

# The Paradox of Control

## ...and the Damage Done

By Dan Ofstedal – September 20, 2025 <sup>1</sup>

“Hold On Loosely, but don't let go  
If you cling too tightly,  
You're gonna lose control”—38 Special

Control gives us the illusion of safety. If we can manage our circumstances—our jobs, our health, our money, even our partners—we believe we can stay secure, and everything will be OK. Every culture I know of encourages this mindset, telling us to hold on tight, plan ahead, stay on schedule, keep things in line. The message is clear: freedom and security comes from control.

But here's the paradox: in many of life's most important areas—especially in our closest relationships—the more we try to control, the more we push away what we most desire. Clinging too tightly drives trust and intimacy out the back door.

**"Whoever tries to save their life will lose it." — Jesus (Luke 17:33)**

The paradox of control is not limited to relationships. We see it everywhere. Athletes know that the harder they "try" to relax, the tenser they become. Leaders discover that the more they dictate, the less buy-in they receive. Parents learn that micromanaging children often breeds rebellion instead of maturity (Like most parents, I have many stories about this). Even in spiritual practice, the more we strain to still the mind for prayer or meditation, the more restless it becomes. In each case, control destroys the very outcome it seeks.

**"Fear is the cheapest room in the house." — Hafiz**

The impulse to control comes from fear—the ego's default state. The ego's job is survival. It sees separation everywhere: me vs. you, us vs. them, life vs. death. From that fractured lens, fear is natural—and control feels like the only defense.

The ego says "I must hold on to this relationship." So it tightens its grip, orchestrates outcomes, manages the people it cares about most. But control comes from fear. And fear simply cannot create or maintain love. The clenched fist only destroys whatever it contains.

It is both paradox and irony that the tighter the grip, the less likely the things you value the most will remain in your hand.

**"Love is the absence of fear and control." — Anthony de Mello, S.J.**

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And here's the deal: the controller pays a price too—living in a state of subtle anxiety, exhaustion from managing what cannot be managed, and isolation from authentic connection. The very act of controlling creates the distance we're trying to prevent. In short: control is the great destroyer of meaningful relationships.

**"When the best leader's work is done, the people say: we did it ourselves." — Tao Te Ching**

There is another way. The Tao Te Ching describes the best leader—which is a metaphor for each of us—not as the one who dominates but as the one whose influence is barely consciously felt.

True guidance never feels like control. The same is true in love and friendship. Real love is allowing others to be free to be who they are. The most loving thing in the world is to let someone go—not because we don't care, but because we care enough to give them freedom. The irony is that when we do this, they are more likely to stay, happily.

What others choose—even those closest to us—belongs to them, not us. Our partners' decisions, our children's paths (once they are adults), our friends' choices—these are not our business to manage. Our only business is our own response to their choices.

Acceptance is control's opposite—not passive resignation, but active trust in what is. When we accept others as they are rather than as we want them to be, we create space for authentic connection.

**"The curious paradox is that when I accept myself as I am, then I can change." — Carl Rogers**

This doesn't mean becoming a doormat or having no standards. Life requires some boundaries. We get to keep our preferences, even strong ones. We can expect others to honor their word—and impose consequences when they don't—while releasing attachment to how they live their lives. We can maintain clear standards about what we will and won't accept without needing to manage outcomes.

Our culture doesn't make this easy. From childhood, we are trained to see control as strength: grades, follow the rules, achievements, deadlines. We build technologies to monitor, algorithms to predict, systems to regulate. And in many areas, control is a good thing. It builds bridges and airplanes, keeps traffic flowing, and prevents chaos. But what works for machines fails for human relationships.

**"You only lose what you cling to." — Buddha**

This is why spiritual teachers across traditions point us back to letting go. Jesus spoke of losing life (ego) to find it. The Buddha warned of clinging. Taoist sages taught the art of flowing with life. They all circle around the same paradox: grasping leads to loss, and letting go leads to abundance.

The paradox of control reveals itself in the end: what we grasp for slips away, and what we release we get to keep. Love cannot be chained. What we try to hold by force we inevitably lose. But what we allow to be free may choose to stay—because it wants to. And that is when real love begins.

When I was a teenager, more than once I saw a plaque or poster that said: "If you love something, let it go. If it comes back to you, it's yours." I have not seen or heard that proverb in a long time.