

“Holding On & Letting Go”
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This past year at Johns Hopkins, not only have I been a chaplain but I’ve also been a chaplain resident, a student. And as a yearlong student, I was in a small class of other chaplain residents and we spent a substantial amount of time together for class and group time, something like 8 hours per week, every week, for the entire year, not counting the outside of class time that we just hung out and yakked or even occasionally spent time in meaningful discussion about things happening in our work. So, as you can imagine, we got pretty close over the course of the year.

The other thing about our group is that we knew in advance that it had a definite ending point. The time when we’d do our last final evaluations and then graduate and then go our separate ways. But here’s the thing – I am absolutely rotten about endings, particularly when it’s something that at least part of me doesn’t want it to end. So my typical way of doing things is to pretend that the end isn’t coming even though I know good & well that it is. As a group or a relationship nears its end for me, I’m constantly surprised when I notice how close the end is. And then the next time I notice it, I’m surprised again. When the ending does finally arrive I just try to get through it as quickly as possible and move on.

This is probably why I am drawn to Elisha in the story we read today. He reminds me a lot of how I tend to deal with endings.

So here we have these two prophets, one the teacher, Elijah, and one the student, Elisha. And they’ve been traveling together and hanging out together for a good while at this point, doing their biblical prophet thing, healings and foretellings and condemning injustices and such. And both of them know, they must both just know, that the end of their relationship is coming soon.

So Elijah says, stay here, Elisha. I’ve got something I’ve gotta take care of. Now Elisha’s answer is a little over the top: “As the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you.” Whoa – who said anything about leaving, Elisha! Alright, fine, you can come along. And so they go to Bethel.

Then there are these disciples of prophets in Bethel who come out to talk to Elisha. Apparently they know that Elijah’s taking off soon, too. “Hey, Elisha. You know, right? You know that Elijah’s about to leave.”

Yes, yes, yes, of course I know! But just don’t say anything! I don’t want to talk about it!

Then Elijah tries again – he says, stay here Elisha. I’m headed to Jericho because I’ve gotta take care of something. He’s probably not too surprised when Elisha does his “As the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you” thing again. So, they both take off for Jericho. And then, and the story is going to start sounding quite familiar, these

disciples of prophets pull Elisha off to the side. “Hey, Elisha. He’s leaving – Elijah is. You know that, right?”

Be silent, be silent! Yes I know, but don’t talk about it!

Like not talking about it will actually change anything, right?

Yet again, Elijah tries to get away – stay here, Elisha; I’ve gotta go to the Jordan. And yet again, Elisha insists on coming.

Now finally they get away from another of these bands of disciples of prophets, and I think there’s a bit of additional conversation that would have happened here. This is when I imagine that Elijah would have looked over his glasses, if they had existed then, and given Elisha a good long stare.

“What do you think, Elisha. Do you think I can’t hear what you’ve been talking with the prophets & disciples about? We’ve been talking about this for months – it’s time for me to go. Avoiding the issue just isn’t going to change that. I know that you’d never leave me. But you’ve got to figure out how to quit holding on to me and let go. It’s your time now, not mine. What can I do for you to help you do that?”

This seems to really be a turning point for Elisha. For the first time, he starts talking about life after, life after Elijah, as he asks for this double portion of Elijah’s spirit.

Elisha spent an awful lot of time hanging on to his teacher and mentor. I find myself trying to get inside of his head and his heart to figure out what kept him holding on. Fear of losing his teacher and friend – that’s for sure. Just look at his vehement response that he’s not willing to even let him out of his sight. But I wonder if there’s also a part that was Elisha’s holding onto his own responsibility in losing his mentor. He said, “I’m not leaving you” even though Elijah was the one doing the leaving. I’ve seen this time and time again in my work as a chaplain – seeing a partner or family member not even willing to leave their loved one’s bedside for fear something will happen. Or the overwhelming feeling of responsibility for changing their loved one’s treatment, especially when it comes to decisions of turning off life support machines.

It’s not only people and relationships that we can hold on to but ideas, too. Maybe these are specific hopes or expectations, hopes that keep us going or expectations of how we envision something to be. But there might come a time when that hope begins holding us back or holding us down.

It was almost 7 years ago that I came down with the neurological disorder Guillain-Barre Syndrome where one’s nerves lose their coatings and then grow them back. The worst part of my experience with the disorder was rather short – less than a week of declining ending with two days of hospitalization and then my recovery started. Now the recovery from this is no picnic – nerves hurt when they change, in particular when they are re-growing. In the beginning of my recovery, I could barely walk and barely sleep because of the pain, and holding onto my hopes for recovery was one thing that helped to keep me going. I could make it through a day or through a relatively sleepless night looking ahead to the future, to getting back to the way that I was before it all happened.

