

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

In this study, by focusing on the experience and lived meaning of letting go, I have made an attempt to contribute to an understanding of the phenomenon from an existential-phenomenological perspective. In being born and in dying we let go, and yet throughout the course of our lives, in living our development, it appears that we are in a continuous process of letting go. The present study attempts to explore and explicate the meaning of this process. The context of this study is developmental.

#### **1.1 Motivation for the study**

As a member of a close-knit family and culture, I became increasingly aware of a reassuring sense of belonging, yet also experienced a need to separate and define a personal sense of self. Living the paradox of oneness yet separateness, of sameness yet difference, appears essential to being human. As humans, in our relationship with others, we vacillate between poles of enmeshment and isolation. As we attach and let go, relatedness is integral to our lives. Beginnings and endings belong together, and it was into this paradoxical abyss that I wished to look.

In my work as a psychotherapist, I have been privileged to hear stories of lives lived and to listen to the meaningful moments experienced. Often the term to ‘let go’ or ‘letting go’ has been used, but what the meaning of the experience is remains diffuse and unexplored. Throughout the thirty years in clinical practice, I have also become acutely aware that where the mobility of letting go is absent, a living pain exists. Immobility is a painful entrapment. Whether it is in the inability to make a decision, or the inability to leave an abusive relationship, being unable to let go reflects halted growth. I needed to explore the experience of letting go and identify its place in psychology.

## 1.2 Overview of the study

Pursuing the lexical definition of letting go revealed a multifaceted term, and while studies did make use of the term, no psychological research had been conducted regarding the phenomenon. I needed to move closer. I wanted to explore and understand the nature of the experience, what it is, and whether it was linked to separation, a term often used synonymously with letting go.

In the context of bonding, John Bowlby highlighted separation with its implications of anxiety and loss, while Donald Winnicott was the first to identify and attend to the potential space between the self and the other (object) in the process of separation, and recognise the significance of entering that space with the valued ‘transitional object’ (or phenomenon). However, regarding developmental psychology, the concept of separation and separation-individuation, as postulated by Margaret Mahler and her colleagues, is seminal and remains dominant in the field. The process of separation-individuation is described as ending at the age of three, though Mahler’s words enticingly propose that: “like any intrapsychic process, this one reverberates throughout the life cycle. It is never finished; it always remains active” (Mahler, Pine & Bergman, 1975, p.3). Jung recognised individuation as crystallizing during adulthood. More recently, attention is being paid to the adult years of development, with the recognition that development continues through life. Letting go appears to be part of the process and needs to be explored.

By asking the question: “What is the meaning of letting go?”, the present thesis found that the developmental theories of Mahler, Bowlby, Winnicott and Erikson provided a natural weave of theoretical fibres that merged to create a meaningful tapestry in the unknown gap explored. The valuable contributions of these and other theorists provided a map to explore the space beyond the self. Nevertheless, every effort was made to remain open-ended and unbiased in my approach. I had to ‘let go’ of any preconceived concepts or theoretical beliefs, and be willing to enter the unknown space with a receptive attitude, hoping to facilitate new discoveries that could extend beyond the ego

definitions of existing psychoanalytic and object-relations theory. My intention was not to seek theoretical confirmation, but to allow the phenomenon to reveal itself.

Willingness to move beyond the defined limits of theory and enter the gap, or space, of the unknown or nothingness, was highlighted by the work of Jacques Lacan, a theorist whose vision extends beyond the predetermined paradigm of ego structure and its definitions. Focus on the phenomenon revealed that the study concurs with Lacan's acceptance of incompleteness, and the power of that which continues through time. In the abyss of the paradoxical space explored, employing an existential-phenomenological framework was helpful where, with the spirit and philosophy of Martin Heidegger, an attempt was made to explore and understand the lived experience of letting go.

Revealing the structure of letting go facilitates an understanding of Mahler's developmental contribution within a broader paradigm, and the value of her work is made even more valuable when taken beyond the object-relations framework on which it is based. Just as Mahler expanded the psychoanalytic perspective so, too, with the findings of this study, an attempt is made to move beyond predefined structures and include concepts and experiences usually excluded from the traditional framework.

