

# Getting a Grip by Letting Go

By

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Among the most valuable lessons learned during my ministerial training is the importance of being a non-anxious presence when I'm with those facing dire circumstances, like a devastating accident, a fatal diagnosis, or the sudden and unexpected death of a loved one. Our instinct is to try saying or doing something helpful; but under such circumstances there's nothing we can do or say to make the trauma of the moment go away; and attempts to do so only make matters worse.

"They're in a better place now," "This too shall pass," "The Lord works in mysterious ways," can feel like daggers to those in the throes of loss and grief. Well-meaning as our intentions might be, what we're really telling them is that we don't want them to feel sad, angry, hurt, or whatever difficult emotions they are having. Telling a person diagnosed with a terminal condition that they ought to remain positive may sound hopeful and helpful, but if we are not honest with them about what's really happening it means they must go through it alone, which makes the process of dying far worse.

It's better just to say, "I'm sorry" and "I can't imagine what you're going through." These statements are honest and only express what we are feeling, without judgment or denial about what the aggrieved are experiencing. It's about them, after all, not me, not my discomfort, not my pointless wish to make all their pain go away. Whatever else might be true, the pain is real and overwhelming, and they have to go through it for as long as necessary.

Understanding this is key to being a non-anxious presence, knowing that we have entered into a traumatic and tragic situation and that there is nothing we can do or say to make it better. Yet, as friends, as family, as a minister, we must and want to be there for those going through some of the worst circumstances of their lives. But in doing so we knowingly enter into a space where we are helpless and vulnerable, becoming what feels like a pointless lump on a log. To be the non-anxious presence they need us to be, however, means accepting that we are helpless and must resist the urge to do something to ease their pain.

It is only then that our presence, paradoxically, becomes meaningful and helpful—a steady, quiet presence who is there if needed, there to listen, there to bear witness to the pain and grief others are experiencing, showing them that they are not alone, while having said little more than "I'm sorry. I can't imagine what you're going through." I'm even hesitant to say, "I'm here if you need me," or "Let me know if there's anything I can do," which, again, suggests I have the ability to make things better and puts the burden on them to reach out to me, that is, to make me feel useful and, therefore, better. But, again, it's not about me.

A 39-year-old suffers a fatal heart attack, a father and his two children are killed by a drunk driver, a man my age is given only months to live after being diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, a woman feeling a little off soon discovers she'll be dead within weeks, a child drowns, another commits suicide, another is killed on a motorcycle, a baby has a fatal fall off a bed. These are among the worst circumstances I have been present for as a minister, and, though they were never about me, there is a cumulative impact of being in the midst of such pain and grief that lingers with me.

As a minister, I have also tried to remain a non-anxious presence for our congregation as a whole. Talk about cumulative impacts. There were fourteen deaths in our church during my first year here, due to age, illness, accidents—two within my first week. It has felt similar these past couple of years as so many of our matriarchs and patriarchs have left us, sometimes only weeks and days apart. That much death takes a terrible toll on a community.

We've faced other difficulties together, the election of Donald Trump in 2016, a major church conflict in 2019, and the return of Trump in 2024. Through it all, I've worked to remain a non-anxious presence, even though, inwardly, I've felt as much anxiety over these events as anyone else, more in some cases. The secret to this, as the saying goes, is to "accept the things I cannot change." I cannot heal the sick. I cannot raise the dead. I cannot go back in time and prevent tragedies. Nor can I "fix" the emotions of others, even though this isn't as obvious to us as is our inability to perform miracles or time travel.

So, in addition to *accepting the things we cannot change*, we must *face the circumstances and challenges before us*. We cannot change who the President is, no matter how much we disagree with his actions and policies, nor how much they are impacting our lives and the lives of others. We cannot force the Congress, Senate, or Supreme Court to uphold the Constitution they have sworn to defend. We cannot avoid the chaos this Administration is causing in our country and around the world. We cannot know when or even if it will end, nor what damage will be left in the aftermath of this sociopolitical storm.

