

“Oh, To Be Above It All,” Rev. Caitlin O’Brien, 12/2/2012

I’m a life-long, card carrying overthinker. If I’m ruminating about something, and a friend says, “eh, let it go,” they might as well be speaking another language. My grip is very tight.

Since a young age, influenced by the stories of Jesus, something within me has dreamed of walking on water...of being someone who can’t be bothered to overthink because she glides just a little bit above it all. I could transcend – as if I had helium balloons tied to me – and if only I’d let go of the things I try to control, I could float a healthy distance above it all. But alas, I’m more like Peter in the reading, a little too preoccupied with the wind to feel the magic of it all.

Can you relate? Are you swimming in waters of worry, resentment, anger or grief that make you feel heavier than you want to feel? Are you stuck in some places because your mind won’t let go?

I’m gonna start out with an assumption: that there are thoughts and feelings that eventually overstay their welcome. Once we’ve screamed and cried, argued, journaled, confided in friends, and really let our feelings have their say over however many weeks, months or years, we reach a point when certain thoughts and feelings no longer serve us. I’m not gonna say what kinds of thoughts or what length of time is too long. I wouldn’t dare. I invite you to listen to that deep knowing in your own life, in your own time.

Step one is to simply answer that question – is there something I need to let go of? To take a step back, or to play with the Jesus metaphor, a step up – above the water you’re swimming in, and look down to see the thought or feeling you’re holding onto. You are the curious observer, saying, “Hmmm..there’s that thought again...huh.”

A psychologist wrote a book called “Brain Lock” about working with patients who live with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. He advised this same concept of observing one’s thoughts from a distance. For example, rather than think “Oh Gosh, I may have left the iron on,” one is to think “I’m having an obsessive thought that I may have left the iron on.” That subtle difference provides some distance between the person and their thought that opens things up for a “more skillful range of responses”. If you find yourself

overthinking a resentment toward someone, instead of saying “I’m so angry about what she did,” you could try saying “I’m spending a lot of time being angry about what she did.” You might notice the thought dissipate when **you don’t completely meld with the thought, or get hooked by it**. In that way, *you* are in the driver’s seat, and the *thought* is not. We are, after all, *more than our thoughts*. Aren’t we?

If someone is renting space in your head because you feel wronged or misunderstood by them, it can be so deliciously tempting to rattle off all the ways **they** are wrong. I sometimes do this alone in my car – it’s the perfect enclosed space to practice my argument, as if I’m performing for a jury. Only thing is when I pull up next to someone at an intersection, I have to pretend I’m talking on my cell phone! Talk about distracted driving! It’s so easy to go there with our thoughts – and the feeling of self righteousness is a **nice boost, right?** Tempting like a dozen donuts, it’s delicious in the moment, but after a certain point, it’s just not good for ya.

You are bigger than this. Life is bigger than this. We can find ways to change the channel. For example, when someone’s driving my mom crazy, she visualizes herself walking the person down the driveway and lifting them in the recycling truck to be driven away. Works for her.

What’ll work for you? Let’s try something. Like the children earlier, can you take a deep breath with me? and close your eyes and conjure up that something you struggle to let go of..... Now tap into the tapes that you tend to play in your mind on this topic, that well worn path in your brain..... The story that hooks your mind..... Now imagine yourself levitating above the thought, and finish this sentence for yourself: “I’m holding on to the story that” \_\_\_\_\_ . Feel how that’s different from just telling and retelling the story in your mind. And maybe say a mantra that helps you feel above the water of these thoughts and feelings – something like “All is well.” There...you are the calm, curious observer of the water below and the horizon beyond. *What can you see on the horizon? Take that in. It’s yours.* You can open your eyes now.

Of course you’re more than your thoughts. When you give yourself some distance from them, you may find you’ve made room for something else. Room for your soul. Define that however you wish, *All Souls* family. If you’re like me, you know it when you see it or

feel it. How do you care for yours? Time in nature, time with music, with animals, in silence, at rest, exercising, or in community? In these ways, you get to touch base with the great wide open, and it is your soul that carries you there if you let it. Your tired mind gets to ride the coat tails of your soul, a soul that's freed up to connect with to something bigger.

A soul that's just a little bit above the water you're treading in, saying "check out that breath-taking horizon...You have a home there, too. You have a home there, too."

