

Put the Lady Down

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The story of the two monks on their way to the monastery may be my favorite Zen story. In nine years of ministry I think this is the third or fourth sermon in my career that I have preached with this as its text. I think I am so attracted to this story because its message is one I so desperately need to hear. And it is simply this: let go. All of those dreams and desires you have; just let them go. There are a lot of proverbial ladies we are carrying around that we need to put down.

One of the most tangible areas of my life where letting go is important is in material things; specifically books. I own far too many books. More than I will ever have time to read in this lifetime. The first of the 12 steps is to admit in public that you have a problem, and this is my confession. I know this because I moved a few months ago and had to come face to face with boxes of books. My office at home was sort of the last refuge for post-move boxes, and gradually I have been attacking the mountain that lives there. Part of this project is to find a place for my books—preferably one with some organization to it. Just when I had

finished heaving one box full of books to one side of the room, which felt more like it contained rocks, and dealt with its contents, it seemed two more had sprung up in its place. After a few hours of this exercise, and I do mean exercise, you start to ask the existential questions like, “Why the heck do I own so many books? What was I thinking?” At the time there seemed to be a good reason to buy each book individually. Most of the fiction I picked up at bargain stores for a dollar or so. But when added together one can’t help to ask “Why? For what purpose do I have all of these books?”

This of course leads to the other question: which books to get rid of? Herein lays the rub. Certainly not the Star Wars or Star Trek fan fiction. A man needs a legacy to pass on to his children after all. Then are the books that I might, just maybe, could use in a sermon some day. Of course the classics that cannot be parted with. Then there are the books that I enjoyed and was captivated by years ago and out of a curious form of loyalty I can’t seem to part with them. And although it is contrary to the proverbial wisdom, some of them just have pretty covers that I like!

Of course our monk friends would call this what it is: attachment. Books are fine in and of themselves. There are no problems with books when they serve the purpose of imparting wisdom and knowledge. Or in my case, strength and cardio-vascular exercise in hauling about large boxes of them. They only become problematic when I become attached

to a book for its own sake. Rather than a vehicle for knowledge and understanding, they become an end in itself. To be separated from objects we are attached to can be a source of a good deal of suffering.

But attachment to books and other material objects are easy. That is obvious. You can see that very easily and let it go. You can put that lady down without much struggle, relatively speaking. The hard stuff is our attachments to the things that are less tangible but even more pervasive and real. By this I mean our attachments to our opinions, our world views, our smug sense of grandiosity that lies just beneath our conscious minds and every day actions. You may remember a few years back that the conservative political commentator Rush Limbaugh wrote a book entitled The Way Things Ought to Be. Although there is little that Rush and I see eye to eye on, I always begrudgingly liked that title. It captures, very explicitly, the way most of us judge other people. Someone does something we don't like and we think to ourselves, "That isn't the way things ought to be." Or "That isn't the way we have always done it!" "That person really ought not to do things that way" or "She should not have said that to me in that tone!" This subconscious narrative goes on all the time inside us. It influences us in so many ways that we barely recognize it.

Here again, there is nothing inherently wrong with this inner dialogue. We could no sooner hope to turn it off than we could turn off our minds themselves. There are ways people should behave of course.

For example we have a congregational covenant about how to treat each other. We take this very seriously as a church. This is a document that was carefully crafted, voted upon, and even signed by the members present. It is displayed in the Parish Hall. We need some standards of behavior. But this is a democratically arrived at document there for all to see. That is all very good and necessary. The problem again arises when we become attached to our personal way of seeing the world “the way it ought to be.” I become the judge of what others should do or say. My criteria is often arbitrary and unspoken. So often we are quick to judge others by this standard rather than talk to them and seek understanding of their point of view. It is just so much easier, and frankly more fun, to rebuke, shame, and judge others by this unspoken and unshared set of norms. We can be very attached to our own opinions of others. Those opinions are the things we need to put down. Our patterns of seeing and reacting to the world are some ladies that are hard to discern and even harder to let go of. But when we do put the lady down, we free ourselves from the terrible burden of being the world’s moral judge.

This is the lesson the elder monk was trying to teach his young student. Self-righteousness, even if it is justified, is a subtle way of bolstering our pride and our ego. It feels good to judge others because of the silent point it reinforces: “I am the morally or spiritually superior person.” Chogyam Trungpa used to call this game of using our spiritual

practice as a bolster to our pride and ego “spiritual materialism.” Why are you still carrying that with you? What is it doing for you? Is there a healthier way?

This week is Thanksgiving, and the official start of the holiday season. I will be visiting my family in Michigan this week. I have been instructed by my mother to come with a Christmas list in hand. It is an odd spiritual exercise writing a Christmas list as an adult. When I was a child writing letters to Santa Claus, it was a magical moment of dreaming. Anything in the world seemed possible. Even when I didn't get what was on the list, the mere fact that something appeared at all was pretty awe inspiring. I always hope to recapture a bit of that feeling every year. This year as I was putting pen to paper for my list, I couldn't help but think of all those boxes of books that already clutter my office. The holidays are a good time to ask “What is really important to me?” This is a good question not only to ask about material things that we own and could possibly simplify, but also those inner boxes of clutter we could do without. What ladies am I attached to that I need to put down? Which ones serve me well, and which ones simply feed my ego?

