

LET GO, LET GOD!

When your life is falling apart, there's always the impulse to hold on: to him, to her, to it; to the way it was, to how you wanted it to be, to how you want it now. But in order to get through a crisis, you will have to let go of whatever is standing in your way or causing the problem; these are the handcuffs around your ankles, the tin cans tied to your tail. You will have to let go of whatever isn't serving you, whatever you no longer need, whatever keeps you from moving forward, whatever you're so attached to that you can't see where you're going.

You may have to let go of your marriage, your friends, your job, your career, your house, your self-image, the way you deal with things, your past, your dreams of the future. I don't know what you'll have to let go of. That's for you to discover, but I do know that you'll have to let go of something.

Letting go is scary. It's a free fall, an act of surrender. It's releasing ways of being and things you thought were important, and then being okay with the fact that they're gone. Though it can feel like passivity, letting go is in fact a shift in consciousness that's a critical part of how you will solve the problem. It takes courage to look at your life and say, this is a helluva pickle I'm in and I need to lighten my load — my financial load, my emotional load, whatever kind of load it is — so I can deal with the reality at hand.

Just as tears are a doorway to the future, so, too, is letting go. When you let go you take an active role in shaping your life because you are taking responsibility not only for an immediate change but also for whatever comes after. When you consciously decide to let go, whatever ensues doesn't just happen to you. You're not just a passive pawn in the plot. Deciding to divorce, selling your house, shredding your journal, quitting your job — when you choose to take these actions, you are actively letting go. You are intentionally choosing to move yourself in a new direction.

We're not used to letting go. We're used to hanging on for dear life. We hang on for lots of reasons: because something is familiar; because the past is a known commodity and the future is a question mark; because we lack imagination and can't conceive of a future better than the past we've had; because blankies (no matter how ragged and trashed they are) and relationships (no matter how complete they already are or inappropriate they have become) are a comfort to us. We hang on because we've been taught that persistence is good and we should never give up. Or we're simply afraid of the free fall, afraid of coming alive as ourselves.

Having to let go — of things, of the way it was, of your notion of what the future will look like — often creates an identity crisis. We like to live according to our memories of ourselves, of how we were, of the way things used to be. Inside us are templates of these memories, armatures on which layer by layer we have crafted our identities. We think we still are who we once thought we were, but changing circumstances can force us to reevaluate. As with the alcoholic bag lady roaming the streets who still thinks of herself as the prom queen, the college valedictorian who's suddenly just an average student in law school, it's hard to let go of an old identity and move on. But if you don't let go of who and what you once were, you won't be available to become whoever and whatever this crisis is inviting you to become. For instance, without the courage to let go, the small business owner who temporarily drove a cab, the special education teacher who was a waitress for a while, and the young accountant who had to move back in with his parents — might have missed becoming the life coach, the owner of a catering business, and the hospital administrator that they have respectively become. Of course, it's easier to cling to the identity of who we once were than to imagine who we might now become, but, frankly, there isn't any future in it.

Letting go, on the other hand, asks you to believe that somewhere across the Big Tent of Life there will be another trapeze bar that you can take hold of after you've let go of this one. It's an act of terror and freedom, of trust and faith that when you let go, you will find something new, better, different.

But unlike the sidelined CEO, instead of letting go with grace, we're often more like the monkey who reaches into the narrow-mouth jar to grab the coconut inside and then get can't get his hand back out, because he just can't bear to let go of the coconut. Often, it's our desire for more that lies at the root of a crisis, and we have to let go of this desire. The happy shopper can't come home with every bargain at the mall. The refugee can't walk out of town with the kitchen stove on his back. Every form of freedom has a price. You can't have everything you've already got and everything you haven't had yet. The living room isn't big enough for the old couch and the new couch both at once. You gotta let go; you gotta take your pick.

Letting go frees up your energy and your attention. In the open field of surrender lie the seeds of new possibilities. Sometimes the content of the new possibility is nothing — you let go and are left with absence, a vacancy. This, in itself, can be a relief: the lightness of being you feel when you've finally dropped those extra fifty pounds, the silken tranquility in the house when you finally ditch your screaming husband.

Letting go means not hoping “things will change,” not bargaining or making deals — I'll let go if; I'll let go when. It's not storing the freeze-dried body of your friendship (or your marriage or your job) in cryonic suspension. It's acknowledging that this piece of your life, this relationship, this way of doing things has served its purpose and so it is time to let go of it completely.

In the less is the more. In the emptiness there is room for so much.