

Letting Go

I. Opening Prayer

Take, Lord, and receive all that I am and have. You've given it all to me; I give it all back to you. Do with me as you want. Just give me your love and your grace and that's enough.

~St. Ignatius

II. Psalm 130

III. Daily Scripture Readings

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| Monday | Colossians 3:1-17 |
| Tuesday | Hebrews 12:1-3 |
| Wednesday | Mark 8:31-38 |
| Thursday | Romans 12:1-3 |
| Friday | Philippians 3:1-14 |
| Saturday | 1 John 2:15-17 |
| Sunday | Genesis 22:1-19 |

IV. Readings for Reflection

V. Reflection and Listening: Silent and Written

VI. Prayer: for the church, for others, for myself

VII. Song

I Lift My Hands

VIII. Closing Prayer

Lord God, be the delight of our hearts, even as we are the delight of yours. And help us to leave behind all thoughts, actions, and attitudes that do not reflect the beauty of that delight. May everything else pale in comparison with the passion we have to be truly yours. In the name of Jesus. Amen. (JLB)

Readings for Reflection-

So much of the journey forward involves a letting go of all that once brought us life. We turn away from familiar abiding places of the heart, the false selves we have lived out, the strengths we have used to make a place for ourselves and all our false loves, and we venture forth in our hearts to trace the steps of the One who said, "Follow me." In a way, it means that we stop pretending: that life is better than it is, that we are happier than we are, that the false selves we present to the world are really us. We respond to the Haunting, the wooing, the longing for another life. Pilgrim (*Pilgrim's Progress*) begins his adventure toward redemption with a twofold turning: a turning away from attachment and a turning toward desire. He wanted life and so he stuck his fingers in his ears and ran like a madman ("a fool," to use Paul's term) in search of it. The freedom of heart needed to journey comes in the form of detachment. As Gerald May writes in *Addiction and Grace*,

Detachment is the word used in spiritual tradition to describe freedom of desire. Not freedom from desire, but freedom of desire...An authentic spiritual understanding of detachment devalues neither desire nor objects of desire. Instead, it "aims at correcting one's own anxious grasping in order to free oneself for committed relationship with God." According to Meister Eckhart, detachment "enkindles the heart, awakens the spirit, stimulates our longings, and shows us where God is.

With an awakened heart, we turn and face the road ahead, knowing that no one can take the trip for us, nor can anyone plan our way. When he sets out, Bunyan's Pilgrim has no map, no itinerary, no step-by-step travelogue with each day's adventure carefully planned out. All he has is his desire and a general idea that the way of life lies somewhere along the road ahead. As the poet Wallace Stevens wrote, "The way through the world is more difficult to find than the way beyond it." So many of the programs of modern Christianity with three steps to this and seven steps to that and a principle for everything are in fact an effort not to journey at all. More often than not, they are pursued with a desire to hunker down and

make life work, here, now. The Sacred Romance is not something to be managed, but to be lived. We cannot remove the element of mystery from the road before us nor can we eliminate the dangers. But we can learn from pilgrims who have gone before something of the road conditions, the weather, the hazards, and the places of rest and refreshment. (**The Sacred Romance** by Brent Curtis and John Eldredge)

Seeking to live a spiritual life while staying in close contact with the world is no easy matter. If you think so, you are dangerously mistaken.

We live in a world, and we have to do business with the world. Because of their work, or position, some must even live as worldly men do, taking part in the luxuries of the world. Yet inwardly we are strangers to the world and enemies of its way of thinking and its false system of honor. For at this present time, we are living in exile from our true home—and so we must abide in two worlds, living like men and women, but thinking and acting like angels! If we would lead others, with spiritual wisdom and insight, we must live inwardly as men and women who see ourselves protected as in a mighty fortress.

Our first rampart is this: to understand that nothing this world offers is eternal or lasting, and nothing earthly can offer the hope or security of knowing life eternal. In fact, earthly things can transfix us, trap us, keep us from forsaking all in order to know God. If you come to see things this way, you will keep this world and all of its alluring offers from having any power over your spirit.

This is the manner by which we become *detached* from the things of this earth—whether people, or possessions, or honored positions. And this detachment is a great good, because all these things, great or lovely as they may seem, will come to an end. We need to let them go, and become *attached* to things eternal... namely Jesus. (**The Way of Perfection** by Teresa of Avila)

As long as I am plagued by doubts about my self-worth, I keep looking for gratification from people around me and yield quickly to any type of pain, mental or physical. But when I can slowly detach myself from this need for human affirmation and discover that it is in relationship with Jesus that I find my true self, an unconditional surrender to him becomes not only possible but even the only desire,

and pain inflicted by people will not touch me in the center. When my *self* is anchored not in people but in God, I will have a much greater resistance against pain. (**The Genesee Diary** by Henri J. M. Nouwen)

*I have drifted down a ways along the shoreline.
I watched these ropes give way where they were tied.
I could have reached out quick when the ropes first slipped,
if I had tried,
but I was wondering where the wind was trying to take me
overnight, if I never did resist,
and what strange breezes make a sailor want to let it come to this,
with lines untied, slipping through my fist.*

*It's downhill all the way to the ocean,
so of course the river always wants to flow.
The river's been here longer, it's older and stronger and knows
where to go,
I guess I'm wondering where the river's trying to take me
overnight, if I never did resist,
and what strange breezes make a sailor want to let it come to this,
with lines untied, slipping through my fist.
(**Slippin Through My Fist** a song by David Wilcox)*

To wait is to learn the spiritual grace of *detachment*, the freedom of desire. Not the absence of desire, but desire at rest. St John of the Cross lamented that “the desires weary and fatigue the soul; for they are like restless and discontented children, who are ever demanding this or that from their mother, and are never contented.” Detachment is coming to the place where those demanding children are at peace. As King David said,

*I have stilled and quieted my soul;
like a weaned child with its mother,
like a weaned child is my soul within me.
(Psalm 131:2)*

Such a beautiful picture, a young one leaning against her mother's breast. There is no fussing, no insistent tears. She has learned to wait.

