

Holding On For Dear Life

A sermon by the Reverend Molly Housh Gordon

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We are, most of us, born with several reflexes – things our body knows how to do at or prior to our birth, before we even begin to learn anything about this world of ours.

We are born with a drive to be nourished and the ability to move toward what will feed us. A rooting reflex turns a baby's head toward any possible source of nurture when they feel a brush on lip, nose, or cheek. And a sucking reflex is prompted by anything touching the roof of their mouths. From the start our bodies know how to find sustenance.

Next we are born with the tendency to startle when our arms encounter gravity and empty space. The Moro reflex primes babies to jump when it feels like they're falling space, no longer suspended in the watery dark of the womb. From the start, our bodies know the fear of falling.

We are born, as well, with a dancing reflex... tiny babies held upright touching a hard surface will almost all lift and step their feet to some unheard rhythm. From the start, our bodies know the joy of movement.

And we are born grasping: tiny fingers will cling with surprising strength to anything that comes into the palm of a baby's hand. From the start, our bodies know how to hold on for dear life.

And so we come into this world, feeding, falling, dancing, grasping creatures. These are things the body knows. Everything else, we have to learn.

Our Unitarian luminary Ralph Waldo Emerson famously admonished preachers that their job was to give the people "life, passed through the fire of thought."

And here I am, back in the pulpit for the first time after nearly three months of a leave time that was consumed almost entirely by baby reflexes... that and poop.

And it's Mother's Day.

And I am to give you life, passed through the fire of thought. This is not without its complications.

I know enough not to give you baby poop passed through the fire of thought, though I have much analysis to share on that subject.

But, Mothers' Day itself is fraught for some of us, joyful for some of us, and probably a bit of both for almost all of us.

Mothering, Not Mothering, Being Mothered well or poorly, Not Being Mothered – these are experiences filled with love, fear, longing, grief, joy, guilt, hope, regret, choice and the absence of choice, and so much more.

Our spiritual communities must be wide and strong and loving enough to hold all of it, together, and my prayer is that each of you, whatever your experience, feel seen and valued on this day.

Beyond the complicatedness of the day, I have often thought we would be better served, as people of all genders, to spend EVERY day celebrating and learning the skills of nurturing one another as human family, widening our circles and networks of compassion, and truly valuing the vulnerable and hard work of giving care.

Nevertheless, I stand before you on this Mother's day, after several months often in the sole company of an infant, and with spit up almost assuredly somewhere on my person, to share life passed through the fire of bleary-eyed thought.

Happily it turns out that the lessons I have learned from new motherhood are mostly the same ones that life and love are always forcing upon me again and again... Lessons available to all of us in every challenge of living and loving as we feed, fall, dance, and grasp our way through this life.

For me, these lessons are mostly summed up by the poet Mary Oliver¹: That to live in this world, we must be able to do three things. To love what is mortal, to hold it against our bones knowing our own lives depend upon it, and when the time comes to let it go."

That's it. The thing we must learn.

To love what is mortal. To hold it tight. And then to let it go.

It's terrifying. It's beautiful. It's painful. It's our best and only work in this life: the work of loving a world that is always passing away, and to live with unrelenting presence to the gorgeous ache of it.

This is the lesson of the God who is a woman growing older, missing her playful children, her body aching for us²: The lesson that we must move with a changing universe – grasping and releasing all at once... The lesson that we can survive the impossible demands of love and her sister loss... The lesson that there is dignity in this life even despite...even **because**...of the ache of it...

¹ Reference to reading:

http://www.phys.unm.edu/~tw/fas/yits/archive/oliver_inblackwaterwoods.html

² Reference to reading:

http://rjmag.org/_kd/Items/actions.cfm?action=Show&item_id=3310&destination=ShowItem

I have felt it before, and boy have I felt it these last few months, the ache of loving what is mortal and therefore ever-changing.

It is something like the pain of a contraction – clenching to open, squeezing and stretching all at once, pulling in every direction beyond what you think you can endure.

It is the pain of being a creature that is free-falling through space *and* holding on for dear life. And the pain of birthing a creature who will always do the same.

As soon as Nora was born, I felt that ache every time she exhibited one of those amazing reflexes, grasping my finger or “dancing” on the coffee table. I would feel terror for the wellbeing of her fragile, tough little body as it grows... and hope, hope so deep that it terrified me too. All of it, at once.

I felt that ache during late night feedings, tired beyond anything I had ever imagined and staring in wonder at the tiny arm thrown across my chest. I would sit there and think this period too shall pass, and I don't want it to pass, and God can it please be over soon, but actually not ever end? All of it, at once.

And I felt it when she screamed for the 2nd hour straight or spewed sour half-digested milk on my person for the 3rd time that morning. Thinking: Someone take this child far, far away from me, and I cannot bear ever letting her out of my sight. All of it, at once.

I felt it when her red hair glinted in the sun, and I imagined that hair growing and swinging around her face at play and getting all tangled with gum, and being cut the way she wants and I hate, and Heaven forbid being bleached and dyed, and being grabbed one day by her own child. And God I pray all of those moments come, but there are no guarantees, and oh let them come slowly.

And it aches. The impossible requirement of love – which is to hold on for dear life and let go for dear life, all at the same time – it aches.

And it always has and will.

I have ached with meaning with my spouse as our marriage changes and grows. And I have ached with hope for my parents' wellbeing as they age. And I have ached with dreams for our community and my vocation within it. And I have ached with pain and joy for our human family and our earth

All these mortal, ever-changing things, and the love we invest in them – they pull us every which way – a wild dance of clasping together and falling apart. And lo, it is good. And God, it is hard.

Luckily, we have a lifetime to learn to hold and release well in the practice of love, however long that lifetime may be. And we have good reflexes to get us started.

And the wisdom of the world's spiritual traditions.

And poetry.

And art.

And each other.

And though none of these will relieve the beautiful ache of love – they remind us that neither could we bear living without it, and they give us resources to withstand its intensity.

For we come into this world - feeding, falling, dancing, grasping creatures, and right away we begin to learn, from our wise ones and nurturers, from our experience. Indeed, wonderfully and terribly, it is most often that ache, itself that teaches us.

Our bodies know reflexively how to find sustenance, and our hearts soon learn to be fed by the beautiful moments we encounter, even in hard times, even as they are already passing away.

Our bodies know the fear of falling and the instinct to preserve the self, even as our minds learn the thrill of freedom and the joy of risk.

Our bodies know to bounce and step, and our spirits learn through practice the grace of stillness and breath.

Our bodies know how to hold on for dear life, and we learn in time that life is just as dear when we unclench our fingers and loosen our grasp.

These are the lessons of the ache of love, if we do not numb it down, or drown it out, or send it away.

That is my prayer for us today. May we hold on for dear life. May we let go for dear life. May we stay with the ache. And may our days, then, be filled with the messy, gorgeous fullness of love.