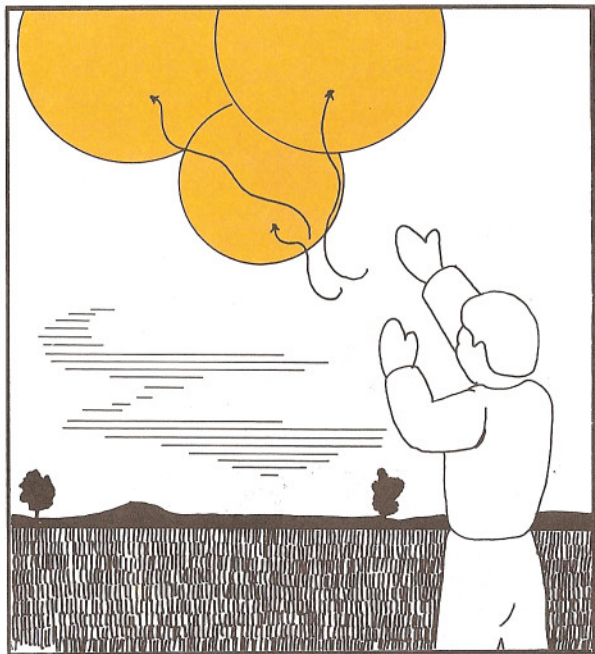


POCKET POWER

LETTING GO



Hazelden®

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LETTING GO

A wealth of wisdom and experience lies behind the simple A.A. saying — “let go.” The following story illustrates how we hinder our spiritual progress when we refuse to let go.

One day two monks were walking through the woods on their way to help gather the autumn harvest in the next village. As they approached a small stream, they met an old woman from their village sitting upon the bank. The first monk asked her, “Grete, what are you doing, sitting here wringing your hands? I thought you were supposed to be at your son’s house just after dawn today to help with the apple pressing.”

Grete answered, “I am afraid to cross the stream, even though I know it is but a trifle, a small splash of water. I suppose I am a foolish old woman. So I have been sitting here these last hours, wringing my hands and wondering what to do.”

The first monk said to her, “We will carry you across this small stream.” The two monks joined their hands to fashion a seat and carried her safely across the water. Then the monks continued on their way.

One mile later, the second monk said to the first, "My frock is wet and soiled because of that foolish old woman. And my back still hurts from the strain of carrying her." The first monk just smiled and said nothing.

Three miles later, the second monk said, "My back is still sore and aching. I know I shall have trouble helping with the harvest today." Again, the first monk smiled and said nothing.

Five miles later, the second monk complained, "I am sure now that you will have to go ahead without me. My back aches so much because of that foolish old woman, that I cannot travel any farther."

The first monk turned to the second monk and said, "Your back aches because you are still carrying her. I let go five miles ago when I put her down on the other side of the stream."

Fighting the Program

At some point in our sobriety, all of us experience the struggle of letting go. Like the second monk, we cling to old habits or resentments that make our progress forward difficult or even impossible. When we encounter impasses in our recovery, we summon our old stubbornness and pride and hopelessly thrash about, like fish scooped up by fishermen's nets. We continue

struggling, thinking we must fight alone. We call this "fighting the program."

Fighting the program means living from a "me" instead of "we" perspective. While using alcohol or other drugs, we felt we carried the problems of the whole world on our shoulders, and we could never put away our worries, even for a moment. Instead, we laid awake at night scheming about how to manipulate situations, or worrying about potential catastrophes.

Old habits die slowly. After we achieve some sobriety, we are often surprised that many of our troubles remain. We can no longer escape to the magic freedom of the bottle or pills, where all our problems seem to disappear. We experience many old feelings of shame and remorse over past binges, as well as regrets about failed relationships. These feelings haunt us with an intensity we hadn't known while we were medicating our feelings.

When we are confronted with unpleasant feelings and the necessity to change, we may fall back on our deepest instinct — we fight. We clench our teeth and determine through sheer willpower to get ourselves out of this mess. But like a car spinning its tires in the snow, our struggle only makes the situation worse.

Whether the problem is to quit smoking, or quit sugar, or move on after a relationship ends,

we cannot change as long as we struggle. Fighting the program means clinging to old ways in spite of ourselves, even when we want to change.

Why do we do this? Change is frightening. The past may have been miserable, but at least it was familiar. We become comfortable with old habits and thought patterns which keep us from growing. Letting go of them can be as painful and difficult as giving up alcohol or other drugs.

Our negative thoughts can snowball and, at times, consume us. Negative thinking separates us from a sense of belonging, suffocates our hope and prevents us from gaining true happiness. Negativity has been a part of our lives for so many years, we need a great deal of practice to develop positive views.

If we pause in the midst of our struggles and worries, we can give ourselves time to let a new realization sink in: we don't *have* to fight anymore. We have another choice: we can surrender. Rather than manipulating situations, we can surrender control. Surrender is essentially an act of trust. When we let go, we can trust events to unfold on their own. Trust gives us a sense of acceptance, and through acceptance we find serenity.

Paradoxically, surrender is not the same as

giving up. When we first came to the program, we didn't give up. We surrendered to our illness of alcoholism. Instead of trying to control, we asked for help. Surrender means exchanging "me" for "we." Surrender means letting go.

If I Let Go, Who Will Catch Me?

Many of us cling to old habits and problems, even though we realize they cause more harm than good. Deep in our hearts we feel alone in the world. In the program we find a glimmer of hope that we are *not* alone. We find a fellowship of men and women to share our strengths, experiences, and hopes. We listen to the suggestions of older members instead of dismissing ideas that differed from ours.

