

New Beginnings

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Sermon – “New Beginnings” by Rev. Frieda Gillespie

I’ll start with an excerpt from a poem by Billy Collins, called Aristotle, that is in three parts: the beginning, the middle, and the end.

This is the beginning
Almost anything can happen.
This is where you find
The creation of light, a fish wriggling onto land,
The first word of Paradise Lost on an empty page.
Think of an egg, the letter A,
A woman ironing on a bare stage
As the heavy curtain rises.
This is the very beginning.
The first-person narrator introduces himself,
Tells us about his lineage.
The mezzo-soprano stands in the wings.
Here the climbers are studying a map
Or pulling on their long woolen socks.
This is early on, years before the Ark, dawn.
The profile of an animal is being smeared
On the wall of a cave,
And you have not yet learned to crawl.
This is the opening, the gambit,
A pawn moving forward an inch.
This is your first night with her,
Your first night without her.
This is the first part
Where the wheels begin to turn,
Where the elevator begins its ascent,
Before the doors lurch apart.

Many new beginnings are exciting and we look forward to them—starting a new grade in school or beginning a degree program, moving into a new house that you love, beginning a friendship. Sometimes we are thrust into a new beginning—such as changing ministers at our beloved church. You didn’t ask for this to occur, but it did, it has. It may seem like a natural progression but still, it’s unsettling. And now a new beginning is happening. How will you make the best of this circumstance? How can you sing a new song, especially if the old song still satisfies? I ask myself why I resist new beginnings and the answer is almost always, fear. Fear of the unknown, fear of not being equal to the

task, fear of loss. It is much harder to move from a place that is comfortable to one that is unknown and uncomfortable. As Thurman wrote, “how I shrink from the harsh discords of the new untried harmonies.” That is why it is the person who is in pain, who is unhappy, who lives their life in quiet desperation as Thoreau put it, that has the most potential to step forward into a new path. For some, the “ties of habit and timidity of mind” are enough. These are safe, familiar grounds, requiring nothing new from us. For others, the thought of being the same inwardly a year from now is unthinkable.

Meanwhile there is so much more to learn and to live. There is so much more untried within us. And each and every one of us has a next step, whether we take that step or not

There is an important spiritual principle. We all have a spiritual nature and path whether you are aware of it or not. Often we need someone to point this out to us. Now you may be asking, ‘what does she mean by spiritual’. Because we don’t take anything for granted as Unitarian Universalists, do we? What I mean by spiritual is that aspect of our own being that is separate from the struggle for existence. It is a need deeper than our need to satisfy our basic desires. It is deeper than our patterns and habits of mind. It is where compassion comes from, it is operating beyond our knowing opening us up to new possibilities. We encounter spirituality when we seek it within ourselves, often in times of trouble and pain. We also encounter it in the joy of discovery. The more we can surrender our self, our lives, to our spiritual nature, the more we have the courage to try new things.

My job here as your Interim Minister is to unsettle you. Not in every aspect of church life. But to question, to wonder why you do things the way you do. Also to offer ideas or better yet, to encourage you to think in new ways. I certainly don’t have answers to any and all questions. I will ask many things that I don’t have answers for myself. I have no hidden agenda or way I am trying to influence you to be other than, open to new possibilities, new directions. And these possibilities and directions may scare you, discomfort you, anger you, but if they are really your next steps as a church community, you will find a new energy and enthusiasm by the end of our two years together. When you have new energy and enthusiasm, visitors will feel that and those that respond to that positive energy, will stay. In this way you will create a growing community of like spirited people.

I am here because I responded to your representatives on the Interim search committee. I could tell from the materials they offered and what they said, that they were like-spirited people. However, I’ve yet to meet many of you. And those of you I have met, I’ve yet to get to know at any depth. Discovering what you love about First Parish and what you’d like to see changed or healed will be my first task here and indeed it will be an ongoing one over the two years.

A beginner’s mind is an open mind, open to learning, open to whatever reality is discovered. It is a mind engaged with life rather than endeavoring to mold and change life to an expectation. When we are asked a question in this open way, we are invited to answer from a real place in ourselves. How often do we get asked that way? How often do we ask ourselves real questions? There are aspects of our being that wish to be heard by us.

