
Holy Hacks: November 8, 2019

By the Rev. Julia Mitchener

Each fall, a particular quote goes viral on social media, accompanied by images of autumn foliage drifting gracefully to the ground. The quote reads: “The trees are about to show us just how beautiful it can be to let things go.”

We, as a society, are not that good at letting go. Witness the continual growth of the self-storage industry, which allows millions of Americans to hold onto things we no longer use but with which we are unable to part. Witness, too, the mixed emotions many of us feel as we approach Thanksgiving and Christmas, knowing that reunions with family members can spark joy but may also reopen old wounds we thought no longer bothered us.

How can we teach our children the truth shown to us by the falling leaves—that there is joy, peace, and renewal in releasing that which no longer serves us well, that which is weighing us down physically, spiritually, or emotionally?

Many children (adults, too) are “ruminators”—they spend countless hours rehashing conversations and events they wish had gone differently. Teaching kids a strategy for releasing these preoccupations can free them up to be more present to the here and now and also reduce stress and anxiety. One great exercise to try is a simple breath practice that involves literally “blowing off” worries and frustrations. The idea is that you form an image of whatever it is you’d like to let go and focus on this while you’re inhaling. Then on your exhale, imagine that you’re literally puffing your concerns out into the universe or, perhaps, into the arms of Jesus. We can help our children self-soothe through intentional breathing, through physical activity, through play, music, and art. We can also talk with them about why we make time for confession most Sundays in church. It’s good for our souls—and even our bodies—to release things we have been worried about, things about which we’ve been chastising ourselves. The rhythm of confession and absolution that we experience in our liturgy is a wonderful gift, one that even the smallest child can receive.

We adults can also model some “letting go” in our daily routines. The approaching holiday season offers lots of opportunities for this. Let’s face it, the frenzied way many Americans live during December doesn’t necessarily make us, or our children, happy. I know a family that has a tradition not just of deciding what special activities they’ll enjoy during the holidays but also of discussing what they’d like to drop from their agenda this year. They do this around Thanksgiving so that there are no last minute disappointments or misunderstandings. They discuss what’s most important to them in their seasonal celebrations, then figure out how to make these things a priority while minimizing the number of commitments they make to events that are less meaningful. For example, the parents usually put a cap on the number of parties they’ll attend so they can make space for some nights where the whole family stays in to bake cookies or enjoy pizza and a movie. They may decide to keep their Christmas Eve meal simple so they have more time and energy for after church rituals like reading stories and putting out milk and cookies for Santa. Some years, they elect not to travel anywhere because the thought of lugging three young children and all their gear onto a plane just doesn’t feel life-giving. The results are a holiday season that has moments that really do feel “holy”—moments of wonder, love, and peace, moments they can savor and not just gloss over in the rush to get to the next activity.

Remember the leaves.

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