

BE PRESENT

Week #1 of a 4-Week Series, "The Power of Letting Go"

Jan. 17, 2021

Rev. Richard Maraj

Rev. Richard Maraj: Good morning, everyone, and welcome to Unity of Phoenix Spiritual Center's Sunday virtual worship celebration. I'm Rev. Richard Maraj, and I'm so glad to be back with you. Thank you for all the positive thoughts and the wonderful prayers; it worked! I had a very mild case of Covid. Happy to have recovered, and happy to be back with you again.

Today at noon, via Zoom, we are having our Annual Meeting. And you can check out the website for the details about how to join us for that.

This Tuesday Rev. Lori is teaching our "Prayer Basics" class, which is one of the classes to become a member. We probably won't have our Member Orientation until the fall, but you can take the class. Because it's a really good class anyway, just to learn about the foundational principles of Unity.

Right now we're going to move on with our service, as we listen to the choir, as they sing "Surely the Presence" for Rev. Lori to lead us in a time of prayer and meditation.

MEDITATION

Rev. Lori Fleming: I invite you to a time of prayer and meditation. As we close our outer eyes and take in a deep, cleansing breath, as we release it slowly. And take in another mindful breath. And, as we release it, we let go of any troubles that have been bothering us. Gently let go of anything that's on our minds or on our hearts; just give it to God. Move our awareness more deeply into that quiet space within: in that place of oneness with Spirit where we are truly one with the Divine, and one with each other. Into this peaceful, quiet moment of spiritual serenity, of calm, as we open our hearts to God's unconditional love within us. Recognizing our oneness, not only with the Divine, but with each other. And that, no matter what's going on in the outer world today, truly we are one in the inner world.

And when we take this time away -- this time of peaceful meditation and prayer -- our consciousness is cleansed. In the silence, we become a whole new being, filled with the light of Spirit, vitalizing every cell in our body, bringing us to wholeness in body, in mind, in spirit. And we recognize that we are created with sacred worth. That each and every person on this planet came for a sacred purpose: to glorify God, to bring us closer together, to heal everything that needs to be healed, to practice forgiveness so that we can move forward as the divine beings that we are. We know that, no matter what we look like or where we've come from or what language we speak, we're all one. And that each and every one of us is a unique part of the tapestry of life. That every color is necessary. That every texture makes us richer, because together we're stronger. Together we're whole. Together we are one.

And so we take just a few moments to move our awareness deeper within, as we feel the peace that passes understanding of God's great unconditional love.

SILENCE

And so, sweet Spirit, we come in gratitude for this time together of prayer and meditation. For connecting hearts to hearts and minds to minds with that great Oneness that we call God. And so for all the blessings that we have, and for the blessings still to come, we say thank you, God; thank you, God; thank you, God! And it is so. Amen.

SOLO

Sean Mullaney sings "I'm Movin' On"

I've dealt with my ghosts and I've chased all my demons
Finally content with a past I regret
I've found you find strength in your moments of weakness
For once I'm at peace with myself
I've been burdened with blame, trapped in the past for too long
But I'm movin' on

And I've lived in this place and I know all the faces
Each one is different but they're always the same
They mean me no harm but it's time that I face it
They'll never allow me to change
But I never dreamed home would end up where I don't belong
Yeah, I'm movin' on

I'm movin' on
At last I can see life has been patiently waiting on me
And I know there's no guarantees, but I'm not alone
There comes a time in everyone's life
All you can see are the years passing by
And I have made up my mind that those days are gone

Well, I packed what I could and sold what I couldn't
Stopped to fill up on my way out of town
You know, I've lived like I should and loved like I shouldn't
I had to lose everything to find out
Maybe forgiveness will find me somewhere down this road
I'm movin' on
I'm movin' on
I'm movin' on

MESSAGE

Rev. Richard Maraj: Thank you, Sean! That was absolutely fabulous!

So we're going to start the new year off with a couple of jokes, as we usually do. So here we go!

So why did the whale cross the ocean? To get to the other tide.

