

“LETTING GO”
Rev. Mary S. Abele
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This evening I have decided to keep my words to a minimum and use the glorious and powerful words of poets to illustrate my theme of letting go. I will begin with the author Annie Dillard:

“At a certain point you say to the woods, to the sea, to the mountains, the world, now I am ready. Now I will stop and be wholly attentive. You empty yourself and wait, listening. After a time you hear it: there is nothing there. There is nothing but those things only, those created objects, discrete, growing or ebbing, standing, or spread. You feel the world’s word as a tension, a hum, as single chorused note everywhere the same. This is it: this hum is the silence . . .

The silence is all there is. It is the alpha and the omega. It is God’s brooding over the face of the waters; it is the blended note of the ten thousand things, the whine of wings. You take a step in the right direction to pray to this silence, and even to address the prayer to “World.” Distinctions blur. Quit your tents. Pray without ceasing.” (*Earth Prayers*)

Empty yourself, she says. Let go of your stresses and cares. Hear the hum of the world—the low, slow deep tones of the Buddhist chant “”Ohm”. Listen to our great planet in the silence.

Mary Oliver continues this theme of oneness with the Earth in her poem, *Sleeping in the Forest*.

I thought the earth remembered me,
She took me back so tenderly,
Arranging her dark skirts, her pockets full of lichens and seeds.
I slept as never before, a stone on the riverbed,
Nothing between me and the white fire of the stars but my thoughts,
And they floated light as moths among the branches of the perfect trees.
All night I heard the small kingdoms breathing around me,
The insects, and the birds who do their work in the darkness.
All night I rose and fell, as if in water, grappling with a luminous doom.
By morning I had vanished at least a dozen times into something better.”
(*Poems To Live By*, Edited by Joan Murray)

It’s true. If we contemplate what Mary Oliver calls the “small kingdoms” of nature and their beautiful and intricate workings, we are able to feel the pull of “something better” and have the opportunity to merge into it.

More ways to connect with our beautiful Earth, a poem by Nancy Wood.

“The earth is all that lasts.
The earth is what I speak to when I do not understand my life.
The earth answers me with the same song that it sang for my fathers when their tears
covered up the sun.
The earth sings a song of gladness. The earth sings a song of praise.
The earth rises up and laughs at me each time that I forget
How spring begins with winter and death begins with birth.” (*Earth Prayers*)

Beginnings and endings. It is so easy to forget that in each ending we find a beginning. The changing of the seasons that we are experiencing now. Leaves falling from trees—showing their stark trunks and branches--a metaphor for who we are at the base of our souls.

The cycles of our lives are addressed by many poets. Birth, youth, mid-life and old age. I will begin with a passage that I use for our naming ceremonies, written by a poet very much in tune with Nature, William Wordsworth. Here’s how it goes:

“Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting: The soul that rises within us, our life’s star, hath elsewhere its setting, and cometh from afar: Not in entire forgetfulness, and not in utter nakedness, but trailing clouds of glory do we come from God, who is our home: Heaven lies about us in our infancy!”

Then I address the baby or child directly, acknowledging the arrival of spirit:

“Little one, you have come to us with star dust in your hair, with the rush of planets in your blood, your heart beating out the seasons of eternity, with a shining in your eyes like the sunlight.”

Moving on to a poem for youth, apparently written by Rudyard Kipling for his son. The first lines may be familiar to you.

“If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you...
If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;
If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim:
If you can meet with Triumph and disaster and treat those two impostors just the same...
If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch...
Yours is the Earth and everything that’s in it,
And—which is more—you’ll be a Man, my son!”

An anonymous poet has given us some thoughts about the lessons we learn in mid-life. Gone are the passions and idealism of youth; not gone forever perhaps, but certainly tempered by wisdom and experience. In their place are common sense, and a subtle, delicate connection to self and soul. Here is the poem:

“After a while you learn the subtle difference between holding a hand and chaining a soul.
And you learn that love doesn’t mean leaning and company doesn’t mean security.....
After a while you learn that even sunshine burns if you ask too much.
So you plant your own garden and decorate your own soul instead of waiting for someone to buy you flowers.
And you learn that you really can endure, that you really are strong, and you really do have worth.
And you learn, and you learn and you learn.”

Last in the cycle of ages comes this well-known poem by Jenny Joseph.

When I am an old woman I shall wear purple with a red hat which doesn't go, and doesn't suit me.