The poet Fredrick Kettner asked, “Does not thy being desire to become more active in thee?”

When I was growing up in Los Angeles, The Times published a cartoon each week by Jules Feiffer. One in particular stands out to me. There are a series of panels with a caricature of the same woman in each one. In the first one, she says: "I tried getting in touch with myself." And in the next one she says, "I wrote myself a letter but there was no response." The next she says, "I tried phoning but no one answered." And next she says, "I even tried showing up unexpectedly. I knocked but no one came to the door." And in the last panel she says, "I know where I'm not wanted."

It is not always easy to get in touch with ourselves, to ask a real question, to wait for an answer.

Suzuki in his book, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, writes, "The important thing in our understanding is to have a smooth, free-thinking way of observation. We have to think and to observe things without stagnation. We should accept things as they are without difficulty. Our mind should be soft and open enough to understand things as they are. When our thinking is soft, it is called imperturbable thinking. This kind of thinking is always stable. It is called mindfulness."

This all sounds so simple stated in these ways. But simplicity, paradoxically, is the hardest thing to achieve.

I read the first verse of Billy Collins' poem. Here is the second verse:

This is the middle.

Things have had time to get complicated,
Messy, really. Nothing is simple anymore.

Cities have sprouted up along the rivers
Teeming with people at cross-purposes—
A million schemes, a million wild looks.

Disappointment unshoulders his knapsack
Here and pitches his ragged tent.

This is the sticky part where the plot congeals,
Where the action suddenly reverses

Or swerves off in an outrageous direction.

Here the narrator devotes a long paragraph
To why Miriam does not want Edward's child.

Someone hides a letter under a pillow.

Here the aria rises to a pitch,

A song of betrayal, salted with revenge.

And the climbing party is stuck on a ledge
Halfway up the mountain.

This is the bridge, the painful modulation.

This is the thick of things.

So much is crowded into the middle—

The guitars of Spain, piles of ripe avocados,

Russian uniforms, noisy parties,

Lakeside kisses, arguments heard through a wall—

Too much to name, too much to think about.

This is what we have to look forward to. Things will get complicated and it will be too much to deal with, to contemplate. However this doesn't really matter. What matters is whether we show up and do our best together. What matters is whether we stay in the conversation even if it gets difficult – or at least come back to it as soon as we can. What matters is that we treat each other with respect and kindness even if we disagree. And what matters is that we reach for a new beginning when we realize we are using the same worn-out tools for solving difficulties.

A colleague recently said that worship is a time when we model the way the world ought to be. And indeed that is the way we should do everything at the church. The church is a training ground where we can practice being the change we want in the world. But this will never happen perfectly or smoothly. Eric Hoffer writes, "The beginning of thought is in disagreement - not only with others but also with ourselves"

So, let's not be afraid to begin, to ask 'why', to disagree with our assumptions and old ways of doing things. Let's make the most out of this new beginning. Let's sing a new song.

Unwritten by Natasha Bedingfield

I am unwritten
Can't read my mind
I'm undefined
I'm just beginning
The pen's in my hand
Ending unplanned

Staring at the blank page before you
Open up the dirty window
Let the sun illuminate the words that you could not find

Reaching for something in the distance
So close you can almost taste it
Release your inhibitions
Feel the rain on your skin
No one else can feel it for you
Only you can let it in
No one else, no one else
Can speak the words on your lips
Drench yourself in words unspoken
Live your life with arms wide open
Today is where your book begins
The rest is still unwritten

I break tradition

Sometimes my tries are outside the lines
We've been conditioned to not make mistakes
But I can't live that way.

Jennifer and I went to see the new Meryl Streep movie, "Florence Foster Jenkins" dramatizing the life of a real person during the 1930's and 40's. She was a great benefactor of musicians, who herself wanted to sing and didn't know that she had no talent for it. It is a wonderful movie and Meryl Streep is at her best portraying this remarkable person. I don't want to give away any more of the plot and spoil it for those who are yet to see it. I do want to share the best line for me in the film, when Florence says to her husband, "They can say that I can't sing, but they can't say that I didn't sing."

I'm going to end this sermon without finishing Billy Collins' poem. We don't need his ending. We are just beginning.

May it be so.