What did the doctor say when the mummy was born? *"Alright; let's wrap it up!"*

And what did the baby soy bean say to its dad? *"Where's edamame?"*

And here's the big close: Why was Vincent van Gogh such a good friend? Because he was always willing to lend an ear. *[Simulates "rim shot" drum roll]*

Alright! Happy New Year, everybody! And so, as we begin this new year, let me ask you a question: What would you like to change in your life this year? What would you like to improve? What would you like to be better? Would you like to have greater health and energy? Would you like to have a new relationship? Or maybe an improved and more intimate and happier relationship? Maybe you'd like a better job. Maybe you would like to have more money. Maybe you'd like to find your purpose in life. Or maybe you'd like to have less of something: maybe less drama. You know, less stress, less tension, less conflict in your family.

You know, the Bible gives us all kinds of promises that our lives can get better. And some of the Scriptures include, *"Ask and you shall receive; seek and you shall find; knock and the door will be opened unto you."* *"All things are possible to those who believe!"* In the Book of Jeremiah, we are told that God has a plan for us to prosper, and to give us hope and a future. Jesus said, *"It's the Father's good pleasure to give us the kingdom"* and that he came *"that we may have life, and have it more abundantly."*

These are amazing and powerful promises that our lives can get better. But how do we actually do it? How do we create it? How do we manifest it? And how do we bring it forth? How do we attract the change and improvement that we are seeking?

Now, in our culture, we're automatically trained to change your thinking, and do lots of actions, and just hang in there -- persevere, push, fight, fight, fight -- and you will achieve your goals and desires. And our annual tradition is to think and set our intentions. And we start out fast and furious, with all kinds of actions. But in our third week, studies show that we usually give up or forget or stop trying, and sink back into our own patterns. Sink back into our usual habits and routines, and levels of happiness go right back to where they are.

So what if I told you there was a better way? What if I told you there was an easier and more effective way that can have the success and joy you want flow with greater ease, greater grace and greater happiness? And the fact is: there is. And it is by making a powerful spiritual practice a part of our regular and daily lives! And that powerful spiritual practice that can transform our lives is the practice of letting go.

And I realize letting go doesn't sound so exciting. But it is powerful! It is absolutely amazing! And what would we let go? We would let go of our fear. Let go of shame. Let go of worry. Let go of anxiety. Let go of our conditioning. Let go of our false beliefs. Let go of our negative thinking and our mindset. Let go of feelings of unworthiness. You know, if we were to practice -- on a daily basis -- the spiritual practice of letting go, it would absolutely transform our lives.

Dr. David Hawkins said that research shows that the number one thing that we can do to improve our lives in every single way -- from our health and our energy to peace of mind, our level of spiritual connection -- the number one practice is the practice of letting go. If we are serious about changing and improving our lives, letting go has to be an element of that process of improvement and transformation.

The Apostle Paul said the word, *"I die daily."* And what he meant by that is: on a daily basis, he releases and lets go of the frustrations and the hurts and the regrets and the mistakes. He liberates himself from the past to be fully present to connect and live this day in a more joyful and wonderful way.

Today we are starting a four-week series on "The Power of Letting Go," because it is such a transformative practice for our lives: so empowering! It really will make a difference. It is based on a book by John Purkiss, where he talks about how to let go of all the things that we've been holding on to that are holding ourselves back. Because the truth is: the greatest thing that holds our happiness and success back -- the greatest thing that causes the most frustration -- is when we hold on to things that aren't good for us. When we hold on to the past. When we hold on to limited thinking and beliefs. And especially when we hold on to things that aren't true about who we are. When we hold on to ideas that we are "less," that we are unworthy, that we are victims, it really stops us from living and enjoying and expressing and embodying the kind of life that we are meant to live. We are so much more than we have come to believe! And we need to let go of those lesser thoughts to fully step into the truth of who we really are.

Thomas Howard said these words: *"We are here for the purpose of providing increasingly effective and dynamic outlets for the intelligence and livingness of God."* That we are here to be dynamic outlets! We are here to open ourselves to the amazing possibilities of that Spirit within us, and to let it flow! He says, *"May each of us step more fully into our divine nature, and co-create with the all-originating Spirit ever-*

more glorious revelations of the divine imagination." And that's a fancy way to say step in to your divine nature and open yourself to the unlimited possibilities of God's goodness that is meant for you.

