Readings

From “Gestalt at Sixty” by May Sarton

And now, as the fruit gathers
All the riches of summer
Into its compact world,
I feel richer than ever before,
And breathe a larger air.
I am not ready to die,
But I am learning to trust death
As I have trusted life.
I am moving
Toward a new freedom
Born of detachment,
And a sweeter grace—
Learning to let go.
From “First Lesson” by Philip Booth

Lie back, daughter, let your head
be tipped back in the cup of my hand.
Gently, and I will hold you.
Spread your arms wide,
lie out on the stream
and look high at the gulls.
A dead-man’s float is face down.
You will dive and swim soon enough
where this tidewater ebbs to the sea.
Daughter, believe me,
when you tire on the long thrash to your island,
lie up, and survive.
As you float now, where I held you and let go,
remember when fear cramps your heart
what I told you: lie gently and wide
to the light-year stars;
lie back, and the sea will hold you.
I

How do you catch a monkey?

I’m not sure. I’ve never had to try to catch a monkey in the woods north of Hillsborough. And I’m not sure you’ll ever need to try to catch a monkey here in Raleigh. But if you do, here’s what I’ve been told.

First, you get a coconut, cut a small hole in that is just a little bit larger than the monkey’s wrist (so he can put his hand inside). Then you hollow out the inside of the coconut and put a piece of fruit or some nuts or rice inside. And finally, you use a strong piece of rope to attach the coconut to a nearby tree or stake.

If you don’t have a coconut, a clear plastic jar will do. It might even be better—as long as the neck of the jar is just a little bit wider than the monkey’s wrist, there’s something tasty inside the jar, and you can attach the jar to a tree or post.

Eventually, the monkey will smell or see the fruit or nuts or rice inside the coconut or jar. And if he’s curious or hungry enough, he’ll reach inside the coconut or jar with his hand and grab the fruit, nuts, or
rice in his hand. But when he tries to take his hand out of the coconut or jar, he won’t be able to do it. Because the hole or mouth is too small for his fist, which is clutching the food he wants. If he lets go of the food, he can run away and get into all sorts of monkey mischief. But as long as he holds onto the food, he’s trapped.

Now I don’t know if this story about how to catch a monkey is really true or whether it’s just a myth or urban legend or story that preachers and motivational speakers tell to people who may want to change or transform their lives.

But regardless of whether it’s really “true,” I believe that it points to a profound truth or wisdom that is even more important to human beings than it is to monkeys: the necessity and wisdom of letting go.

II

The problem, of course, is that letting go often isn’t easy for monkeys or humans.

In an ancient Buddhist tale, a young monk and his teacher were walking along the road together when they came to a river with a strong current. As the two monks were preparing to cross the river, they saw a
very young and beautiful woman, who was also attempting to cross. When the young woman asked if the monks could help her cross the river, the teacher picked her up, carried her over his shoulder, forded the raging river, and set her down on the other bank.

The younger monk was very upset, but said nothing. He crossed the river and joined his teacher and the two monks continued their journey. Many hours later, the teacher turned to his student and asked: “Is something the matter? You seem upset.”

“Yes,” the younger monk said. “As a monk, you have taken vows of abstinence and celibacy. You are not permitted to even touch a woman. And yet you carried that young woman across the river on your shoulder.”

The teacher thought for a moment, and then replied: “You are right. I carried that young woman across the river on my shoulder. But I set her down on the river bank, and you are still carrying her.”

Letting go is not always easy. And yet, there are times when we have to let go of possessions, relationships, and, even, life. And there are also times when we need to let go of anger, resentment, habits,
prejudices, and unhealthy ways of being that keep us from living more full, whole, engaged, and joyous lives.

III

I know, at least in my head if not in my heart, that there are things in my life that I need to let go of. I know that there are aspects of myself that I should let go of. I know that I hold onto a lot of attitudes, emotions, and ways of behaving that don’t always serve me, or others, well. I want to let go of my perfectionism, my self-righteousness, my cynicism, my need for control, my insecurity. And yet, I find it hard to let them go.

Letting go of attitudes, emotions, habits, and ways of thinking or behaving isn’t easy even when we know we should let go. It’s not easy because they are a part of who we are, and, as the younger Buddhist monk learned, it’s not easy to let go of any part of ourselves.

Sometimes, we even have trouble letting go of that which causes us great suffering because, to paraphrase the words of the well-known Buddhist monk and teacher Thich Nhat Hahn, we prefer to hold onto the
suffering that is familiar rather than letting go and facing what is unknown about ourselves or life.

What about you? What attitudes, feelings, habits, wounds, prejudices, and concerns do you need to let go of this morning?

Do you need to let go of anger or disappointment with your parents, your children, your spouse, your former spouse, a friend, or colleague? Do you need to let go of the suffering you’ve experienced at the hands of family, friends, or the religion of your earlier years? Do you need to let go of insecurities about your own self-worth or unrealistic expectations of yourself or others?

What ways of thinking or behaving are weighing you down or holding you back from being who you want and need to be and living the way you want and need to live?

IV

And what about those parts of our selves and our lives that we really want to hold onto? When do we need to let go of our hopes, dreams, relationships, and identities?

