THE EXPERIENCE OF LETTING GO:
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

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The Secret

No, it is not enough to despise
the world
It is not enough to live one’s life
as though
Riches and power were nothings.
They are not
But to grasp the world, to grasp
and feel it grow

Great in one’s grasp is likewise
not enough
The secret is to grasp it, and let it
go

Wang Wei (699 AD)
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The experience of letting go: A phenomenological study.

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to discover and describe the structure and essence of the phenomenon of letting go. The meaning of the experience had to be revealed, explored and understood. The emphasis in contemporary psychology is on separation, a word often used synonymously with letting go, and, while a plethora of studies have been conducted in the area of separation, with separation-individuation the prevailing paradigm for developmental psychology, the meaning and experience of letting go has remained unexplored.

The phenomenon of letting go was approached from a developmental perspective. Literature in the field regarding separation, separation-individuation and the related aspects of holding, attachment, transitional space and autonomy was reviewed. With the focus on an existential-phenomenological understanding of the lived meaning of the experience, a dialogue between the available psychological facts and the world of experience regarding letting go arises.

The phenomenon was explored in a qualitative manner employing the phenomenological research method articulated by Amedeo Giorgi. The qualitative research interview, proposed by Kvale, was the method used to collect the data where, five participants were asked to describe a significant letting-go experience.
The general psychological structure revealed that the experience of letting go cannot be contained in stasis. The experience is also relative to the contextual environment in which it occurs. Letting go is a transitional process of spiral mobility, as the past is returned to (and repeated), to meet with the challenge of change. In fear of entering the unknown, the familiar is held on to and as a façade evolves which conceals the truth, there is a deceptive belief regarding personal stability. In the push and pull experience of the polarised conflict, a struggle ensues, where unexpected outbursts can occur. Gradual awareness of the inevitability of change and the emerging negativity regarding the self gives rise to the threat of fragmentation, and there is a submission to the omnipotence of time and space. In an attempt to gain control, decisions are made, as the self partakes in the creative process. Successful resolution of the conflict gives rise to a sense of empowerment.

While memories fill the gap of the past and new meaning is created regarding the future, a sense of continuity arises that is held on to. To let go is to relinquish control, to submit to, and partake in the process of creation. The vacillation and oscillation between positive and negative forces is the rhythmic process of life. Letting go is characteristic of human development, which though cyclic, is not only phase-related but unpredictable and an integral part of life. The dialectic of holding on and letting go is the dialectic of life and death.

The implications of letting go are diverse in relation to microcosmic or macrocosmic change, whether personal, social, political or universal. The findings revealed can contribute to the fields of developmental psychology, social psychology, transpersonal psychology, psychotherapy, bereavement, forgiveness and other related fields. Letting go is the experience of the self in the process of change.
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