Yet this is the collective trauma of our times, especially as liberals, and it feels as if democracy itself has been in a terrible accident, is now in critical condition, and we don't know if it will live or die. Many of us are in shock, fearful of the worst, and already grieving the loss of the society and world we once believed would always be with us. My advice is, again, to let those feelings be. Lean into them. They will come and go, and come and go again, and again. Trying to control our feelings is like standing on the ocean shore and trying not to get wet. The waves move in and out of their own accord. They wash over us,

overwhelm us, then recede for a time, before returning again. Better to accept them, knowing only that they will eventually subside with the changing of the tide.

Among the most surprising emotions for those in grief are the waves of joy and laughter that come; or, sometimes, no feelings at all, as if life feels entirely normal. These confusing moments can compound the situation with additional feelings of guilt. “How can I feel happy, or feel nothing at all, at a time like this?” The same is true for us as a society, especially, again, for the liberal-minded who greatly value the principles upon which our democracy is founded, imperfect a union as it has always been.

For much of the time since first announcing his candidacy in 2015, Donald Trump has been the main headline in our lives, almost daily. It’s as if we’ve been stuck in an unending reality TV show whose star is working to create as much upheaval, suffering, and chaos as possible.

After eleven years of it, we’re extremely fatigued by this barrage of daily and disturbing headlines. We can try avoiding them for a while, but we can’t really escape the reality we’re in. Eventually, we have to face what’s happening. We have to acknowledge this isn’t just a show. When we do, we are better able to allow the difficult emotions to come and go, while also continuing to live and to do what we must, sometimes feeling like everything is completely normal.

Again, we can’t control which emotions come over us, nor do much to change the reality we’re in. But we can control our response to those emotions and how we react to our circumstances. Anger doesn’t mean we have to lash out at others. Grief doesn’t mean we have to disappear into depression. Facing reality doesn’t mean we have to simply accept the way things are and can’t work to make them better. We can control our attitude, to some extent. We can control our actions and reactions, regardless of what we’re feeling. We can do what we can to support our loved ones and friends, and to serve the grander purposes of our community, society, and life itself. Rather than protesting against what we dislike, we can demonstrate those values we do believe in.

When someone loses control, we might tell them to “Get a grip!” What I’m saying here is that to get a grip we need to let go. We need to let go of our desire to control or change our circumstances. But letting go does not mean giving up. Quite the opposite, it means facing what is before us, going through it, standing strong, and moving forward as best we can. The American bison, often called buffalo, are a magnificent example. These powerful creatures, with enormous heads and broad shoulders, have bodies that taper off to almost nothing compared to all that size and force that’s up front, as if they’re built to face life head-on.

In fact, it is well known that instead of turning away from storms, especially powerful blizzards, buffalo head directly into them, knowing that by doing so they'll get through them a lot faster than by attempting to avoid them. This, again, is what it means to be a non-anxious presence, *accepting the things we cannot change and facing the circumstances, the challenges, the realities before us.*

This practice, of getting a grip by letting go, of moving into the storm instead of away from it, of facing reality, and accepting what we cannot change, is also central to most of humanity's major religions. Among Judaism's Ten Commandments, for example, is the command to "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your town."<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew word, *šabbāt*, simply means, "to rest."

In February, I'll be taking a month long sabbatical, which obviously comes from this very word. Some have asked, "Where are you going? What are you going to do?" I'm going nowhere and doing nothing, because that's what a sabbatical is for, which is why I prefer to rest, like the Earth itself, in the coldness and darkness of winter.

In Taoism, *wu wei*, which means, "doing nothing," is similar to *šabbāt*. "Sitting quietly, doing nothing, spring comes, and the grass grows by itself,"<sup>2</sup> according to an old Chinese proverb. In fact, the Chinese pictograph for "busy" is symbolized by two characters meaning *heart* and *killing*.<sup>3</sup> But "Practice not-doing and everything will fall into place,"<sup>4</sup> the *Tao te Ching* tells us. "Fill your bowl to the brim and it will spill. Keep sharpening your knife and it will blunt."<sup>5</sup> "Tao never acts, yet nothing is left undone."<sup>6</sup>

The Christian idea of Grace is another example of this principle, the notion that there's nothing we can do or need to do to be saved. "Look at the birds of the air,"<sup>7</sup> Jesus is reported to have said. "Consider the lilies of the field."<sup>8</sup> The birds do not sow, harvest, or store away, yet they are fed. The flowers do not toil or spin, yet they are clothed, "yet even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these."<sup>9</sup>

There are other examples, including ancient myths about the necessity of Winter, those cold dark months when even the Earth rests and of our need to rest along with her. But I most prefer the way this principle is treated by Stoic philosophy. The ancient Stoic philosopher Epictetus began his *Handbook* with the simple phrase, "Of all existing things some are in our power, and others are not in our power."<sup>10</sup>

This is referred to as "the dichotomy of control," which may seem obvious, but what isn't obvious is knowing the difference between what is within our power and what isn't.

