



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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## “Learning How to Float”

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### Centering Thoughts

*When I let go of what I am, I become what I might be.  
When I let go of what I have, I receive what I need. ‘Tao Te Ching’*

*Some of us think holding on makes us strong; but sometimes it is letting go. Hermann Hesse*

*As swimmers dare to lie face to the sky and water bears them, as hawks rest upon air and air sustains them, so would I learn to attain freefall, and float into Creator Spirit’s deep embrace, knowing no effort earns that all-surrounding grace. Denise Levertov*

### Sermon

Are any of you watching the winter Olympics? This year’s \$50 billion dollar Sochi Olympics include a new snowboarding event called slopestyle. Daring snowboarders sweep down huge ramps, run narrow rails at 25 miles per hour or more, twist and flip multiple times in the air, then land, we hope, gracefully upright. It’s a wild sport.

Can you imagine what it feels like for the first time? Can you imagine flying through the air without a safety harness, flipping and turning, and defying gravity? Like many ski and snowboard events, these brave souls take great risks. They learn to trust the laws of physics and their own experiential knowledge to make their sport possible. Amazing as their accomplishments are, I bet each one learned by taking small steps, building upon each one to reach Olympic excellence.

For the average person, learning how to float or swim may be a more familiar process of facing fears, letting go, and trusting oneself, the laws of physics and perhaps something more. Even after I learned how to float and swim, I remember being scared to lose contact with the ocean floor. In early childhood I remember going to the beach where heavy long ropes led out perpendicular from shore and were anchored in deep water, I guess to provide some safety against undertow risks. Long before the days of floaties I swam out alongside the rope line, well beyond where my feet could touch bottom. Even with the rope next to me, I worried about the water being over my head. But something within urged me to test myself. I willed myself to go further and

further out before turning back for safer, shallow waters. By overcoming some of my fear I gained confidence in my ability to meet challenges. My story probably reflects similar stories of your own.

Letting go of fears, real or imagined, isn't always easy. Whether it's learning how to float, flip in the air on a snowboard, or let go of things we no longer need, taking baby steps makes it easier. So does having a friend nearby.

Some things are easier to let go of than others. Getting rid of *material* goods we've collected over the years can be made easier by small steps, like starting with a single drawer, then working up to a room or whole house.

But more difficult to let go of are the *immaterial* things we hang onto, especially the abstract ideas or concepts which guide much of our thinking and behavior, but which no longer serve us well. We may not even realize we're holding onto an idea, much less for too long. Sometimes we grab hold of an idea so firmly, we're unaware its weight is drowning us. We don't know it is long dead.

Consider religious ideas. When we hold New UU orientation sessions we ask you to describe your spiritual journey. If you were not brought up in this faith, some of you share what, if any, religion you grew up with and why these beliefs no longer serve you or are no longer meaningful. You come here looking for something new or for affirmation of the views you bring with you. Others, including born UUs, may bring religious ideas intact but you're looking for a new religiously diverse community to share them in. Given that Unitarian Universalism calls itself a living tradition and we don't claim one, capital T truth, the concept of outdated religious ideas is not new here.

We recognize religious ideas may change and some will die over time, but we may be blind to other types of ideas in need of burial. We may not realize some ideas are dangerous, we may not realize we *can* bury some ideas, and we may not even be aware that some ideas are not capital T truths because they are so ingrained. We need to become aware of these set ideas and assumptions, our personal operating systems, that guide our thinking and behavior, because they pose a danger if no longer true, if they hinder our individual or collective progress and happiness, and otherwise don't serve us well anymore.

Here's a sampling of some dead ideas we have mostly let go of:

- the earth is flat
- it's okay to treat people as property and enslave them
- meditation practices have no scientific basis or benefit
- teachers should be allowed to spank or slap unruly children
- widespread use of antibiotics poses no known risks

I'm sure you can suggest many other dead ideas. These I named obviously are dead now, but weren't always.

Sometimes a crisis forces us to realize an idea is past its prime. Police angrily beating non-violent civil rights protestors in the Sixties convinced many white people that segregation laws must be eliminated. The burning of the Cuyahoga River convinced many people that water pollution needed to be addressed. Lung cancer convinced people of smoking dangers.

