

Summer Swing Wisdom Revisited

(Reflection by Rev. Peggy McDonagh, August 16 2020)

The Spirit of God within me greets and honours the spirit of God within each of you.

My friends it is nice to be sharing worship with you again. I hope that during this summer season, despite the restrictions, distancing, and life challenges, you have found moments of respite and peace.

For me, the first part of July, my vacation month, was a struggle. In the first week, I continued to work from home because some things just needed to get done and I had to officiate at a wedding. I was not well for many weeks, and I suspect that that was a response to both stress and allergies. Also, I have a dear friend who has been and continues to be extremely ill.

During those first weeks I was feeling a great deal of negativity, anger, and anxiety in a time that was supposed to be restful, calm, and relaxing. Because I was not well, I could not visit my mother at her home in Rosalind, which added to the negative feelings I was harbouring.

Fortunately, I did manage to spend the last part of July with my Mom. The first few days of sitting on the swing sheltered by a large spruce tree, my mind wrestled with many thoughts. I mulled over everything that had been happening since life changed dramatically for everyone in the world. I lamented about all the various challenges shaping and changing the world and life as we know it. I was feeling deeply for my friend Rick. I kept pondering about the future of St. David's and what we will do about re-opening for worship while keeping all of us safe and healthy.

I also recognized that all the negativity that I was holding inside affected my behavior and my ability to relax and to enjoy my vacation. With my mind in a constant state of flux, it was hard to let go and be in the present moment. Even sitting in the peacefulness of my mother's beautiful yard, I experienced moments of panic and feeling overwhelmed. Fortunately, after a few days of being in that quiet place I was able to stop the chaos of my thoughts and let go of them and subsequently, the negativity. As I sat in the quiet of nature and felt its goodness and peace with a settled mind, I reflected.

In and around my mother's large yard are a variety of mature, tall trees where one can witness the constant activity of a wide assortment of birds. Periodically one discovers an egg that has fallen from a nest or a baby bird that did not survive. The mother bird stands by her lifeless little one for a bit but then continues her search for food for the other nest

babies. It seemed to me as I observed this bird life that birds and animals can embrace the natural processes of life and death, accepting the ebb and flow of things. They do not own anything nor dwell on things. Nature takes life as it is. We human beings tend to fight the ebb and flow of life, holding on to what we want and holding on to what we don't want. It is difficult for us to let go.

People say that they don't want to suffer and don't appreciate struggle, fearing unhappiness. Yet, unconsciously we hold on to things that cause suffering, encourage the struggle, and create dissatisfaction. If we need to let go of something, then that means that we are holding on to something. What are you holding on to? Perhaps a lost relationship, an unfulfilling job, protecting the self from suffering, a grudge, a disappointment, long-lasting grief, a negative attitude?

In his *Little Book of Letting Go*, Hugh Prater writes, "Our lives are filled with useless battles because our minds are filled with useless thoughts. We never finish thinking about anything. We carry around unhappy scenes from the past as if they are still happening, and we chew on the memory of whatever we just did. This glut of thoughts profoundly affects the world we perceive and the life we live in." This was what I had been doing, and as a result I was hampering my ability to be at peace.

We tend to hold on to so much. In so doing, we lose our authenticity and the simple act of enjoying every moment. We lose the ability to let ourselves flow with life, which stops us from experiencing what we want, inner peace, acceptance, and love. We ask, what is letting go? What does it mean? What must we let go of, and what happens when we finally do?

Lao-Tzu was a 5th-century Chinese philosopher and poet best known as the author of the Chinese text *TaeTe Ching* and founder of philosophical Taoism. One of Taoism's most important concepts is Wu-Wei, often translated as "non-doing" or "non-action." Another way to understand it is to say that it is the act of non-action. Here is what Lao-Tzu wrote regarding the freedom of non-action: "The sage experiences without abstraction and accomplishes without action. He accepts the ebb and flow of things, nurtures them, but does not own them, and lives, but does not dwell."

Having a clear and mindful understanding of the ebb and flow of life allows our lives to flow naturally like water. Lao-Tzu teaches that "water has no desire, no needs to fulfill, has its own course, cannot be controlled, and will overcome any difficulty presented to it." When we let go of our preoccupations with failure and disappointment, when we release anger and negativity, or our need to have life unfold the way we demand, we can

live in harmony with life despite its challenges, disappointments and mistakes.

In reflecting on the Gospels, it is interesting to note that many of Jesus' teachings are about non-attachment. Often there are direct teachings on this concept, such as "deny yourself...lose your life". Other times, we may not immediately recognize non-attachment or letting go, as in Jesus' teachings on forgiveness. What else is forgiveness, but letting go of identifying with hate and anger? For Jesus letting go was about self-emptying, detaching from, and surrendering. His most profound act of letting go occurred when he said: "Abba, I commend my spirit into your hands." Jesus teaches that before we can love others and our enemies, we must let go of self-importance and self-interest to attend to and fully accept the other. Faith includes letting go, letting go of certainty and trusting in the unknown, letting go of negativity, and holding on to hope, perseverance and goodness.

What I discovered on the swing is that nature teaches much about letting go and allowing life to unfold naturally. When a strong wind blows with tremendous gusto the more supple trees bend with the wind and will not break. In contrast, a brittle tree will resist the wind's natural force and be uprooted and destroyed. Similarly, when we let go, our lives become like the supple trees, and no matter how hard the storms may blow, we will bend but not break.

Nature also teaches that if you throw a branch into the river it will carry the branch's weight without complaint; throw a boulder into it and it will naturally find a way around it and over time it will carve its way through it. As Lao-Tzu and Jesus suggested, this is the nature of our lives without abstraction. When we let go, we allow ourselves to embrace life's ebb and flow, no longer forcing, but always accepting and letting our individual rivers travel their own unique and beautiful course.

Undoubtedly, living in these pandemic times is intensely stressful, confusing, sad, and scary. What I learned on the swing in my Mother's yard, is that we must give ourselves a respite from negativity. We must give ourselves permission to let go, periodically, of our fear, anxiety, and stress to find moments of joy, peace, and calm.

It is essential to stay informed about the pandemic and other life difficulties, but continually reading or watching the news can water the seeds of worry and despair, inducing feelings of depression and helplessness. Increased negativity has the potential to affect our immune systems. In the book, *How to be Happier Day by Day*, Alan Epstein suggests that we take a break from the news and in doing so take a break

from negativity. I know that taking a respite from the constant negativity is rejuvenating. For our own health and well-being, we must, at times, let go and embrace peacefully life's ebb and flow.

Creation-centred spirituality teaches that despite the challenges, the obstacles, and the difficulties of living, life is good. As we read in the Bible, "Taste and see that life is good." My friends, I invite you to remember that life is good. When you find yourselves anxious, negative, and fearful, say out loud, "Taste and see that life is good." Focus on that. Dwell on it deeply. Believing in the goodness of life, of creation, and of God gives us the ability to face challenges with calmness, clarity, and wisdom. May this be so for us all.