Acknowledging this dichotomy requires us to distinguish the difference because, too often, we tend to obsess about the things we cannot change, while ignoring the things we can. This is a significant point because it can mean the difference between being an anxious or non-anxious presence, not only in the lives of others, but in our own lives. It doesn't make a lot of sense worrying about matters we can't do anything about, especially when such worry distracts us from doing what we can.

I'm sure you're familiar with the Loren C. Eiseley's famous anecdote from his 1969 essay, *The Star Thrower*. An old man walking on the beach notices a boy throwing washed-up starfish back into the sea before they're dried up and killed by the heat of the Sun. "But the beach goes on for miles and miles," he tells the child. "There are thousands of starfish stranded here. You will never be able to make a difference!"

"I made a difference to that one," the child replies.

If we only notice all that overwhelms us and is out of our control, then we miss our opportunities to make a difference where we can.

We all know the serenity prayer, attributed to theologian Richard Niebuhr, *God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference*. This is a favorite saying in AA and among Stoics because it addresses the dichotomy of control that all of us face. But the real trick is knowing the difference. The old man on the beach doesn't understand that not having the power to save all the starfish on the beach doesn't prevent him from saving some. The boy, on the other hand, only sees what he can do. The thought of saving all the starfish has never crossed his mind because it's not in his power to begin with.

Contemporary Stoic philosopher William Irvine compounds the problem by reminding us that it's not just a dichotomy of control, but a *trichotomy* of control. For "There are things over which we have complete control," he says, "things over which we have no control at all, and things over which we have some but not complete control."<sup>11</sup> We have no control over who wins an election. We have complete control over who we vote for. So, there's no sense worrying about either. Let go of what we can't control and do what we are able. What we ought to most concentrate our energy on, rather, are those matters that we have some but not complete control over. We may not control who gets elected, but we can volunteer for a particular candidate or participate in a public awareness or get-out-the-vote campaign. The goal of the Stoics, Irvine says, "was not to change the world, but to do their best to change it."<sup>12</sup>

I'll compound Epictetus's original dichotomy of control even further by adding a fourth component; there are some things in our power to control that we should not control—

namely, the emotions, thoughts, and decisions of others. This is to say, that we should not force our wills upon the wills of others. Why? Because, from a humanistic position, it's unethical, using others as a means to our own ends rather than respecting their freedom and autonomy as individuals who have a right to choose and pursue their own ends.

And this goes back to where we began, being a non-anxious presence. If we respect others, we have no need to change or control their emotions, nor to prevent them from facing the storm they must walk through. What is within our power, and, thus, our arena of responsibility, is to simply be present with them, even if it is only to bear witness to what they are going through, so that they know they are not alone.

To be a non-anxious presence in an anxious world is not to be passive or indifferent. It is to stand steady in the storm, neither denying its power nor being overpowered by it. It is to face what is real, to do what we can—and to let the rest go.

<sup>1</sup> Exodus 20:10

<sup>2</sup> <sup>9</sup> Watts, Alan, *The Way of Zen*, Pantheon Books, Inc., U.S.A, 1957, p. 141.

<sup>3</sup> <sup>12</sup> Muller, Wayne, *Sabbath*, Bantam Books, New York, NY, 1999, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Tao te Ching* #3

<sup>5</sup> *Tao te Ching* #9

<sup>6</sup> *Tao te Ching* #17

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 6:26

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 6:28

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 6:29

<sup>10</sup> <sup>3</sup> Oates, W.J., *The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers*, Random House, New York, NY, 1940, p. 468.

<sup>11</sup> <sup>99</sup> Irvine, William B., *A Guide to the Good Life*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY, 2009, p. 89.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.