,” I said. “It’s magical. My favorite part is the nave behind the pulpit; I never really believe the wall is flat until I’m up there, eye to eye with it.”

“We had fun doing it,” he said. “Art students came from all over Europe to help us out.” I knew that, some twenty years earlier, while the roof was being repaired, a hurricane had blown in, tearing at the tarp. Water had rained into the sanctuary, ruining the paint, and leaving behind slimy green mildew. “It was a mess,” Hayes explained. “Before we could even start to paint, we had to erase the crap off the walls. Can you imagine? We all had Pink Pearl erasers, and stood on ladders – there must have been fifty of us – and erased the walls. By the end, we were knee-deep in Pink Pearl eraser dust.”

“Some chamber music orchestra was rehearsing here that summer,” he continued. “The mornings were quiet, but just after noon, they’d come in and set up and start playing. It was great.”

He fell silent. I wondered, “And then what happened?” but thought better of asking. Hayes turned from looking at the walls to face me. “I thought I might come around on Sunday morning,” he said.

“Come,” I said, amazed that worship was even on his radar screen. “The service is at 11. You’re welcome anytime.”

It never occurred to me that he would actually show up, but there he was, in a clean shirt, with his dark hair combed off his thin, ruddy face. If anyone else thought it astonishing that Hayes had made his way to church, no one let on. He listened to my sermon attentively.

Afterwards, during the sharing of joys and concerns, he raised his hand and cut to the chase. “I just found out I have AIDS,” he said. My mind flashed white for a moment, as I absorbed the blow of yet more illness, another loss to come. “It’s made me think about my life, and how I want to change.” He paused. I thought he might be done. But he continued, “I’m coming to church now, and I’m going to quit drinking.” That was all; he sat down, and everyone clapped for him.

After the service, I spotted him in coffee hour. Three of our sober members – my A.A. posse – were talking with him. No one doubted that it would be a miracle if Hayes could – or would – get sober.

The next Sunday, he was in church again. Again, he stood during the sharing of joys and concerns. “I’m sober one week,” he said, and sat down. Again, everyone clapped.

And so it went, with Hayes reporting his sobriety to the congregation – “I have 21 days.... I have 35 days.... I have 42 days.” He shared that he had set his sights on attending 90 A.A. meetings in 90 days.

At 56 days, Paul could no longer stand for the sharing of joys and concerns, but he raised his hand and spoke from his seat. Two weeks later, he lay on a pallet in front of the pulpit, but he was exultant as we celebrated 70 sober days with him.

By the next week, he lay bedridden at home, but we all kept the calendar for him. He was wasting now – AIDS was ravaging his body. Still, he was eloquent about his spiritual awakening, and longtimers and newcomers to A.A. alike sat by his bedside, lovingly attending this dying, luminous man.

On the ninetieth day, an A.A. meeting was gathered at Hayes’ house. People sat on his bed, on the radiator and window sills, and spilled out into the hall. The topic of the meeting was “The Promises” of Alcoholics Anonymous, which Hayes had memorized for this very special occasion. Slowly but surely, to the expectant crowd, he recited The Promises. Some of you could say them with me now, if you’d like:

“If we are painstaking about this phase of our development, we will be amazed before we are halfway through,” he began. “We are going to know a new freedom and a new happiness. We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it. We will comprehend the word serenity, and we will know peace. No matter how far down the scale we have gone, we will see how our experience can benefit others. That feeling of uselessness and self-pity will disappear. We will lose interest in selfish things and gain interest in our fellows. Self-seeking will slip away. Our whole attitude and outlook upon life will change. Fear of people and of economic insecurity will leave us. We will intuitively know how to handle situations that used to baffle us.

We will suddenly realize that G*d is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves. Are these extravagant promises?"

The crowd responded, "We think not."

He concluded, "They are being fulfilled among us – sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly. They will always materialize if we work for them."⁴

It was the final meeting for which Hayes was conscious. One week later, people crowded into the sanctuary for his memorial service.

That fall, the congregation gave me a gift for my thirtieth birthday – Hayes' painting of the meeting house, the one he had begun at the beginning of the end, the one with the great door open.

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Beloved spiritual companions,

Cows get lost.

Everything changes.

When the time comes to let go,

may we dive deeply into the full catastrophe of our attachment

and then, resurfacing,

open our hands to grace.

When we learn how to die, we will learn how to live.

Let us practice living the promises of an abundant life.

Let us practice letting go.

Let us practice leaving the great door open.

⁴ *Alcoholics Anonymous* [the *Big Book*], pp. 82-83