

I was visiting my parents this week and my dad asked if I could take him to the hardware store so he could buy some sweeping compound for the garage floor. This surprised me, because we haven't actually seen the garage floor since 2005, when my parents moved there. The garage is stacked and piled with 58 years of marital accumulations. My father is sentimental and won't throw anything away. Holds onto everything.

I asked him, "How are you going to get to the floor to sweep it?"

I wasn't being disrespectful, I was just curious.

He said, "I'm going to clean out my garage and get rid of a bunch of stuff."

Something dreadful has happened to my father. Someone has taken him away and replaced him with an imposter. This man looks like my father, his voice sounds just like my father's voice, but he is saying strange things, things I've never heard my father say before, about letting go of things. It's very peculiar. It's almost like a conversion story in the Bible, like when the Apostle Paul was knocked off his horse and had this dramatic change in personality. My Dad has gone from holding on to letting go. I looked in the garage and there were angels in there, and bright light, and harp music.

It made me think of all the stories in the Bible about holding on and letting go. Starting with the very first story, with God letting Adam and Eve go from the garden. The church has said that's a story of judgment, but any parent recognizes it as a story of a parent letting go of their children, pushing them from the nest. God is just a little annoyed is all. But any parent should recognize that as a teenager-leaving-home story. I mean, read the story. God stays up the night before and makes clothes for them to wear. You don't do that if you're throwing someone out. If you're throwing someone out, you grab them by the scruff of the neck and pitch them out the door. You don't stay up all night and sew clothes for them. This is a story about letting go.

Think for a moment of all the other letting-go stories in the Bible:

Abraham is asked to let go of his son Isaac.

Sarah is so saddened and angry about this, she lets go of Abraham.

The Pharaoh is asked to let go of the Israelites.

Esau is asked to let go of his inheritance.

Saul is asked to let go of his throne and his power.

David is made to let go of the son he fathered with Bathsheba.

Jonah is asked to let go of his hatred for the Ninevites.

Mary and Joseph are asked to let go of their son.

Jesus is asked to let go of his life, and asks us to do the same.

Paul is asked to let go of his prejudice and hatred.

Some of the most difficult decisions we ever face in life are decisions about holding on and letting go. And sometimes they aren't even decisions, in that we don't have a choice. We're simply presented with situations that require us to let go—the death of a child or spouse, the end of a marriage, the loss of a job, the diminishment of our lifestyle, a once-treasured friendship broken through misunderstanding, leaving a house we love, letting go of our independence. Something we once held on to and treasured becomes something we must relinquish, something we must release.

Other times we are presented with situations that require us to hold on—persisting in important relationships even when they have become awkward or difficult, persevering in times of illness or discouragement, sticking with a worthwhile duty that has become challenging. Something we want to release or step away from something, but we stay at it, we hold on.

Our younger son, Sam, is graduating from high school next month. A few weeks ago, we went with him to Fort Ben Harrison where he enlisted in the Army, a development we, his Quaker pacifist parents, did not foresee. I guess this is how the children of Quaker pacifists rebel. They join the Army. He wants to learn emergency medicine and believes the Army will help him accomplish that goal. He leaves July 29th, and I miss him already. I hate letting go of him.

I said to Sam, “Why don’t you go live in a commune in California?”

But he is determined to be productive and responsible. It’s almost more than I can bear.

I was talking with someone about it, someone who has never had an 18-year-old child, and he said, rather indignantly, “Just tell him he can’t do it.”

I actually tried that, but it didn’t work.

I said in a very stern voice, “I forbid you from joining the Army.”

He just laughed and lifted me over his head a few times.

But it made me think about what was more important: my need to hold on to his life, or his need to let go of his childhood and move into his adulthood.

When do we hold on? When do we let go? Hardly a day passes we don’t deal with those two questions.

There are people in my life I want to be like when I grow up. Among their virtues, they are people who know when to hold on and when to let go. They know when to persevere and persist, and when to yield and release. That isn’t instinctive. People aren’t born with that ability. It is nurtured. It is developed. It is the result of careful thought and mindfulness. And bravery. For it requires great bravery to let go well, and great bravery to hold on well.

I know a man over in Ohio who works in health care. When he was growing up, his parents told him if he didn't become a doctor, he would be wasting his life. So he went off to college and became a doctor. What he really wanted to do was make furniture. It made him very happy to create lovely and useful things people could enjoy. He couldn't wait to get home each night from being a doctor so he could go to his basement workshop and make furniture.

He's in his mid-60's now. I asked him, "Why don't you stop being a doctor and make furniture."

He said, "I'm waiting for my parents to die."

So here he is, holding on to a life he hates.

I want to give you homework this week. Pay attention to your life this week. Be aware of when you are having to decide between letting go or holding on. If you're holding on to something, ask yourself why. If you're letting go, ask yourself why. Pay special attention to the motives that drive your decision and ask yourself if they are worthy motives. What would it mean to let go well? What would it mean to hold on well? But that's your homework. It has been several decades since some of you have had homework, and it might feel a bit intimidating, but I hope you don't let it go.