

Transformed

By [Nanette Sawyer](#)

February 8, 2015

*For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page, which includes Sawyer's current Living by the Word column as well as past magazine and blog content. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.*

I love a good mountaintop experience. It's a moment when everything changes. Insight flares up in the mind, illuminating the moment, the experience, the problem in a whole new way. You're never quite the same again.

One such moment for me happened in prayer when I was on a three-day silent retreat. I was doing the kind of begging prayer that we humans can fall into sometimes, a "please, please, please" prayer in which I prayed for relief from emotional pain. Honestly, I cannot even remember what was so bad at the time, but I was definitely crying while I prayed. "Please, please take away this pain," was the refrain of my prayer, and it went on for a long time, with a vigorous intensity.

Suddenly, different words popped into my head. It felt like a sudden piercing stream of light shone into the darkness. But it wasn't light, it was words, spoken in my head in an exasperated tone: *Let go!* It didn't feel like a thought that emerged from my own mind. Rather, I heard these words in my mind like they had been inserted there, like someone had spoken directly into my mind.

I was so completely astonished by this experience that I stopped crying instantly and sat bolt upright. Where did those words come from? *Let go.* My perspective shifted from being inside my body, inside my pain, to watching myself instead.

In my mind's eye I saw myself crying and praying with my hands clenched tight. I thought that I was offering my pain to God in prayer, but actually I was holding onto it very tightly and praying *about* it. I had been circling it and pointing to it from every direction, as though saying, *see, God, look at my suffering! Here it is. This is what it*

*looks like. It's horrible. It's awful. Look! See!* And on and on I went with my prayer.

But when those other words (*Let go!*) shone into my mind and shocked me—not just the words themselves, but their exasperated tone—I dropped my experience of pain and had an entirely new experience, one of astonishment. I realized in that moment that I could choose how much attention to give my sorrow. I had the capacity to drop it, to let go.

Now, some people need to pay a little bit more attention to what's happening with their emotions. Awareness is a step toward liberation. But in that moment I had the opposite problem. Sometimes I need to pay less attention to what I feel. I need to accept it and let it go, so I can move on.

I call this experience a mountaintop experience because it was radically transformative in my life. It happened in a shadowy place in me—but when I went back down the mountain, back into daily life, I was different. I couldn't un-see what I had seen about myself. And I didn't want to. It made me a better person.