You know, one of the things Purkiss says is that holding on really creates a level of separation and disconnect with our divine nature: that Intelligence and creative unlimited Good that made us. And we believe that we are so much less. That letting go is the process of releasing that, and to fully becoming and discovering who we really are. And nothing is more liberating or empowering than learning how to let go to fully step forth and be who we came here to be.

So over the next four weeks, we're going to look at different aspects of letting go and releasing, and how they can change our lives. Today we're going to look at letting go and how it can help us to be more **PRESENT** in the here and now.

So have you ever been working on a project, and your body was there, but your mind was way somewhere else? Totally distracted on something in the past, or worrying about something in the future, or obsessing about something that is currently going on? Or have you ever been in a conversation with someone, and you're talking with them, and you can tell they're just not there? They're not listening; they're not present?

You know, Woody Allen once said that 80% of success is just showing up. And sometimes in our lives, if we're really honest, we're not always present. We're not always present in our relationships. We're not always present to our own feelings and ourselves and our desires. We're not present and fully engaged in the work that we do.

And see, the reason is that our bodies might be there physically, but the reason we're not present is because our minds are off and drifting off and being distracted. The Buddhists say we have something called "monkey mind": the mind is like a monkey jumping from branch to branch, and getting distracted. You know, our minds really can go all over the place! I mean, have you ever just been thinking of something over and over and over again: overthinking it, obsessing it, almost to the point that you couldn't even shut your mind off? I mean, our minds are always thinking about, "*How do I get what I want?*" Or we think, "*How do I deal with the fact that what I wanted didn't happen?*" And then also, "*How do I deal with the fact that things happened that I didn't want?*" Our minds are always racing, thinking about all these types of things.

And that's why the Apostle Paul said, "*Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*" That, if you really want to transform your life, you have to renew your mind. And the way to renew the mind is: you have to quiet your mind. You have to slow down your mind. You have to bring more stillness into your mind. And the only way to renew our mind and quiet our mind is learning how to let go. Just how to release.

And so, one of the practices of letting go -- and relaxing our mind and bringing it to the present -- is mindfulness meditation. Mindfulness meditation is a process of letting go of the past -- and letting go of any concern for the future -- and bringing your minds to the here and now. Because peace is now. Happiness is now. Life is now. All of the good -- and all of the things that we want to experience and create -- can only be done in the here and now. The more we pull ourselves to the past or the future, or have our minds wander, we actually limit and reduce and diminish our ability to live more effectively and freely.

And the universal way to let go and bring ourselves to the present and the here and now is just the simple practice of following your breath as you breathe in, and following your breath as you breathe out. It pulls us away from the past and the future, and brings us to the here and now.

So everyone just take a deep breath: feel the air as it comes. And exhale: feel the air as it goes out. Just focus on your breath as it comes in; focus on your breath as it leaves. Focus on your breath as it comes in; focus on your breath as you exhale. Breathing in; breathing out. All your attention on your breath as

you breathe in and breathe out. If your mind wanders, that's okay; just bring it back by breathing in: focus on your breath in. Focus on your breath out. Now just notice your feet as they're on the ground. Just notice them for a second: be aware; be present to them. And now be present to your breath as you breathe in. Be present as you breathe out. Be aware of your breath as you breathe in; be aware of your breath as you breathe out. Breathing in and breathing out. Now notice your neck and your shoulders. Just be present to however that's feeling. And now back to your breath: breathing in and breathing out. Just breathe in and breathe out. One more time: breathe in. Breathing out. In fact, let's do one more with a big smile: breathe in and breathe out.

And I bet every single one of us is probably a little more calm and a little more relaxed, because letting go really works. The more we let go, we not only just relax and calm ourselves, but we open ourselves to greater ideas, greater wisdom, greater peace. And things just begin to flow and happen with greater ease. We don't have to force and make things ... we can actually just allow things to happen.

The mind is always going to wander, so for this to work -- this practice of letting go and mindfulness -- we need to do it on a consistent and regular basis. And the more consistently we do it, we'll be less stressed, and we'll be more calm and able to enjoy life. You know, the more connected -- instead of disconnected -- we feel. But we need to do it on a consistent and regular basis.