Gaining a sense of connection with others helps build a spiritual foundation that will sustain us in times of trouble. Before finding A.A., we felt we were perched on the edge of a great cliff, ready to fall at any moment. We clung desperately to the little we had left of our lives to avoid tumbling into the blackness of insanity or death. We were afraid to live and afraid to die.

How could we let go if we had nowhere to go and no one to catch us? We led trapped and desperate lives. In recovery we need to occasion-

ally remind ourselves how far we have come and how much we have to be grateful for. It's easy to slip into old ways of thinking during times of stress and look for impulsive, desperate, or easy solutions. We need to remember we now have more options than we had previously thought imaginable. We no longer have to play the trapped victim or the master puppeteer who tries to control the lives of all those around him. We can be human, with all the freedom which that brings.

When we are confronted with a problem and feel afraid, we can remember we are part of the fellowship; we can find strength in realizing we no longer need to battle our personal dragons alone. We can pause, allow the panic to subside, and listen to our inner voices. This time of quietness helps us break the walls of our loneliness and find a sense of connection with our Higher Power. We remember to "Let go and let God."

Our Higher Power will help us in times of need. By cultivating a positive attitude of faith and hope we can put our problems in perspective. Times of pain are always opportunities for growth, and our Higher Power never gives us more than we can handle. We don't need to solve all our problems in a day; we don't have to solve all our problems by ourselves. All we need to do is reach beyond ourselves, through medi-

tation and prayer, and talk things over with a sponsor or friend. We can let go, secure in the fact that our Higher Power and the fellowship will help and support us.

Getting Ready

Most of us are not able to immediately surrender control of our problems to our Higher Power. We often struggle until we become so miserable that we throw up our hands and cry, "I give up!"

We don't need to struggle until we reach the depths of misery. Warning signs can make us aware of when we need to "Let go and let God." When we become increasingly irritable with friends, co-workers, or our family, we may be taking everyone's inventory but our own. We may imagine solutions such as, "If only this person would change, then I could finally be happy."

Patterns of being overly critical and controlling usually mean we are avoiding taking a good hard look at ourselves. We may be ignoring a character defect. It's easier to blame our problems on someone else. When we let go of our efforts to change other people, we take responsibility for our own growth and change. We can turn things around by realizing we are not the

center of the universe. Like snowflakes, we are each separate and unique. Instead of wasting energy criticizing others, we can let go and appreciate their specialness.

Isolation is another warning that tells us to let go. We begin to miss meetings, or we switch meetings so we are no longer responsible to a home group. We may begin to call friends less, and we make up excuses when invited out. We may isolate ourselves by talking to only one special friend.

We often isolate ourselves when we feel secretly ashamed about a problem. We may be in an abusive or overly dependent relationship. We may have an eating disorder, become compulsive shoppers, or gamblers. Whatever the problem, the first step is to reach out to our Higher Power and other people.

We begin by being honest with ourselves and others. At meetings, we talk honestly about our struggles in working the Twelve Steps. We are honest with friends instead of telling them everything is fine. We need to be gentle with ourselves and patient with our Higher Power. The pain of personal growth is part of the human experience. While going through painful periods, we can be good to ourselves. Take a bubble bath, go for a walk with a friend, go to a movie, or curl up with a good book.

When we let go, we need to remember our Higher Power doesn't work miracles if we sit back and do nothing. We need to pray for potatoes with hoes in our hands. For example, a salesman who had a few months of sobriety had to give a sales presentation. He was terrified at the prospect of speaking in front of a large group of his peers, so he decided to "let go and let God." He prayed to his Higher Power for courage, then spent the night watching television instead of preparing for the presentation.

His presentation did not go well. At his A.A. meeting, the salesman complained that "This letting go stuff isn't all that it's cracked up to be." But, by the end of the meeting the salesman realized that instead of letting go of his anxieties, he had let go of his responsibilities. Letting go is not a license to be lazy or irresponsible. Letting go is an admission of humility and faith, followed by action!

Letting go helps us live with our problems and with our disease. We admitted we were powerless and our lives had become unmanageable; we turned our will over to the care of God as we understood Him. This means we live one day at a time; we don't take the first drink; we go to meetings, and we try to work the Twelve Steps to the best of our ability. We pray for potatoes with hoes in our hands.

Accepting Change

When we let go we accept the fact that life is constantly changing. Yesterday's joys and sorrows are past. If we cling to the past, we miss the wonder and excitement of the present. We go through our lives in a trance.

When we are confronted with a problem which seems insurmountable, we may look back to the past through rose-colored glasses. Life seemed sweeter, simpler, and easier. We may feel the pain of an old relationship and brood about how wonderful life was. We feel trapped by our memories, and find we can't stop thinking about them.

We need to take a leap of faith. Letting go means having faith that we are put in this world to experience life fully. We can lead useful, productive, and happy lives. When we put our lives into the care of our Higher Power, we can truly look at the world around us. We may realize how unaware of our surroundings we have been while mired in depression and hopelessness. A miracle happens when we are willing to change and to live in the present. We discover people are there ready and waiting to help us.

Letting go of negative attitudes is manageable if we concentrate on living one day at a time. Living one day at a time puts our prob-

lems into perspective and reminds us that a well-lived life begins in the present, not in the past or future.

The ability to accept change is the gift we receive when we let go. Simple acts of faith and humility give us much in return. We exchange our sad, gray "me's" for exciting, multicolored "we's." We discover tolerance for people who look or act differently than we do. We form friendships and are intimate without the constant, fruitless struggle of trying to change others.

We can laugh, cry, and celebrate the miracle of life together. We have let go, and by letting go have gained a precious gift. We accept our own and other's frailties, and we grow from our pain. This ability to learn from our experiences is part of the miracle of the program. We turned our weakness into our greatest strength; by letting go we gained an understanding of the spiritual principles of the program which will forever sustain and nurture us.

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