While exploring the phenomenon, it was revealed that the very entrapment that was present in the polarised duality of letting go was also evident in the theories that attempted to understand separation with its conflict and entrapment, reflected in their quest for totality and closure. In addressing the phenomenon of letting go, the power of incompleteness became evident in the fact that the phenomenon of letting go is continuous and never static. The phenomenon is relative to the contextual environment in which it occurs and is constantly in motion.

The findings of this study reveal the omnipotence of time and space. To us as humans, the omnipotence and dominance of time is reflected in the continuity of our language and culture, where meaning fills the gap. In the sense of a dualistic wholeness and completion, language (and culture) holds us and we hold on to it; language (and culture) influences us, but is also influenced by us. However, in its continuity of being there

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before us, and there after we have left, language (and culture) is powerful in its incompleteness. As we let go, it is the third dimension of time and continuity that dissolves the entrapped duality of our polarised existence and quest for oneness in the tangible and illusive world to which we relate. Continuity is conveyed through meaning and, as a sense of continuity is held on to, we submit to time. Change is inevitable, and as we enter the unknown and create new meaning, we let go; we relinquish control and partake in the process of creation.

Development is a process of meeting with the challenge of change through time. Letting go is more than separation; it is the experience of separation. Letting go is the experience of self in the process of change. Though separation is accepted as part of the developmental process, development appears to be more than separation. Development is a process of letting go, which is cyclic and spiral in its mobility, rather than chronological in nature. The conflicting struggle of letting go is a challenge to meet with change and its successful resolution becomes a developmental achievement.

The present thesis comprises six chapters. Following Chapter One, with its introduction to the study, Chapter Two provides a theoretical base by looking at definitions of letting go that are foundational to the literature review that follows in Chapter Three. In Chapter Three, letting go is approached within a developmental perspective. Theories regarding development and its mobility, individuation and separation-individuation are reviewed, although, due to the breadth and depth of the topic, the literature review is contained and not exhaustive. In keeping with the structural framework and explication of the process of separation, the respective concepts of holding, attachment, transitional space and autonomy are then discussed.

Chapter Four deals with the methodological orientation and the rationale of phenomenological research, showing how the data is obtained and how the implicit structure is made explicit. The approach to the present study is qualitative, with no intention to determine causative information or make statistical deductions. The phenomenon of letting go was studied primarily from an existential perspective with the intention of revealing the meaning of the experience. Through the unique, lived

experience of the participants interviewed, descriptions were provided. In moving from personal descriptions to theory, the study had to be phenomenological, as the inductive method moves from the specific validity of the description, to universal validity. Meaning reveals itself as a transitional phenomenon where the significance of memories is retained and new meaning created. The implicit manner of the experience of letting go is made explicit, facilitating an understanding of the dialectical process.

The final research question posed to the participants, and brief background information regarding the participants used, is provided in Chapter Five, where the data analysis of each of the Research Participants is presented respectively; viz. Marlene (M), Ben (B), Penny (P), John (J) and Karen (K). Chapter Five also includes the general psychological structure and the structural synthesis. Finally, Chapter Six attends to the discussion where literature, research, and the findings of the present study act in dialogue to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the explicit meaning of the experience of letting go.

Regarding writing style, in an attempt to remain gender sensitive throughout the study, the term (m)other is used to identify the primary caregiver or meaningful significant other in the infant's life. Though the concept of 'mother' and the value of the significant other to the infant and child is included in the term (m)other, it also satisfies the intention to be gender sensitive. Reference to the term, however, was awkward, and in an effort to be fair, the feminine context of the term (m)other is retained, while infant is referred to as masculine. Limitations of the English syntax rather than any unintended sexism must bear responsibility for any sensibilities that may be offended.

### **1.3 Aim of the study**

The aim of the present study was to understand the meaning of the experience, to discover and describe the structure and essence of the phenomenon of letting go, and to contribute to knowledge in the field of developmental psychology.