



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Part of the Flow,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on October 4, 2015

We would be one, as now we join in singing,
our hymn of love, to pledge ourselves anew,
to that high cause of greater understanding
of who we are, and what in us is true.¹

I don't need to tell you about brokenness and fragmentation, in our society and in our selves. The poet Adrienne Rich wrote, “My heart is moved by all I cannot save: so much has been destroyed.” You know this. Bad things happen. We make a mess of things. We have limited abilities and powers. We often feel inadequate in the face of all the suffering and injustice in the world.

Today I want to remind you that this bad news, all that heartbreaking and discouraging things you see on TV and the internet and in your lives, this is not the whole story. I have to believe that beyond what pulls us apart and what keeps us from being who we might be, there is a greater force that is for good. The UU minister David Bumbaugh put it this way; he said “Beneath all of our diversity, and beyond all our differences, there is a unity which makes us one, and binds us forever together in spite of time, death, and the space between the stars.” That is my faith, and what keeps me going, the glimpses I get of this unity, this oneness, this goodness that surrounds us.

Our worship theme for this month is “Letting Go.” This points us toward the end of October, and those holy days when we remember those who have died, and consider our own mortality, the biggest letting go of them all.

But for now, I ask you to think about other kinds of letting go. Because I assume that each of us has things that are keeping us from being who we ought to be, and fully in touch with what in us is true; that we would live happier, more helpful lives, if we could let some things go. And our world needs, needs us to be fully here, awake and alive and doing our part.

When I was wrestling with making a change at midlife, my spiritual director introduced me to the idea of “disordered attachments.” Attachments aren't necessarily bad, but when we get too attached to something that it keeps us stuck or holds us back, then it's become unhelpful, or

¹ “We Would Be One,” words by Samuel Anthony Wright, hymn #318 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.

disordered. I wanted to say yes to my call, and I wanted assurances that it was all going to be okay. It was like saying, "I'm going off on a journey but I want a guarantee that nothing unplanned or unpleasant is going to happen." You might as well stay home! I had to let go of my need for control of the outcome, my need for certainty in order to follow my call. What about you? What do you need to let go of?

I asked you earlier to think about what might be holding you back from being who you are meant to be, from living the life that is your own. Does anyone want to name that aloud? You don't have to, of course, but it could be helpful—sometimes articulating your intention so others can hear it an important step in doing what you need to do. So how about it? What do you want or need to let go of?

This is good time to take up a practice of letting go. As trees start to drop their leaves, as the days get shorter, the natural world seems to be calling us to pare down and get in touch with the impermanence of life, to put ourselves in a place where we can be one with these changes, rather than gird ourselves against them.

Think about that image of a journey again. When you come back from a trip, have you ever said, "I wish I'd taken more stuff with me"? One of the gifts of travel is learning that you can get along quite well without so many things. Traveling light is liberating, and opens you to more direct experiences, when you're not weighed down with too much stuff.

Isn't that how you want to live? At home in the world, and in your own skin? What do you need to let go of, so you can be free?

In our reading this morning, Rumi says you don't want to go through life being a spiritual window-shopper, just picking up things and putting them down, just looking. Because life is going to go by faster than you think, and at some point someone is going to ask about your life, or you're going to ask yourself, what it was about:

Where did you go? "Nowhere."
What did you have to eat? "Nothing much."

You don't want to say that about your life! No, Rumi says

"Even if you don't know what you want,
buy something, to be part of the exchanging flow.
Start a huge, foolish project,
like Noah.
It makes absolutely no difference
what people think of you."

He's saying, jump into life. Don't let your fears or preconceived notions hold you back. Who knows what might happen, what great thing you might do?

Remember the first “Star Wars” movie, that great moment at the end, when young Luke Skywalker goes out in a spacecraft on an impossible mission to fight against the forces of evil? At a pivotal moment he hears the voice of his mentor, the recently deceased Obi Wan Kenobi, who says, “Use the force, Luke. Let go.”

Obi Wan is saying there’s a power much greater than our own. It’s in the universe and it’s available to us. But it’s not something we can bottle up or control. You have to let go if you are going to access that power, that force. This letting go can be scary, but it’s worth it. Who knows what might happen? You could be like Luke Skywalker, and save the world from evil!

A few years ago, psychology professor Mihaly Csikszentmihaly wrote a book called *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, that became a national bestseller. In this book, he describes what accomplished writers and artists and athletes all know about—those times when everything is going right, when you’re in the zone, and that power is flowing through you; it’s not even about you—you’re a conduit for it.

Csikszentmihaly says being in the flow is “being completely involved in an activity for its own sake.” When this happens, he says, “The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you’re using your skills to the utmost.”

How this happens is a mystery, and it’s beyond our control. But it happens more often to people who have worked to develop their skills, who bring attention and intention to their lives and their work. It doesn’t happen if you are worried about failure, or about what people will think. It doesn’t happen if you are distracted or unfocused. Athletes and artists understand the importance of practice, of showing up on the field or facing the blank page or canvas, so when that moment comes they’re ready; they let that force flow through them, and just try to not get in the way.

I took piano for two years, and I never got close to being in the flow. I learned to read the notes, mostly; I’d think to myself, “that’s a C,” and could press the right key, but this is no way to play! You have to learn to bypass your brain somehow, so the music goes straight from the page to your hands. It seems a miracle to me, the way gifted musicians like some of you can play. To say nothing of how Fred or Nate play the organ, also playing with their feet!

My freshman year at the University of North Carolina, a big basketball school, we were in the dorm, watching an away game on TV against NC State, a bitter rival. Near the end, things weren’t going our way. State had the ball and a one point lead while the last seconds ticked off the clock. But as the State player dribbled the ball across mid-court, a Carolina guard named Dudley Bradley picked his pocket, stole the ball, and broke toward the basket. Around the free throw line he leapt toward the rim, and dunked the ball, seconds before the buzzer sounded, winning the game by one point.

We went crazy, erupting in cheers, and all over campus on that winter night, students threw open their windows, yelling and cheering, sharing their joy with others. The next day, the student newspaper had a big picture of Dudley Bradley making that dunk, with this quote: “It was like I saw God,” he said.

To be in the flow, you need to practice. And you need to find ways to turn your thinking brain off, or at least turn it down, to bypass your ego. Going out for a walk, or losing yourself in making music, serving others; these are all ways to do this. Some of the best sermon ideas come to me in the car, when I'm daydreaming as I drive down the road.

That's what good worship does, that's what spiritual practice does; it helps us set the ego aside so we can hear another voice. "Let go, Luke. Use the force." It puts us in that place where we feel the Spirit moving and we are part of that flow. And don't we all need more of that? Isn't that what we live for—these moments when we sense we are connected to one another, that we are part of something more, that life does make sense, in spite of all the dispiriting evidence to the contrary?

Let go of your fears. Let go of what is holding you back. Let go of what is keeping you imprisoned. Let go and let God, as they say.

I'm not saying this is easy. It's not. But it's what we are made for. "And you want to live, don't you?"² If there are things you need to let go of, so you can be here more fully and more freely, isn't now the time to start? You have companions here, to encourage and support you on the way. You have this one life you have been given. So I say to you, "Let go. Use the force. Be part of the flow."

It's what we are made for. It's why we're here.

Amen.

² Rainer Maria Rilke, "Morning Prayer."