

“Hold Everything”

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There’s a store that was in the neighborhood where I used to live called “Hold Everything.”

It sold all sorts of things to help people get organized—
magazine racks,
file boxes,
in boxes, out boxes,
and the fanciest closet organizers you’ve ever seen.

They were so organized, they were a closet organizing *system!*

Whatever your storage needs—
so their promise went—
you could find it at this store—
Hold Everything.

And this was a very popular store,
because for a lot of people,
organization is good.

Organization means safety.

It means confidence.

If you’re organized, you’ve got everything under control,

And if you’ve got everything under control,

you can handle anything, right?

But the thing about life is,
so much of it is *not* in our control!

We know this in lots of ways.

We know we’re not in control of everything that happens to us.

Like when we get stuck in traffic—

we can’t un-stick ourselves;

it's not in our control;
we just have to go with the flow...
of traffic, that is.
Or like when you really want something,
like when you're applying for a job that sounds really good,
or you're waiting for someone you really like to call you up,
and it doesn't always happen.
None of us are in control all the time.

Think of all those people whose lives were so shaken up
by Hurricane Katrina,
which hit New Orleans just over one year ago.
People lost their homes, their clothes, their photo albums....
Some people even lost people they loved.
And it was totally out of their control.
The leaders and the politicians could have done a much better job of
helping them, as we know!
But the people who lost so much—
that storm just swooped down on them
and they couldn't stop it.

Sometimes life does that, big time.
It swoops down on us
and jumbles us around,
and sometimes it's scary,
and sometimes it hurts!

And I sometimes think,
wouldn't it be something if that "Hold Everything" store
that sells those beautiful tidy closet organizational systems—
wouldn't it be something
if that store could sell you a *life* organizational system?
Imagine a pretty cardboard box
with a contemporary floral print
and a cute little label

where you could write down whatever was jumbling you around
and just stash it away and forget about it.
You might have a whole stack of pretty boxes that you could label
“Back-to-school jitters,”
or “Illness,”
or “Problems with your in-laws”
or “Anger at our nation’s foreign policy.”
(For some of us, that one would have to be extra-large, right?)
Imagine if you could just file those problems away
as if they were out-of-season sweaters.
If we could just set up a system
to hold everything,
everything that happens to us
or will happen
or *might* happen—
then we’d be safe!

I think this is really tempting for Unitarian Universalists,
because we’ve believed for so long in our own power to change things,
to make things happen,
to figure things out.
It’s like we want to take that old song,
“He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands,”
and rewrite it as
“*We’ve* Got the Whole World in *Our* Hands”!

And this is a real double-edged sword for us.
We *need* to believe we have the power to change our lives,
to change the world,
If we didn’t believe in ourselves,
we’d never try.

But we have to understand our limits too.
If we don’t,
we’re setting ourselves up to feel frustrated,

because we feel we should be able to do more
than what's humanly possible.
We're setting ourselves up to be afraid
of all the ways life might get in the way of our best efforts.
And we're setting ourselves up to be cynical
about what's possible on this earth.

So we have to accept our limits,
but within that we have to use the power we have.
And we do have power.
It comes from the same source that gave us our life.
Last week I talked about flow—
that thing that happens when you're working on something
and you manage to get out of your own way
and let energy just flow through you.
When that happens,
you realize that you aren't totally in control.
Something is working through you,
and you just need to allow it to.
That something is energy,
it's the life-force that flows everywhere in the universe.

That life-force flows in us.
And we can only control it so much—
it's like we're the rider, but not the horse!

Think about it.
We don't get to choose when we're born—
it happens *to* us—all of a sudden we're alive,
we've received this amazing gift of being alive,
and as far as we know
we had nothing to do with it—
it was totally out of our control.

As we grow up and get older,

our bodies remind us over and over
that we're not in control.
Our will—that's the part of us that wants things
and tries to make things happen—
our will can control some things,
like how much we exercise,
and whether we eat healthy foods or not.
But it can't control whether we catch a cold or not.
We can't control how tall we get,
or the color of our eyes, or of our skin.
We can't control when our hair starts to turn gray,
or when we start having to trim our nose hairs!
We don't know when we're going to die.

And in a way this is really scary.
Sometimes we want to have everything under control,
we want to know what's coming.
But when we discover we're not in control,
there is a gift that sneaks up on us:
the gift of *awe*.

Awe is an old word we don't use much anymore.
But we all know what it feels like.

I drove through the Utah and the Nevada desert this summer,
and it was so beautiful.
I'm used to cities, you know,
and getting out into that open country was awe-inspiring.
Miles and miles of scrub and cliffs and dirt,
and it was just *there*.
In the city, people are always using land for a purpose—
building on it or growing lawns or whatever.
But out in the desert
I had this feeling that the land was totally self-sufficient.
It didn't need us.

We weren't in control.
The land had been there for a long, long time
and I felt this sense that the land was in charge here,
not me.
It was a powerful feeling,
and this might sound strange,
but it wasn't scary at all—
it made me feel very safe,
like I was in the presence of some incredibly wise thing
or force—
it's hard to say, really.
But there was something massive out there.

You know, thousands and thousands of years ago
out in that desert country
there was a lake.
And this lake was huge.
If you've ever been to see one of the Great Lakes
back in the Midwest, where I'm from,
you know what a big lake looks like.
You can't even see the other side.
And this lake was that big,
and way, way deeper.
For over 15,000 years this lake just existed.
It was massive.
It was calm on the surface.
But underneath, something was happening.
Imagine all that water, pressing down on the floor underneath
and the mountain walls all around it.
It was so heavy, you can't imagine.
And the desert land held all that water for a long, long time.

But one day it started to groan.
Something was shifting.
The water was so heavy, the land couldn't hold it any more.

First a little crack in the wall,
then a big one,
and all of a sudden the land shuddered and broke
and the water exploded out and rushed out across the land.
The flood lasted for a year—can you imagine?
For a whole year water rushed out from that giant lake
and spread itself out,
running and bubbling and flowing
until at last the flood came to an end
and the water was calm again.
The water that was left formed a little lake,
a very little lake compared to what had been there,
and today we call that little lake the Great Salt Lake.

Imagine what it would have been like to be there
when that water broke out!
You really would not want to be a little creature
in the way of all that water!
It would be so scary
to be a person standing on that bank
when the bank stopped being able to hold that water.
Just like it was so scary for those folks
who got caught up in Hurricane Katrina.
There is so much energy in the world,
and it is so much stronger than we are!
We can't hold it all,
we just can't.

But, you know, when I think of that giant lake,
when I think of all that water rushing out,
I would not want to live in a world
that was small enough for me to hold everything in it!
I think of Laura Ingalls Wilder, the pioneer girl,
watching wild, ferocious thunderstorms on the plains of South Dakota.
She was terrified,

but there was a part of her
that loved the “wild strength of the wind”
and the lightning and the thunder.¹
There’s a part of us all
that knows we can’t hold everything
and is glad of it
because it means we are a part of something
so much more amazing and powerful that we can even understand,
and it is worth it to be a part of that something.

We *are* part of it.
We are part of that lake,
we are part of that storm.

When we know we are a part of it all,
we don’t have to be afraid.
We are safe in the biggest way there is
because our life is part of the universal life
that flows on and on, forever.
Life is what holds everything.
It holds us safe.

May it be so.
Amen and blessed be.

¹ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *These Happy Golden Years* (New York: Harper Trophy, 1971), p. 197.