

Letting Go of Staying Still

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I mentioned over a year ago now that part of my work as a minister has been to help people let go of beliefs. This is counter-intuitive. We usually think of church and of ministers as those entities that try to get us to believe in things such as creeds.

I have found from experience that many people have plenty of beliefs that are neither true nor helpful in terms of their personal growth. It is liberating for these folks to let go of these beliefs.

Let's take an easy one for illustration. This is not about a particular person, but a conglomerate of people.

Francine, not her real name, was told that divorce was against the will of God. Marriage was for life. She believed it. She vowed that she would never get a divorce. To do so would go against the will of God.

As it turned out, she found herself needing to get out of a relationship that simply wasn't working. She tried everything to keep it together. She finally ended the relationship and divorced her husband.

Among all the feelings of grief, she felt a profound sense of guilt. She believed that she had sinned against God. That guilt became even heavier when she considered getting married again several years later. She believed the Bible. She was told that the Bible says that once you are divorced it is against God's will to marry again. She believed it.

Yet she wanted to marry again. She was in a dilemma. Follow God or follow her heart? To get to the point, she finally let go of some of her beliefs about God. She let go of her belief that God was always judging and counting sins. She let go of her belief that everything in the Bible or everything everyone says is in the Bible is the absolute truth.

One could argue that she just rationalized her divorce and remarriage. In fact, she was accused by family members and others, including people in her church, of doing just that. She found after much soul-searching that she needed to let go of yet another belief.

She needed to let go of the belief that others knew better how she should run her life than she did.

When Francine let go of that belief, she was able to grow, to be happy with herself and with God, who as it turned out, wasn't who she believed Her to be after all.

Not everyone is able or willing to do that. Some folks remain stuck. They are stuck either in their beliefs or stuck in guilt because their beliefs and their actions are not integrated. In either case, they cannot grow because they are staying still.

Francine's story is a successful one. It took work and courage on her part. It took some good fortune to find trusted support to help her work through it all.

I tell this quasi-fictional story of Francine to illustrate that personal growth at times involves letting go of beliefs rather than adding beliefs or holding harder to the beliefs we have inherited.

My series of Lenten sermons are about beliefs to let go in order to grow.

I have to take care with this. Because some of what I have been saying these past few weeks has been autobiographical. Therefore, the beliefs that I am in the process of letting go may not be the ones that you might need to let go. I don't want to impose my non-belief, so to speak, onto you.

So take it for what it is worth. I don't insist.

I wasn't sure what to talk about this week. As this was the jazz service, I didn't know how my sermon series was going to fit in with that. I didn't know until this week what the theme would be.

Thanks to Rick Simerly, I found the theme. Rick and I have been communicating by e-mail about this service. I asked him to pick the songs. It was interesting the songs that he chose. I see motion in them.

“I Want Jesus to Walk with Me.”

“Just a Closer Walk with Thee.”

“When the Saints Go Marching In.” Well, I picked that one.

I thought, “That’s it. This sermon has to be about moving, walking, the journey. You can’t do that if you are staying still.”

Thus letting go of staying still. In classical physics we learned the law of inertia. A body at rest stays at rest unless a force acts upon it. A body in motion stays at the same speed in a straight line unless a force acts upon it. In more precise language, from a physics textbook: *Every body perseveres in its state of being at rest or of moving uniformly straight ahead, except insofar as it is compelled to change its state by forces impressed.* [Cohen & Whitman 1999 translation]

At the risk of mixing science and religion, I suggest that religious belief, particularly dogmatic belief, tends to keep us in a state of inertia. We move at the same speed in a straight line or we just sit there.

On the other hand, spirituality is about moving, changing direction, stopping, starting, accelerating, decelerating, and speeding around the curves. Spiritual growth is the force that acts against the inertia of religious dogmatism. Religious symbols can be powerful forces for spiritual growth, but when they harden into beliefs they stop our growth.

We, of course, are not marbles. We are conscious beings who can act on our own. In order to act on our own, we need to let go of beliefs (they may be religious, political, or social) that stifle our individuality. In my fictional character Francine’s case, if we let an external authority plan our lives for us, we remain in a state of inertia. Francine had to let go of the belief that she could not make good decisions for herself. When she did let go, she began to move in creative, exciting, and joyful ways.

Since Lent is a season of introspection, we might ask ourselves if there is a sense in which we are in a state of inertia. What is it that is keeping us there? Are there beliefs that are keeping you—to use a cliché—from following your dreams?

To illustrate further, here is a personal story. I have had a dream since I was a teenager I suppose of being a writer. I have dreamed of writing a novel, or a collection of short stories, or as the Beatles sang once upon a time, “I want to be a paperback writer.” Lately, I have dreamed of writing a book of theology. Not a technical academic theology, but one for regular people. That is a topic of which I am interested. I haven’t done much with that dream except to write sermons, or an occasional essay, or more recently, my blog.

Why am I in that state of inertia? I have a lot of beliefs. Here are a few:

I am not a very good writer.
No one really cares what I have to say.
I would never get it published anyway.
The world doesn’t need any more books.
It’s a selfish dream; it is only an ego trip.
I would have to get an advanced degree first.
I should be happy with what I am doing now.
I should just stay the course.
And perhaps the biggest belief of all:

it is better to have an unfulfilled dream, then to follow it and fail.

All of these beliefs, and probably others of which I am not conscious, keep me in a state of inertia. The question for me is this: Will my dream have enough force to overcome the forces of inertia? Will I be able or willing to let go of those beliefs that keep me staying still in order to grow?

I have shared a little bit about myself.
Now, what dreams do you have as yet unfulfilled?
What beliefs are keeping you in a state of inertia?

I want to switch metaphors and close about a belief about God that might be worth letting go.

Last night at the jazz concert, Rick at one point told the audience: “We don’t know what we are doing.” That generated a good deal of laughter as they certainly looked and sounded like they knew what they were doing.

I think what Rick was saying is that with Jazz, there is no music score for each musician. It is not all planned out. I don't know anything about jazz, so I won't say too much so as not to embarrass myself. As I have observed, there is a song to play. There is a beginning and an end. To use a layperson's language, there are themes and markers that they come back to and build upon as I hear it. They have to listen to and respond to each other. But there is no score. There is room for each musician's creativity. The song is different each time it is played. When you are on, you have to improvise. In a sense, you don't know what you are doing until you do it.

You may have been told that God has a plan for your life. It is all predetermined. God knows from beginning to end everything you are going to do. He has written the score and you need to play it. God's spokespeople will even tell you what that score is and how you should play it.

But with jazz, there is a place for human creativity. So if Jazz is a metaphor for life and if God is a jazz artist, then there is a place for your creativity. God might set the tempo and provide some themes such as:

Don't intentionally hurt others or yourself. Seek what is good. Celebrate beauty. Do good work. Contribute to the welfare of others. Think of future generations.

But the rest is improvisation. Play what is within you. We really don't know what we are doing, but that is just fine.

God isn't watching and criticizing every note. It is not all fixed. There is no grand score.

God is improvising with you—with all of us. God enjoys what you have to play.

God is having a good time. So move and groove. The music is in you. Let it out!