And I shall spend my pension on brandy and summer gloves and satin sandals, and say we've no money for butter.

I shall sit down on the pavement when I'm tired and gobble up samples in shops and press alarm bells, and run my stick along the public railings, and make up for the sobriety of my youth.

I shall go out in my slippers in the rain and pick the flowers in other peoples' gardens, and learn to spit.

You can wear terrible shirts and grow more fat , and eat three pounds of sausages at a go or only bread and pickles for a week, and hoard pens and pencils and beer mats and things in boxes.

But now we must have clothes that keep us dry, and pay our rent and not swear in the street. And set a good example for the children. We must have friends to dinner and read the papers.

But maybe I ought to practice a little now? So people who know me are not too shocked and surprised when suddenly I am old, and start to wear purple.

Which leads me gently into Veteran’s Day, which we are celebrating this weekend. I will read two poems honoring the men and women who have put themselves in danger for our sakes. Sadly, we do not think often of these brave human beings. Maybe it is because we forget, or perhaps it is because, in our hearts and minds, we don’t dare go there.

The first is an anonymous poem, written in the trenches during WWII.

“Stay with me, God. The night is dark,
The night is cold: my little spark
Of courage dies. The night is long;
Be with me, God, and make me strong.

I love a game; I love a fight.
I hate the dark; I love the light.

I love my child; I love my wife.
I am no coward. I love Life.

Life with its change of mood and shade.
I want to live. I'm not afraid,
But me and mine are hard to part;
Oh, unknown God, lift up my heart.

.....
I knew that death is but a door.
I knew what we were fighting for:
Peace for the kids, our brothers freed,
A kinder world, a cleaner breed.

I'm but the son my mother bore,
A simple man, and nothing more.
But—God of strength and gentleness,
Be pleased to make me nothing less.

Help me, O God, when Death is near
To mock the haggard face of fear,
That when I fall--if fall I must—
My soul may triumph in the Dust.”

This plea to God is followed by a poem of remembrance by Stephen Spender that may be familiar to you.

“I think continually of those who were truly great.
Who from the womb, remembered the soul's history
Through corridors of light where the hours are suns,
Endless and singing. Whose lovely ambition
Was that their lips, still touched with fire,
Should tell of the spirit clothed from head to foot in song.
And who hoarded from the spring branches
The desires falling across their bodies like blossoms.

.....
Near the snow, near the sun, in the highest fields
See how these names are feted by the waving grass,
And by the streamer of white cloud,
And whispers of wind in the listening sky;

The names of those who in their lives fought for life,
Who wore at their hearts the fire's center.
Born of the sun they traveled a short while towards the sun,
And left the vivid air signed with their honor."

Birth, death, and the strange and intricate stories we human beings weave in between the two. We create our stories in innocence, while Life is busy creating itself all around us. How wonderful to have the opportunity to live—whether it be short or long--and play a leading part in one's own dramatic tale! What a gift from God!

Finally, I offer you one of my favorite poems, a poem that tells of the joyous and unexpected adventure life can be. This is a poem by the naturalist Edward Abbey that I read as a benediction at President David Finney's inauguration at Champlain College, and many of my wedding couples choose it for their wedding benediction. Here are Edward Abbey's vivid words:

"May your trails be crooked and winding, leading to the most amazing view!
May your rivers flow without end, meandering through pastoral valleys
tinkling with bells, past temples and castles and poets' towers
into a dark primeval forest where tigers roar and monkeys howl,
through miasmal and mysterious swamps and down into a desert of red rock,
blue mesas, domes and pinnacles and grottoes of endless stone,
and down again into a deep vast ancient unknown chasm,
where bars of sunlight blaze on profiled cliffs,
where deer walk across the white sand beaches
where storms come and go, as lightning clangs upon the high crags,
where something strange and more beautiful and more full of wonder than your deepest
dreams waits for you—beyond that next turning of the canyon walls."
(adapted from Edward Abbey, EARTH PRAYERS)

Letting go means a lot of things. It means allowing your protective leaves to fall off so everyone can see the beauty of your soul. It means letting go of the need for others to "bring you flowers," and knowing you can plant your own flower garden. It means reaching an age where you can wear purple with a red hat if you please, and rattle your cane along fences and railings. Most of all, letting go means being open to joy and adventure in every aspect of your life, and deep gratitude for life itself!

Blessings!