Sometimes a new idea helps us reevaluate an old idea. Recent episodes of the English historical drama, 'Downton Abbey', have highlighted the difficulty of accepting newfangled toasters and refrigerators. We may think such attitudes silly now, but at the time it didn't seem so unreasonable. Looking to our past can show us resistance to new ideas in the present is often unwarranted, but traditional ways still die hard.

Letting go of a church organ or adding folk and rock bands to a worship service may seem a terrible travesty to some. Adding rituals and calling this service worship may be a travesty to others. Every one of us carries around some sacred cow we give up reluctantly. Letting go becomes very difficult when we're emotionally attached to a particular way, our personal orthodoxies.

The small-church style of governance used by this Fellowship until recently was a dead idea long past its usefulness. The Fellowship's growth made the old ways inadequate to its current size. Leaders recognized this fact, shared why the old way wasn't serving us well, explained a new 'governance and ministry' model, and now new ideas are slowly becoming the norm. Adding a second service was another way we responded to a status quo that wasn't working well. Though we're still a bit uneasy over letting the idea of one service go we still have parking challenges at 11:30. If you don't already regularly attend the 9 am service, I encourage you to make the change. Each Sunday roughly 40 people already prove it can work.

I'm sure you've buried ideas in your own lives that no longer serve you. If you live with another adult and both of you work full time, I imagine you share home chores, unlike in the past. I am extremely glad you don't believe a woman's place is in the home!

And many of us have let go of the idea that a married couple must consist of one man and one woman. Someday the Georgia legislature will also realize this is a dead idea.

Besides a crisis or a gradual realization, sometimes it takes a prophet, heretic, or child to call out truth to power. I think our government operates under ideas long in need of burial. The fact that Republicans and Democrats are so polarized indicates to me each is stuck in a bad idea and need a new way out. Both sides are convinced their way is the answer, yet neither can convince the other. Both desperately need to let go of old assumptions about what's right or best. We need a new idea that will get us out of the stalemate we're in. Even compromise would be a new idea, though I think it will take more than that. A child or an army of protestors and voters needs to tell both parties they aren't wearing any clothes.

No matter what the context, change is rarely easy. But that can't excuse us from the need to look within ourselves or our culture to find the assumptions and orthodoxies that plague us. Because such introspection is difficult and deeply spiritual work, we can do this together in

community, exploring and naming that which doesn't want to get named and supporting each other as we realize our shared goal to improve lives and make the world a better place for all.

Matt Miller, author of *The Tyranny of Dead Ideas*, suggests three steps to help us let go.

- *Identify dead ideas that matter.* These are ideas big enough to pose a threat or shape society. One example of importance to me – the idea that the increasing gap between top earners and the rest of us causes no harm to society or democracy. The Fellowship has identified some ideas it thinks are dead and is working to achieve, such as marriage and wage equality, and reduced carbon footprints.
- *Understand each dead idea's story.* Miller believes we can't move past an old idea if we don't know the source of its power, why it was once a good idea, or what is at stake if no change occurs.
- *Reach for new ways of thinking.* We must stretch ourselves beyond conventional thinking, and consider what at first may seem impossible or paradoxical. Our most inventive and creative thinking must suggest what's needed *now*. If Steve Jobs had been guided by, "We've always done it this way", where would computers and phones and music devices be now?

An emperor who insists on wearing fancy clothes despite evidence that they don't exist is a fool. A society that fears naming a truth and carries on in spite of the evidence is also foolish. Let us not be fools.

The voice of the prophet may rarely be welcome, but it is always needed. Let us be the child who calls out truth. Let us not cling to illusions and out-dated assumptions.

May we have the courage to challenge our assumptions and to let go of old, dead ideas, trusting that new ideas will carry us safely into the future. May it be so.

### **Questions for Reflection or Discussion**

1. Do you meet new ideas or change willingly? What contributes to your willingness or its lack?
2. How does it feel to let go of something you've held onto for a long time? Please share.
3. What sorts of things do you tend to dwell or hold onto, or can't let go of? Do you have a technique to help you let go?
4. How might you want someone to help you understand some change is necessary?