

“You Gotta Know When to Fold ‘Em”
3 June, 2007 ✧ Live Oak UU Congregation ✧ Rev. Erika Hewitt

An Associated Press article caught my eye in January. The headline said:

SCIENTISTS CAN'T GET SLOTH TO MOVE

The sub-heading followed: “Exhausted German scientists raise white flags after 3-year battle with unmovable sloth.” Curious, I read on:

Scientists in the eastern German city of Jena...have finally given up after three years of failed attempts to entice a sloth into budging as part of an experiment in animal movement.

The sloth, named Mats, was remanded to a zoo after consistently refusing to climb up and then back down a pole, as part of an experiment conducted by scientists at the University's Institute of Systematic Zoology and Evolutionary Biology.

Neither pounds of cucumbers nor plates of homemade spaghetti were appetizing enough to make Mats move.

“Mats obviously wanted absolutely nothing to do with furthering science,” said Axel Burchardt, a university spokesman.

Mats' new home is the zoo...where, according to all reports, he is very comfortable.

Imagine the lab meetings.

Imagine those evolutionary biologists and systematic zoologists sitting around the table every week, reporting more or less the same news:

“Has the sloth moved yet?”

“*Nein.*”

“How many days does that make?”

“*Seben* hundred *und* twenty-five.”

“Hasn’t moved *at all!*”

“*Nein.*”

“...What do you say: should we just watch him for *one* more week? And let’s try offering him more pasta.”

Situations as far-fetched as these are fun to laugh at. They offer such clear perspective: a sloth, after all, isn’t named that for nothing. He hasn’t moved for *three years* – the study’s a bust, a waste of time. Move on to something else!

In our own lives, we seldom have such clarity, even though our lives abound with similar circumstances: long, protracted waits that, by sheer virtue of time, invest us more deeply into projects that might otherwise be best abandoned. If we’re honest with ourselves, our lives are full of opportunities to choose either to keep investing ourselves in a project, in a relationship, in a future hope – or to place our cards on the table, let go of the chips we’ve put down, and say, “I’m out.”

You gotta know when to hold ‘em, sang Kenny Rogers, Know when to fold ‘em, know when to walk away, know when to run.

How do we know when to do what? This is a universal and timeless discernment we all grapple with.

Most of you can look back at your life and identify a time when you wish you had walked away (or had *run* away) sooner. Such stories are illuminating precisely because of the regrets and mistakes that they hold: we learn from experience that sometimes we hang on so long – to our invested time and energy, to our hopes for a future change – that the hanging on damages us.

My story goes back half a decade, when I spent several years in a relationship with an emotionally abusive man. His anger and violence diminished my capacity to love and care for myself. His controlling nature drove away all of my friends, at once isolating me from my community and subjecting me more intensely to the power he wielded over me.

Today I understand why women have a hard time leaving their abusers.¹ At the same

¹ One reason is the tremendous control and manipulation that abusers exercise, threatening dire consequences about what will happen if their partners leave. Even if those threats aren’t of physical violence, abusers utilize their power over their targets by implanting fear and dependence.

time, I should have left my partner much sooner than I did. (It was only when I met Gordon that I felt brave enough to do so). I can't retrieve the years that I lost with that man, but my years with him have become part of my existential toolbox: since I can look back and identify where and when and how pieces of my identity were chipped away, I'm that much more aware of what it feels like to be severed from my soul. I'm that much *more* vigilant, and *less* willing to let it happen again.

Whether your stories of “hanging on too long” are as incisive as mine or are more benign, our past informs how we decide – today – when to fold ‘em: when to let go of our invested time and hopes, and start over.

It also helps, I believe, to know something about both human nature and the natural world. Psychological research demonstrates that we humans aren't very good at deciding to walk away from the table, because we're unwilling to “abandon something if a great deal has been invested in it, even if future prospects are dim.”² Biologists tell us that animals work in the opposite way, banking only on future potential and readily giving up past investment if there's nothing to be gained.

To demonstrate this contrast, here's a hypothetical situation: You've decided to go see a play; the ticket cost is \$20. From there, two scenarios unfold:

A. You haven't bought a ticket yet. At the theater, you discover that earlier in the day you lost a \$20 bill from your wallet.

B. You've already paid for a ticket. At the theater, you discover that you've lost the \$20 ticket that you already bought.

The question is: *Do you buy a ticket?*

When psychologists³ ran this now-classic experiment 1984, they discovered that 88 percent of participants who'd lost twenty dollars would still buy a ticket. Only 46 percent of those who had forgotten their ticket would buy a second one.