But then time started to go by. I had recovered most of my functioning but found myself just waiting, waiting for the rest of the pain to go away. It was a much lower level of pain than it had been initially, but it was still there. I kept telling myself that most people recover completely, so I just had to wait it out and I'd get there too. But I wasn't really living, just waiting. And one day, after about 6 months, that realization finally occurred to me... that I didn't have to keep feeling like a victim and just waiting for things to change. It was a moment that truly felt liberating. It was when I decided that my future didn't necessarily have to be absolutely pain-free and I should just get on living instead of waiting for that outcome that might never be. I let go of that particular hope. Now, my conviction certainly wavers from time to time, when I have moments of slipping back into a feeling of victimhood and feeling sorry for myself. And I'll entertain the thought for a minute and then tell myself to let go of it; that it isn't me. And there's probably been discernible change over the past 7 years, but I've quit even trying to figure it out. It's just not worth life's energy spent worrying.

For me, letting go was a release, relieving me from the restrictions that my holding on had brought. Now I know that I'm talking about the positive sides of letting go while neglecting the positive sides of holding on, and holding on is just as important when it's the right time for it. But I'm not really worried about anyone not knowing when to hold on. Humans are pretty good at that. I haven't met very many people, well anybody really, who let go too soon, who let go of an idea or of a person that they loved too soon. Instead it seems to be knowing the right time, or else ignoring that time when it's there.

Let me take you inside two hospital rooms, both very literally times of letting go, when families had to turn off the machines and let their loved one die.

The first man I'll call "Ralph." I was called to talk with his family because they were having a difficult time with "some decisions" and his wife was upset. So here we are, sitting in Ralph's room in one of the intensive care units. He's got a lot of machines – his heart monitor, IV's & medications, dialysis machine, and of course the respirator – the machine literally creating his breaths. As we're talking, we can hear the breaths, regular through the machine, and even see the display picturing each breath. The end was there for him – there was not much more that the surgeons could do. Ralph would move and then we'd talk about whether he was moving towards his wife's or son's voice or if it had just been a spasm. There were things that they wanted to have said but never got the chance to. His children talked about their anger and told me what a good man he was. They asked what he did to deserve this. They directed their anger theologically and were angry with God for allowing it to happen.

They had been holding on with him for so long– through his surgeries and recoveries and through this struggle. But even through their anger and disbelief, even through their exhaustion and numbness, every single person that I talked to in his family told me that they were ready. Ready to let go. That it was his time and what he would have wanted. Through a lot of tears for some and without tears for others, they had already made the decision. And even after the ventilator had been turned off and the aggressive medications stopped, Ralph lingered for about a day before dying. And it felt okay – like

he was just lingering for a little more time with them not because they were desperate for it but just to linger. When they left, they were grieving of course, but their decision to let go seemed courageous and healthy. I felt good about them, that they had gotten through what was probably the most difficult part of the entire experience.

The other man I'll call "Ed." While many of the things that happened with Ed were similar to Ralph, his family's experience was entirely different. They were struggling, and I do mean struggling, with the idea of letting go. Ed couldn't speak or communicate anymore, and he was dying. There was nothing that could be done to prevent it. Though his room looked so much like the first, the room held desperation, in between the words spoken by his family and held in their eyes. Eventually, Ed slipped away, despite his family's efforts to keep holding on. I was worried for them, worried that they might never find the release of letting go, the release they had run from for so long.

Holding on is something that we do so naturally, but I think letting go is really the work of being alive, in relationship with others and in relationship with ourselves. Sometimes these are huge things to let go of, like many of the things I've talked about today. But much of the time they are not quite so huge. Like when my daughter wanted me to stop walking her into the school building. I had to let go of my own expectation of doing that, and, well, at least attempt to let go of my disappointment. We don't have to practice holding on, but letting go sure does seem to take practice. But the rewards can be great.

I'd like to close with one of the Experience Project readings from earlier, written by Blue Zen, a woman in her early 30's.

"I spoke, I let the words flow from my heart to my mouth. I let the feelings that I held for so long become words that will reach your eyes. My words flew like captured birds, outwards and onwards. They breathed the clean air and almost smiled back to me as they flew away from me.

Now my heart is light again, there is space in it again. Although you ran away, you took my words with you, do with them what you may, for I am clean. I had my catharsis, now I can move on; for the weight I had in my heart is gone."