Now, letting go isn't easy, but we have done letting go -- and we do letting go -- in moments in our lives that we don't always realize. Let me give you an example. Have you ever woken up in the morning without your alarm, and you weren't quite conscious, but you just felt all warm and cozy? You weren't thinking about anything; you were just kind of just being and in that moment? Then after a few moments, you start thinking, "*Ope, I'd better get up. Oh, I'd better ... What am I going to eat for breakfast? You know, I've got this big meeting at work!*" And we get into our heads. But we do, and we've all had those moments of just letting go, and how peaceful and calming that can be.

Other times, have you ever been lost and looking at the sunset -- or the moon at night -- and you're just captivated? You are fully present: fully alive and engaged in that moment? And then you think, "*Hey, maybe I should get my phone and take a picture of this, and then show it to so and so.*" And we get out of our heads. But we have been in those moments of just feeling a sense of bliss and peace and oneness.

Even in our meditations, we've had moments where we're just so connected to the breath, so connected to that moment. And then we think to ourselves, "*Why can't I do this all the time?*" And we pull ourselves out. And it's okay that our mind goes away. That's how it goes!

The question is: can we consistently keep bringing it back, keep bringing it back, keep bringing it back? Because what it does: it helps us drop into the gap between our thoughts, where there is infinite possibility. Where there is incredible peace and intuition and wisdom and clarity and guidance. But we need to keep going back. A part of the routine is: the mind will always wander, and you just gently bring it back, bring it back, and bring it back.

We don't need to go up onto a mountain top; we don't need to retreat from the world. We just need to practice this consistently: coming back to the breath, being mindful in the here and now. And it just begins to open up a whole new world of peace and possibilities for our lives.

Now, the second thing we need to do to practice letting go and being present is to become the observer. In our meditation, you'll notice that your mind always wanders. It wanders on, "*Hey, I need to pick up some bread and milk on the way home.*" Or, "*I can't believe that person said that to me yesterday.*" Or, "*Oh; I made such a terrible mistake, and I wish I didn't say this or that.*" And it's just to observe -- just to notice -- that that's where the mind goes. And to just say, "*Oh! There's my mind telling myself that story that life is unfair.*" "*Oh; there I go just feeling angry about the person that cut me off on the highway yesterday.*" And just observing -- not getting sucked in and pulled into it -- but just observing the thoughts that come into our minds.

We are not our thoughts; we can just observe our thoughts. And what that does is create a level of space in between ourselves and our thoughts. Realizing we're not our thoughts. And it makes us more self-aware and it gives us choices and options of how to handle those situations. The more we can be observing, particularly in our meditation, of where our thoughts go -- without judging them, and just being aware of them -- we can actually bring that observation into our real life.

Like, if we're watching the news and we see something that ticks us off, we don't have to just dive into the pool of being ticked off. We can just think to ourselves: *"Okay; I notice that my mind is being triggered and upset and angry right now at whatever that person is saying."* And the more we can just pull back by just observing, the greater difference it's going to make.

And it could be, *"Oh; I'm noticing and observing that I'm feeling nervous now."* Or, *"I'm feeling ashamed."* Or, *"I'm feeling scared or insecure."* Just noticing the stories that we tell ourselves -- and the feelings that come up -- really make a huge difference. Just observing takes away us being hooked into it. It's almost like watching a screen, like in a movie theater. The screen will be our consciousness, and the thoughts and the pictures are the things that we project onto our screen.

We project stories all the time! And we don't have to get sucked into it. We can just think, *"Ope, there's that story I tell myself about how life's unfair!"* *"There's that story I'm telling myself that that person is better than me."* And just noticing it really makes a difference. It increases our self-awareness. It gives us liberation.

And the most important thing is to observe without judging. Don't put ourselves down or condemn for what we're thinking! Just be aware. The more observe it, we actually are less controlled by it. More liberated.

Now, this is hard work: observing our own thinking! We're going get sucked in. We're going to get just jammed up and hooked in and consumed with it from time to time. And that's okay! Success is that, if you get hooked four out of five times instead of five out of five times, that is progress! Observing makes a huge difference in our level of self-awareness, and gives us the freedom of choice. And it doesn't keep our minds sucked into the negativity or the drama.