The choice is a false one: either way, you'll be \$40 poorer and will see the same play. But people get confused, because in the latter situation, it seems like you're paying \$40

² “Overexploitation of Renewable Resources by Ancient Societies and the Role of Sunk-Cost Effects” by Marco A. Janssen and Marten Scheffer. *Ecology and Society* Vol. 9, No. 1. See www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol9/iss1/art6/main.html.

³ Amos Kahneman and Daniel Tversky. In 2002, Kahneman won the Nobel Prize in Economics (shared with Vernon Smith) for his work. Tversky died in 1996, and the Nobel is never awarded posthumously.

to see a \$20 play. When presented with this choice, however, our emotions and sentiment impair our rational thinking. We're reluctant to abandon something we've already invested ourselves in – even if it's only twenty dollars – because “we hate to lose what we have.”⁴

Economists call this the “sunk-cost effect.” Ecologists call it the “Concorde Fallacy.” Both mean “too much is invested to quit.”⁵ This phenomenon is alive and at work in our lives: when we put something into an experience, we attach meaning to it in the form of stories, which then get in the way of our moving forward.

Those attachment stories take many forms:

There's the urban myth about the woman whose attic was full of boxes labeled “STRING TOO SHORT TO SAVE” (boxes full of – what else? – string).

There's the stack of foreign-language books that you've had for years, determined that “this is the summer I'm going to learn German/French/Swahili.”

There's the dusty exercise equipment in your home, currently serving as a clothing rack.

And then there's my green storage bin – a bin that holds the makings of a quilt that I designed and began working on five and half years ago. I stopped working on it five and a quarter years ago. This bin has traveled with me from Chapel Hill to Berkeley, to Davis, to Santa Barbara. I designed it as a “crazy quilt,” and – just like Mats the sloth – it's lived up to its name: it drives me crazy that I've lugged this unfinished quilt (and when I say “unfinished,” I mean “barely begun”) around the country for nearly six years. But I can't get rid of it.

Says the Reverend Ken Sawyer, “It's the old arguments, the old explanations, old understandings, that are hard to let go of.”⁶

I say, it's also our hopes that are hard to let go of:

our hopes that we'll be granted days with 25 hours instead of 24;

our hopes that we'll fulfill all the potential in our lives;

our hopes that others will grow into their full potential.

⁴ From *Intuition: Its Powers and Perils*, p. 155, by David G. Myers.

⁵ From *Intuition: Its Powers and Perils*, p. 155, by David G. Myers.

⁶ “Nothing to Be Gained,” a sermon by Rev. Ken Sawyer reprinted in *Quest*, the newsletter of the Church of the Larger Fellowship, January 2004. It was Ken's excellent sermon that inspired me to write this one.

Consider again those German scientists, who made a meta-study of themselves by spending three years watching a sloth who refused to move. The crowning irony is that animals themselves are not ensnared by past investment; “their rationale is not muddled by sentiment.” When one of several chicks grows weak, for example, a mother bird will refuse to feed it, investing instead in the other chicks whose survival is secure. The future, not the past, is the only thing that matters.

It’s a uniquely human trait, then, to hang on “no matter what” – to “never give up.” Our past stories (“This quilt has been with me for seven years”) and our future hopes (“...someday it’s going to be on my bed.”) are so intricately woven. The urge to “hang on” is reinforced by accounts of businessmen who persevere at all costs and finally bring in the million-dollar deal; actors who struggle with bit parts for a decade until they finally win their breakthrough role. Never mind that we hear one of these stories for every several thousand people who don’t hit the figurative jackpot – we learn that “winners never quit and quitters never win.”

There are surely times when we ought to hang on *at all costs*, of course – fighting a merciless disease and upholding the responsibilities of parenthood are situations that come to mind. Mostly, however, the “should I stay at the table?” choices that present themselves to our attention are subtler, less cut-and-dry. They’re situations in which there’s no clear definition of “winning.”

That’s why I believe that it’s time to consider new ways to frame the false choice between “quitting” and “winning.” There’s tremendous grace to be found in letting go of unrealistic hopes. There’s heaps of sanity – of peaceful calmness of heart and mind – to be found in giving up a struggle that’s chipped away at our integrity, or our soul.

We plant our hopes and tend them carefully, but only some of them will bear fruit.

May each of your lives open to reveal which buds which call for your attention, offering joy and satisfaction, and which are withering hopes, ready for release and surrender.