The word *detachment* might evoke wrong impressions. It is not a cold and indifferent attitude; not at all. Gerald May writes, “An authentic spiritual understanding of detachment devalues neither desire nor the objects of desire.” Instead, it “aims at correcting one’s own anxious grasping in order to free oneself for committed relationship to God. (***Journey of Desire*** by John Eldredge)

Only prayer allows us to hear another voice, to respond to the larger possibilities, to find a way out of our need to order and control. Then the questions that seem to shape our identity will not matter so much: Who says good things about me? Who doesn’t? Who is my friend? My enemy? How many like me? As we make God the center of our lives, our sense of who we are will depend less on what others think of or say about us. We will cease being prisoners of the interpersonal. (***Turn My Mourning Into Dancing*** by Henri J.M. Nouwen)

*To struggle used to be
To grab with both hands
and shake
and twist
and turn
and push
and shove and not give in
But wrest an answer from it all
As Jacob did a blessing*

*But there is another way
To struggle with an issue, a question-
Simply jump
off
into the abyss
and find ourselves
floating
falling
tumbling
being led
slowly and gently*

*but surely
to answers God has for us-
to watch the answers unfold
before our eyes and still
to be part of the unfolding.*

*But, oh! the trust
necessary for this new way!
Not to be always reaching out
For the old hand-holds.*

A New Way of Struggling by Susan W. N. Ruach

Moods are worth my attention. I am discovering during these first weeks in Genesee that I am subject to very different moods, often changing very quickly. Feelings of depressive fatigue, of low self-esteem, of boredom, feelings also of anger, irritation, and direct hostility, and feelings of gratitude, joy, and excitement—they can all be there, sometimes even during one day. I have the feeling that these quickly changing moods show how attached I really am to the things given me: a friendly gesture, pleasant work, a word of praise, a good book, etc. Little things can quickly change sadness into joy, disgust into contentment, and anger into understanding or compassion.

Somewhere during these weeks I read that sadness is the result of attachment. Detached people are not the easy victims of good or bad events in their surroundings and can experience a certain sense of equilibrium. I have the feeling that this is an important realization for me. When my manual work does not interest me, I become bored, then quickly irritated and sometimes even angry, telling myself that I am wasting my time. When I read a book that fascinates me, I become so involved that time runs fast, people seem friendly, my stay here worthwhile, and everything one big happy event.

Of course both “moods” are manifestations of false attachments and show how far I am from a healthy form of “indifference.” Thinking about all of this, I guess my main problem still is that I have not really made prayer my priority. Still the only reason that I am here—I mean the only reason I should be here—is to learn to pray. But, in fact, much of what I am doing is motivated by many other concerns: getting back in shape, learning some skills, knowing more about birds and trees, getting to know interesting people, and picking

up many ideas and experiences for future teaching. But if prayer were my only concern, all these other things could be received as free gifts. Now, however, I am obsessed by these desires which are false, not in themselves, but by their being in the wrong place in the hierarchy of values. That, I guess, is the cause of my moodiness. For the time being it seems so important to be at least aware of it. (*The Genesee Diary* by Henri J. M. Nouwen)

I worry too much. Autumn trees ask me not to worry. They, like Jesus, suggest trust rather than worry. So often in autumn I want to go lean my head against a tree and ask what it feels like to lose so much, to be so empty, so detached, to take off one's shoes that well, and then simply to stand and wait for God's refilling. It sounds so simple, so easy. It isn't easy. But it is possible.

I think I've met one person in my lifetime who was truly empty. I didn't ask her what it felt like, but I remember a quiet joy that seemed to permeate her spirit, and she looked free.

We autumn strugglers must try hard not to wear discouragement as a cloak if we can't wear enough emptiness to make us free. It takes a long time to get as far as even wanting to be empty.

Our hearts are hungering for the *Sacrament of Letting Go*. Once we discover that we already possess enough grace to let go, trust begins to form in the center of who we are. Then we can take off our shoes and stand empty and vulnerable, eager to receive God's next gift. (*Seasons of the Heart* by Macrina Wiederkehr)

Thus Jesus introduced us to the shocking power of sacrifice, which can turn something that looks for all the world like loss into something that feels for all the world like gain. According to Frederick Buechner, "To sacrifice something is to make it holy by giving it away for love." Even if someone is trying to pry it out of your hands. Even if those standing around you laugh and shout that you have no choice, *you have a choice*. You can still decide how you will let go. You can still open your hands at the last moment and give up what others thought they were taking from you. You can even make it holy by doing it for love. (*Home By Another Way* by Barbara Brown Taylor)

You told yourself you would accept the decision of fate. But you lost your nerve when you discovered what it would require of you:

then you realized how attached you still were to the world which has made you what you were, but which you would now have to leave behind. It felt like an amputation, a "little death," and you even listened to those voices which insinuated that you were deceiving yourself out of ambition. You will have to give up everything. Why, then, weep at this little death? Take it to you—quickly—with a smile die this death, and become free to go further—one with your task, whole in your duty of the moment. (*Markings* by Dag Hammarskjöld)

Song:

I Lift My Hands

I lift my hands to the coming King
To the great I Am, to you I sing
For you're the One that reigns within my heart

I will serve no foreign gods,
nor any other treasure
For you are my heart's desire,
your Spirit without measure
Unto you I will bring my sacrifice