

Letting Go

MICHELE  SAFFIER
& ASSOCIATES



In the stress and complexity of our lives, we may forget our deepest intentions. But when people come to the end of their life and look back, the questions that they most often ask are not usually, “How much is in my bank account?” or “How many books did I write?” or “What did I build?” or the like. If

you have the privilege of being with a person who is aware at the time of his or her death, you find the questions such a person asks are very simple: “Did I love well?” “Did I live fully?” “Did I learn to let go?”

These simple questions go to the very center of spiritual life. When we consider loving well and living fully, we can see the ways our attachments and fears have limited us, and we can see the many opportunities for our hearts to open. Have we let ourselves love the people around us, our family, our community, the earth upon which we live? And, did we also learn to let go? Did we learn to live through the changes of life with grace, wisdom, and compassion? Have we learned to forgive and live from the spirit of the heart instead of the spirit of judgment?

Letting go is a central theme in spiritual practice, as we see the preciousness and brevity of life. When letting go is called for, if we have not learned to do so, we suffer greatly, and when we get to the end of our life, we may have what is called a crash course. Sooner or later we have to learn to let go and allow the changing mystery of life to move through us without our fearing it, without holding and grasping.

I knew a young woman who sat with her mother during an extended bout of cancer. Part of this time her mother was in the hospital hooked up to dozens of tubes and machines. Mother and daughter agreed that the mother did not want to die this way, and when the illness progressed, she was finally removed from all of the medical paraphernalia and allowed to go home. Her cancer progressed further. Still the mother had a hard time accepting her illness. She tried to run the household from her bed, to pay bills and oversee all the usual affairs of her life. She struggled with her physical pain, but she struggled more with her inability to let go. One day in the midst of this struggle, much sicker now and a bit confused, she called her daughter to her and said, “Daughter, dear, please now pull the plug,” and her daughter gently pointed out, “Mother, you are not plugged in.” Some of us have a lot to learn about letting go.

Letting go and moving through life from one change to another brings the maturing of our spiritual being. In the end we discover that to love and let go can be the same thing. Both ways do not seek to possess. Both allow us to touch each moment of this changing life and allow us to be there fully for whatever arises next.

There is an old story about a famous rabbi living in Europe who was visited one day by a man who had traveled by ship from New York to see him. The man came to the great rabbi's dwelling, a large house on a street in a European city, and was directed to the rabbi's room, which was in the attic. He entered to find the master living in a room with a bed, a chair, and a few books. The man had expected much more. After greetings, he asked, "Rabbi, where are your things?" The rabbi asked in return, "Well, where are yours?" His visitor replied, "But, Rabbi, I'm only passing through," and the master answered, "So am I, so am I."

To love fully and live well requires us to recognize finally that we do not possess or own anything—our homes, our cars, our loved ones, not even our own body. Spiritual joy and wisdom do not come through possession but rather through our capacity to open, to love more fully, and to move and be free in life.

This is not a lesson to be put off. One great teacher explained it this way: "The trouble with you is that you think you have time." We don't know how much time we have. What would it be like to live with the knowledge that this may be our last year, our last week, our last day? In light of this question, we can choose a path with heart.

*This excerpt is taken from the book **A Path with Heart**.*



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