Most spiritual frameworks seem to have letting go as a core value: Taoism's sacred text says "If you want to be given everything, give everything up." Christianity's sacred text says you have to give up your family and life itself to follow Jesus. And letting go is right there in the definition of Islam, meaning "surrender" or "submission to God." The third step in Alcoholics Anonymous says "to turn your will and your life over to the care of the God of your understanding." Each of these systems offers this advice in the context of a philosophy that supports it: Taoism assures you that the universe is in proper balance; Christianity and Islam assure you that you'll be saved if you are in right relationship with the divine; AA assures you that letting go is the only way to overcome addiction. In other words, *there is something in it for you if you let go.*

In Unitarian Universalism, we don't have a creed, and we aren't really asked to let go or surrender, except maybe to the results of a congregational vote. When it doesn't go your way, letting go isn't easy - it's true.

But I don't have a creed to encourage you to let go; all I can do is stand up here and ask you what you're holding on to, and to then ask *how's that workin' for ya?* You may very well need to keep holding it, to keep processing it in a productive way. If it's not working for you, though, be intentional about loosening your grip, so you can levitate a bit above it. There may be something in it for you if you let go some. You might do something great with the breathing room you create.

That is the point, of course, to let go in order to **let in** something better for you. But our tight grip feels so comfortable, and what will come of the thing we let go of? What will come of **us**?

And perhaps no experience begs this question more urgently than the loss of a loved one, whether someone leaves us in death, someone leaves us to grow up, or someone leaves us as a relationship ends. How on earth do we let go? We seem so naturally built for connecting, for depending on each other. People weave themselves into the fabric of who we are, and then, one day, they have to go from us, and life makes what feels like an **outrageous** request of us. Life asks us to let go of someone we somehow thought we'd always get to keep.

And when they go, we ask ourselves about the nature of this universe. What is out there that we are letting them go into? Will it hold him? Will it love her like I do? I asked these questions when my father died, actually six years ago today. And as a chaplain, I've sat with people asking these questions. It is natural. Our minds resist mystery – our minds want answers. It's our soul that can make some peace with mystery, if we let our soul do its thing. If we feed our soul and give it a voice in our lives.

The journey of grief from the first moment onward is different for everyone, often beginning with shock, sadness, anger and loneliness. These feelings **ABSOLUTELY CANNOT** be rushed, and in most healthy approaches, they make their way toward a stage of mindful letting go, and letting it be. Let it be...because, sadly, it already is anyway. Let it be, because fighting won't change it. Let it be because ***your*** life still waits to be lived each day.

I love, love, love this life. I love being in the waters of this world. I love laughing til it hurts. I love grilled cheese with a side of fries and a pickle. And I love the feel of my child in my arms. If I'm honest, I also love to be mad and stubborn... But I also feel there's a place for me – a home for me – a bit above it all, on the horizon. I love the questions the horizon asks of me, and I really love it when it tells me to shut up.

I'm about to share a song with you. When I first heard it, my mind started doing its thing, saying, "I wonder who her voice is representing – is it mother nature? The divine? A loved one who has passed? And then the song took over and said, 'shut up, Caitlin. Just Connect!'"

For me, it's care of the soul that gets me there. The more I spend time in breath taking music, in meditation or in deep connection with people, the more I experience an antidote to my overactive mind. I feel an embrace of oneness – it's what I imagine the seagulls feel as they ride the wind and glide above the water. When I've been there often enough in a given week, I can move through worry or upset without quite *sticking* to it. The Peter in me can relax, and I can feel lighter on my feet.

And dare I say that, when I'm in that soulful space, loved ones - like my dad - who are gone - are somehow a little less gone. I admit that I don't quite know what I mean by that, but I know that I mean it.

I'll let singer Annie Lennox take us home from here...

(musical reflection: "Into the West, Annie Lennox")

Please rise in body or in spirit, and reach out and take the hand of someone near you. Feel its warmth and support. Feel the power of connection, the way in which we are in this together.

We belong in the waters of our lives, in its problems to solve, its sometimes delicious details, and its wounds to lick; and we are also invited to lift our perspective above the waters, to see what is in it for us...to make contact with a wider view and find a home there too...

Go peacefully, go soulfully into the days ahead. Amen.