Learn to let go

One of the highlights of many a summer was a trip to Hershey Park. In my younger days as a parish priest I would go with the school kids. Invariably they would lure me onto a ride: “It’s not scary, Father Joe.”

Then they would take obvious delight as centrifugal force would pin me to the walls of some whirling device. We humans seem to love to scare ourselves and each other!

As the years passed I would still go, now with families and friends. Invariably the day would seem too short, and the ride home always a little soggy from the drenching we took on the water rides!

With the passing of years, and wear and tear on discs in my neck, I no longer do the “scary” rides. It’s sometimes hard to surrender the things of youth.

One true story, however, put all this in perspective. A family was coming home from Hershey, and all the children were sad that the day was over. Observing the children’s obvious gloom, the father said: “Don’t be sad that the day is over. Be glad that the day was!”

What powerful words.

It’s so true that much of our misery in life comes from holding onto what is past, what we can no longer have. It’s so easy to resist life, rather than let life flow. Every feeling wants to leave. When we hold onto them, we find ourselves at war with ourselves.

It’s especially easy to hold onto negative feelings – sadness, anger, depression, anxiety and so on. We find ourselves creating our misery without realizing we are creating our own misery. For example, if someone said or did something mean to me, that happened once. Every time I go over that experience again and again in my mind I hurt myself again and again.

The most powerful exercise that I’ve learned psychologically is the power of letting go. Yes, we need to grieve our losses. But we also need to let go of focusing on the

pain so that the pain can pass. A little three sentence practice that helps me goes as follows: “Look at it. Love it. Let it go!”

We need to look at our feelings – our pain and sadness. Denial just keeps them under the surface and bothering us subconsciously. Second, we need to send love to our feelings – send love to the anxiety and fear and worry and depression and sadness and so on. Instead of resisting them, we simply allow love to heal and dissolve our feelings. Then we let them go. As long as our feelings are flowing we are peaceful. When we hold onto them, go over them again and again, we prolong our unhappiness.

Sometimes I find myself giving more attention to my negative feelings. There’s a certain drama that comes with loss and sadness. It’s easy to focus on them, and whatever we focus on grows bigger in our minds. So that’s why, after following the three steps above to allow these feelings to pass, I want to focus on allowing the good feeling to expand.

Here I have a two-sentence exercise. Follow the advice of the father to his children “be glad that the day was,” and focus on joy and laughter and happiness.

To these good feelings I say, “I love you. I allow you to expand.” Just as love dissolves the negative feelings, love expands the joy and peace and love. Allow these feeling to fill your stomach and chest and head and whole body. As you keep repeating, “I love you. I allow you to expand,” we discover that we are bigger than our feelings – we are the masters of our own “feeling” lives.

Finally, trips to Hershey can become parables of life and death. As we age, as we experience personal limits and the death of loved ones, it’s easy to focus on “the day is over.” However, while we honor our grief by acknowledging it, loving it and releasing it, so too we need to honor our good feelings. We need to allow ourselves to be glad that “the day was”. And when we look at death from the point of view of faith, we realize that the true “day” will really never end.