

## Getting a grip on letting go

By Ruth Ostrow

IT has been days. He's been standing at the door looking out. I know the signs. My new kitten, my new baby, is ready to go into the world alone -- to separate from mother. It's dangerous out there. I live on the beach in a home without fences. Dogs are always coming into the yard. A busy road is out front.

In here it's warm and safe. I give him more love than any creature could expect. But he's bored and restless. I sigh and wonder how I can let him go but stop him getting knocked over by life.

I decide to give him his first lesson in independence, walking him into the front yard and being there while he explores his surrounds. He wanders a little and immediately comes back. Purring, rubbing himself against my leg to reassure himself. "I'm still here, darling," I say, stroking his chin and watching him turn and bounce off again, this time a little further.

I feel it in my body. There is a stiffness, a pain in my chest where I'm trying to breathe deeply, but it is constricted. I can see the cars whizzing down our street too fast, always too fast. He startles at every one of them, but continues to venture forward anyway, bounding after a moth that is playing in the grass. Bound, bound, bound. How does he know where the garden ends and the road begins?

A few weeks of having this cat and I'm already deeply fretting his absence. Because I have started to feel love. And love is a hard one to reconcile with letting go..

"You have to let him go," says my mum, who is staying with me on holidays. "He needs to be free to enjoy the world." She understands. She has had to let four of us go -- her children who at various stages were in various countries around the world, bounding after moths.

But it isn't that simple. Not a day goes by when she isn't on the phone to one of us, keeping an eye, checking in. At night her hands are racked by unexplained pains. The doctors say it's arthritis. Alternative healers say that at a deeper level her pain is her inability to let go, or keep her hands free of the need to hold on, grasp, keep her loved ones safe.

During the past two years she has faced tragedy. Her girlfriend's daughter was killed. The girl -- young, beautiful, just out of school -- was on her first overseas trip. The grieving was overwhelming. They say that women who lose children have a very high risk of heart disease. My mum's girlfriend -- with her broken heart -- died of a coronary soon after.

Then my mother suffered the loss of her sister's daughter -- my much-loved cousin -- to cancer. The loss to our family was great. The pain in my mum's hands became worse, exacerbated by stress and sadness.

It plagues me too, this ailment. At night I feel it in my left hand. Is it the beginning of arthritis or the same condition that haunts my mother, perhaps all the mothers and fathers of the world? A horrible, nebulous fear at the deepest level that all will be taken away at any time. The unconscious and futile attempt

by our little hands to keep the things and people we love so close, does it make our fingers stiffen?

"Mum," I have said in times of clarity, "in the West we are taught to grasp at life and never let anything go. It's our way, this greediness. But as we get older and watch things we love vanish -- our youth, health, loved ones -- we can only grieve and fear, grieve and fear.

"In the East they have another way. Hindus, Buddhists believe the way of enlightenment is accepting the gradual divestment of all things. The letting go until we are attached to nothing, need nothing. Everything will end. Nothing stays the same. To lie in bed at night and fear loss is futile. To allow things to slip from our grasp graciously is the only realistic way."

These are the wise words taught to me repeatedly in yoga and through my masters. But without a world around me that echoes and reinforces this philosophy, I find myself as at sea as any mum, worrying endlessly about my child, my loved ones, my own mortal demise and, now -- God only knows -- my kitten, who has bounded off again and has his paw in a hole.

It could be a crab hole. But it could also be the lair of a deadly brown snake. They live in the rainforest behind my garden. I put my hand to my chest. The movement reminds me to breathe. Breathe deeply and fully, in and out. The moment is perfect. I have no control over what will happen next. The sun is shining. All is well. And the ending of this perfect moment is as natural, and inevitable, as the coming of nightfall, looming just over the horizon.

[www.ruthostrow.com](http://www.ruthostrow.com)

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