And the final thing I want to talk about is learning how to let go of who we think we are, and to unite with the true nature of who we really are. See, most of us identify ourselves with all the normal human things. We identify ourselves by our names, by our jobs, by our income, by our nationality. By our political affiliation. We think that's who we are! But the truth is: when we are able to go to a deeper level of releasing, we can get to the truth of who we really are, which is that we are pure consciousness. We are expressions of God. We are divine, amazing spiritual beings.

I love the word "transcendental." Transcendental meditation is a form of meditation where they use mantras to help us go deeper. And to transcend means "to rise above" and to connect to the higher level of oneness and Spirit. And so what we do in meditation is to transcend and connect with the higher truth of who we really are. We are divine beings. We are pure consciousness.

And one of the mantras -- and the word "mantra" actually means "a mind instrument." It's a mind instrument we use in meditation. As we're breathing in and breathing out, we actually say a mantra. And John Purkiss says the most powerful mantra to know who we are is the mantra, *"I AM."* To just breathe in and say to ourselves, *"I AM"* as we relax. Breathe in; *"I AM."* And as we're breathing in, just keep affirming, *"I AM. I AM. I AM. I AM."* That, when we do that 20, 30 times, it drops us into the truth of who we really are. The more we will be able to let go of who we're not, and the more we'll be able to identify and live from that truth of who we really are. "I AM" is about being present to the presence of that Spirit that is within each and every one of us.

You know, in Psalm 1, it says that when we meditate on God -- when we meditate day and night on that spiritual truth -- we will be like a tree that is planted next to a stream that has strong roots. Whose

leaves never wither, and who prospers in all ways. That when we connect and meditate on the "I AM" -- the truth of the amazing divine beings that we are -- we become more steady. We become more solid. We become more centered. And we become more open to grow and to express and be those dynamic outlets for the amazing livingness of God.

This is a new year, and we all want to have a better life. And I would suggest this year -- instead of setting goals and resolutions -- maybe make a commitment to change how we live. To bring in this practice of letting go, and allowing letting go to reap its amazing benefits of bringing the truth of who we really are out in all that we do.

The three practices that I want you to do is: practice mindfulness. Follow your breath in and out. When your mind wanders, that's okay; bring it back with your breath, and let it help you come to the present moment: the most powerful moment that we have. Secondly, observe your thoughts. That, when you're meditating, just observe where your mind goes without judging it; just observe it. Creates a little bit of space, brings greater self-awareness, gives us more choices in how we respond. And then, finally, identify with the truth of who you are by just meditating and affirming as your mantra -- as your mind instrument -- "I AM. I AM. I AM. I AM. I AM."

The more that we are connected to the present, the more conscious and the more engaged and more alive we are! Our lives can improve in amazing and great ways if we make our commitment to practice letting go.

God bless you all!

OFFERING

Rev. Lori Fleming: It's that time in our service to give of our gifts and our tithes and our offerings. We're so grateful to all of you who continue to send in checks, and to contribute online to keep this great work we call Unity of Phoenix Spiritual Center going. Thank you so much for all you give!

Our offering blessing is: *"Divine love, through me, blesses and multiplies all that I have, all that I give, and all that I receive."* And so we say thank you, Mother/Father God, for these gifts, and these tithes and these offerings. We know they are given in love, they are received in love, and that they move through this ministry with the energy of divine love out into the world as good. And that each giver is blessed -- heaped up, pressed down and overflowing -- for that is the Law. And so it is. Thank you, God! Amen.

CLOSING

Rev. Lori Fleming: Well, we're so grateful you took the time to be with us: to watch our service online. We hope you have a fabulous week. And now will you join me in listening as the choir sings the Peace Song?

Choir sings Peace Song:

Let there be peace on earth
And let it begin with me!
Let there be peace on earth
The peace that was meant to be!

With God as Creator
Family all are we!
Let us walk with each other
In perfect harmony!

Let peace begin with me;
Let this be the moment now!
With every breath I take

Let this be my joyous vow:
To take each moment and live each moment
In peace eternally!

Let there be peace on earth
And let it begin with me!

Rev. Lori Fleming: And now will join me in affirming the Prayer for Protection?

The light of God surrounds us;
The love of God enfolds us;
The power of God protects us;
The presence of God watches over us.
Wherever we are, God is. And all is well!

Have a fabulous week!

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