I wish I knew the answer! But I don’t.
All I know is that there are many moments in our lives when we have to let go, either willingly or unwillingly, of something or someone that has been an important part of our life or who we are—a vision or dream, a job, career, or profession, a home, a religious community, a spouse, a child, a friend. And letting go is especially hard when we have to let go of someone we love or something that is precious or dear to us.

Sooner or later, we all have to let go of everything that we are and everything that we value in this life. There is no way that we can hold onto anything, anyone, or ourselves forever. And death is our ultimate letting go. Ultimately, what is most precious to us must be released and given back to the larger Life of which we are all a part, so that we may live and love fully.

Change and loss are inevitable and necessary parts of life. And change and loss always require letting go. So the real question, I believe, is not whether to let go, but how to let go gracefully, courageously, peacefully, and confidently.

Letting go is a lesson that we all have to learn. And we only learn how to let go by practicing letting go.
Letting go can be hard. But letting go can also be transformative.

As author John Heider writes in *The Tao of Leadership*: “When [we] let go of what [we are, we] become what [we] might be.”

When we let go of who we are, we open ourselves to who we could be and who we are becoming. When we let go of who we have perceived others to be, we open ourselves to discovering who they really are. When we let go of our narrow ways of thinking, our prejudices, and the labels we put on other people, we open ourselves to seeing, experiencing, and understanding ourselves, others, and the world more fully and more deeply.

And sometimes we have to let go of what we have or who we are in order to embrace that which is new, that which is good, and that which is larger than ourselves. For, as the American mythologist Joseph Campbell has said: “We must be willing to let go of the life we have planned, [in order] to accept the life that is waiting for us.”

According to an old Greek folk tale, there was once a farmer who lived a long and happy life on a beautiful island in the Mediterranean Sea.
The man loved the island more than anything else in the world. And so, when the old man realized he was dying, he asked his young granddaughter to take him outside one last time. There he knelt, gathered a handful of his native soil, and clutched it tightly in his gnarled old fingers.

After the old man died the next day, he found himself at the gates of heaven. But when he tried to cross the threshold, a kindly angel said: “Before you can come in, you must let go of the soil you are clutching.” “Oh, no,” the man said. “I could never do that. This soil is from my beloved home.” So he sat down outside the gate, holding onto the soil from his beautiful island.

Day after day, the angel invited the old man to come in. And each day, the man refused to let go of the soil from his farm. Many, many years passed. And then one day the angel appeared at the gate along with the farmer’s granddaughter, who had now grown old and died.

“Grandfather,” she cried, “I’m so happy to see you!” The old farmer was overwhelmed to see his granddaughter again. In his joy, he flung out his arms to embrace her, the soil slipped through his fingers, and they walked through the gate hand in hand.
VI

Letting go can be hard. But letting go is also, I believe, an act of faith and a spiritual practice that is present in many, if not all, of the world’s religions.

The Hebrew Bible, for example, reminds us that there is a time to hold on and a time to let go. In the Christian gospel, Jesus called his disciples to let go of material goods and concerns and seek, instead, the kingdom of God. And Islam calls on Muslims to surrender their lives to the will of Allah, letting go of all that separates them from God.

From the east, Buddhism insists that desire and attachment are the causes of suffering and that enlightenment comes from the letting go of desire, while the wisdom of the *Tao Te Ching* teaches that “by letting go, it all gets done,” and that “the world is won by those who let it go.”

Letting go is a spiritual practice and an act of faith.

According to UU minister Roy Phillips: “Letting go requires a sense deep down that there is that which can be trusted. … Putting together our own power with power not our own,” he continues, “is perhaps life’s greatest challenge. To assert oneself and then to let go. To
connect with others and to let go. To hold on to what we cherish and to let go. Every parent has to learn this,” he says, “as does every teacher, leader, friend, lover, family member, and every person … who has a ministry.”

Letting go is an act of faith.

It is, in May Sarton’s words, learning to trust both life and death and finding a new freedom born of detachment and the experience of a sweeter grace.

It is, to use Philip Booth’s image, learning to let go, lie back, and let the sea of life hold us.

VII

In her 1983 poem “Blackwater Woods,” Mary Oliver writes these words: “To live in this world you must be able to do three things: to love what is mortal; to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it; and, when the time comes, to let it go—to let it go.”

Loving, holding on, and letting go. All three are essential parts of living. And all three require wisdom and practice. Learning when and
how to love, when and how to hold on, and when and how to let go are some of life’s hardest lessons.

They are lessons that I’m still learning. And I know I don’t have all the answers. But I do believe that there is wisdom in the words of Mary Oliver, Roy Phillips, the Bible, Jesus, the Buddha, and Lao Tsu. And I also know that there is wisdom in each of us.

Loving, holding on, and letting go.

There is a time to hold on, but also a time to let go. It is important to hold on, but also important to learn to let go. And it is always important to love.

When it is time to hold on, may we hold onto ourselves, others, and the world firmly, but also gently and with love.

And when it is time to let go, may we let go gracefully, gently, and with faith and love.

*Amen.*
Benediction

To live in this world you must be able to do three things: to love what is mortal; to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it; and, when the time comes, to let it go.

Loving, holding on, and letting go.

May we love life deeply. May we firmly but gently hold onto all that is good in ourselves, each other, and the world. And may we learn to let go of all that which we need to let go—gracefully, peacefully, and with love.

May it be so.