I will probably put some new books on my list again this year. My mom and my wife get mad when they don't give any clues at all about what to get me for Christmas. It is going to happen like it or not. But this year the list will be shorter and with much more thought put into

each selection. Simplifying the soul is much harder. I like holding on to my self-righteous opinions about the world. They make me feel good; superior to others. We can identify with the younger monk. He thought he had scored a point on his elder colleague. “Ha ha!” We can hear him say. “I caught you breaking the rule! I knew all along that I was a better monk than this old guy.” No, you have to put the lady down. Let go of that thought and that feeling.

Please do not misunderstand me. I am not arguing against self-esteem; far from it. We should feel good about ourselves. We should always remember that we are inherently good, lovable people. I would even encourage you to think of this in terms of your theology. You are a child of God. You have the Buddha nature or the divine spark within you. If you are an atheist then you know that you are a unique individual that is capable of love; the primary meaning of life. When we are grounded in this knowledge, whatever belief speaks to us, of course we would have good healthy self-esteem.

Sadly too often we don't feel good about ourselves based on the simple fact that we are children of God or anything else. We usually feel good about ourselves at another person's expense. This doesn't even have to be of our doing. A recent study of viewers of reality TV programs showed that most people feel better about themselves during and after they watch the show. Reality TV's popularity draws on our desire to feel good about ourselves relative to others whom we deem

stupid or foolish. I don't mean to offend fans of reality TV, I will admit to you now that I have succumbed to this guilty pleasure myself. Only a preacher who has known sin is capable of speaking about it! But I think there is something to this study. I didn't swap spouses, I didn't act like an idiot in front of Donald Trump, I didn't eat a vat full of worms, or cheat on my wife or husband. The people on TV did; and therefore I am better. That, my friends, is a lady we are carrying, and when you are carrying a lady what do you have to do? Put the lady down.

I would even go so far as to say that gaining self-esteem at another person's expense or delighting in their suffering is a lack of faithfulness. If I really and truly understood myself as having the divine spark within, for example, then I would just feel good about myself. I wouldn't need to laugh at someone else's fiancé on a show called "Tool Academy" to know that I am a good and lovable person. The fact that we do need someone to look good next to means we don't really believe what we say we believe. Not fully at least. We need to concentrate on what is important to us. What is it that you believe is your ultimate concern? Focus on that as a source of your identity. Focus on what is truly important to you.

Last week I had a rather surreal experience: my first parent-teacher conference as a parent. The very thought of it shocked me. It was one of those, "Oh my gosh I am someone's Dad!" moments that I thought I had already gone through. For those of you who don't know, my son

Thomas is three and half and attends pre-school. So it wasn't like there was going to be major report card issues or anything. Thomas is doing well. He is not the top student in his class. There are others that color inside the lines better, and others who know their ABCs better. Of course I could feel that little niggling in the back of my head that said, "He will be at the top of the class! How much does a coloring book tutor cost?" But that is more my issue than his. So I remind myself: you have to put that lady down.

A few days ago I got a call from Sharon telling me that there had been an incident at Thomas' school. Thomas' best friend in his class is a little boy named Michael. Thomas and Michael are two peas in a pod. I come home every day and hear about what Michael did. Apparently the class was sitting in a circle and Michael felt that Thomas had taken his spot. Upset at this perceived wrong, Michael bit Thomas on the shoulder. It was through his shirt, but it did draw blood. Michael had to sit in a special chair for a punishment. The teachers reminded the class that it was not OK to bite others. Thomas didn't cry or retaliate. Instead he went over to Michael and said, "I didn't like it when you bit me. But I forgive you." Wow! Now that is a moment to be proud of as a parent! Three year olds do not easily set aside their egos like that. In a way that is the spiritual life in microcosm. Be in touch with your feelings, even when wronged, and be compassionate and honest. Forgive as quickly as possible.

How do we put the lady down? How do we let go of our subtle attachments to our self-righteous, judgmental views of others? It is possible to set aside our ego, our concern for ourselves as the center of the universe, and be selfless. We can actively look for ways to be of help to other people. Sarah Vowell in her essay this morning gives a big clue as to how we can put the lady down. In the weeks following 9/11 in New York City there was a sense of eight million people being a part of one family. And it was a family trying to heal together. That is a selfless approach to one's fellow man and woman. For once people thought of themselves as part of a "we" instead of just "me."

Of course you can't have total selflessness either. Attachment to that is also bad. But the balance that Vowell learns between considering her own needs alongside the needs of others is so out there she needs to constantly be aware of it. To live in the most populous city in America, and some might say the most aggressive, and see that sign on the New York City subway: "You will not be left alone. Someone will help you." That is a powerful statement of Humanism in its best sense. She is so inspired by this sentiment that she actually hopes that someone will get sick so that she can demonstrate that this principle is true. And they say Humanists don't have a spiritual practice! I would say that being proactive in seeking out ways to help others in need, counts.

Small acts of selflessness, of seeking to help others, of putting our ego to the side for the moment; those are the things that are really

important. Those actions are what help us to loosen our attachments to our smug sense of superiority over others. Instead we become the servants to others.

So if you realize one day that you own too many books, what do you have to do? Say it with me. Put the lady down!

If your neighbor down the road wronged you, what do you need to do? (Put the lady down!)

If your best friend bites you on the shoulder, what can you do except: (Put the lady down!)

If someone says something at dinner this Thursday that embarrasses you or hurts your feelings, what are you going to do? (Put the lady down!)

And if you can put that lady down, you will have something to truly be grateful for this Thanksgiving. Seek out ways to constantly be doing random acts of kindness, compassion, and selflessness. Do it because you will make a difference in someone else's life. But we all will know that really you did it so that you can—put the lady down!

May this holiday season begin with gifts such as these. Amen
Blessed Be.