



## The Beginning is Now

BY SARA HUISJEN, MINISTER, UU CHURCH OF  
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*The beginning is now,  
and will always be....  
There's another train.  
There always is.  
Maybe the next one is yours.  
Get up and climb aboard  
another train.  
—Pete Morton*

(You can hear this song at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_LM0Zkx4Cpk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_LM0Zkx4Cpk))

The first time I heard those words was in seminary. I'd just agreed to sing with a newly formed a cappella group, and this song, *Another Train*, was on the practice CD I'd been sent home with after our first rehearsal. Thinking back, I'd guess I played it at least a hundred times the first few days I had it in my possession—in the shower, on my way to classes, when I went for walks, even when I was washing dishes at the sink and doing my laundry. I nearly drove my housemates crazy, but there was something about the lyrics that really grabbed me.

The words echoed—or maybe amplified is the better word—a feeling I knew well: a kind of sadness *and* hopefulness that lived inside me. The words in the song expressed a longing I recognized as my own at that time: a kind of hope or faith that I wanted to hang onto, the confidence to believe that somehow, regardless of whatever has come before—whatever heartbreak or loss or disappointment we have known in our lives—we *can* move on. We can allow our experience to shape us, yes, but not to hold us back or keep us from taking chances again.

This song said to me that despite whatever we've done, forgiveness is possible; that beginning again is possible; that setting out and charting a new direction in our lives is possible; that however difficult or scary or overwhelming it may seem, change is, in fact, *always* possible. *The beginning is now, and will always be....*

Kathleen McTigue writes:

*The first of January is another day dawning, the sun rising as the sun always does,  
the earth moving in its rhythms.... Yet also we stand at a threshold, the new year  
something truly new, still unformed, leaving a stunning power in our hands.*

As the old year dies and the new one begins, we have the opportunity to be mindful of this threshold and to take time to reflect on the past year, to remember what it held for us, good and bad.

In my work and ministry with hospice, I've learned to listen closely to what people say about their lives and their experience, knowing that it often has a lot to teach me about living my own life. People wrestling with a serious or terminal illness are often very aware of what matters, and what's most meaningful in their lives. For some, this awareness ushers in a sense of gratitude for all they've had—for their children and grandchildren, for the long life they've been fortunate to live, even in spite of difficulties they've known.

For others, facing death and seeing more clearly what matters includes wrestling with regrets they still carry—hidden sadnesses about the choices they made or remorse they feel about broken or cut-off relationships. For most of us, taking time to look back and to look ahead will likely involve both acknowledging our thanks for the blessings we've known and also admitting and facing somehow the sorrows and regrets we carry.

# Quest

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Every new beginning  
comes from  
some other  
beginning's end.

—Seneca

A monthly for religious liberals

### THINKING ABOUT BEGINNINGS

- THE BEGINNING IS NOW  
Sara Huisjen
- IN THE BEGINNING  
Bruce A. Bode
- UNEXPECTED NEW YEAR  
David S. Blanchard
- IN THE BEGINNING  
Nancy Shaffer
- FROM YOUR MINISTER  
Meg Riley
- RESOURCES FOR LIVING  
Lynn Ungar
- WHERE IT STARTS  
Karen Hering

Bronnie Ware is an Australian woman who worked for many years with people receiving palliative care, providing medical care and support that seeks to keep them comfortable as they near the end of life. In an article that's been widely circulated, Ware identifies five regrets that dying people most often shared with her as she cared for them in those last few weeks of their lives. In honor of the New Year, I offer them as "food for thought," particularly as you consider the decisions, goals and intentions you hold for yourself and your loved ones in this year to come:

The first, most common, of all regrets she heard sounded like this: **"I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me."** How many dreams, I wonder, have gone unfulfilled in your life to date? How can you, or might you, honor some of them still? I'm reminded of a poem by May Sarton that begins, *"Now I become myself. It's taken / Time, many years and places; / I have been dissolved and shaken, / Worn other people's faces...."* What does it mean in your life to be true to who you are in this moment?

The second regret Ware identified was: **"I wish I hadn't worked so hard."** How good are you at balancing the demands of your work and the needs of your family? How much time in the day do you claim for your kids or for your partner? In what ways might you simplify things and make it easier to align your time with the people and engagements you love? *I wish I hadn't worked so hard...* It's good to remember this, and to imagine, on the threshold of the new year, how you might choose to live and work differently, or even work *less*.

A third regret identified had to do again with being true to oneself: **"I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings."** Too often our inclination or conditioning is to suppress our feelings in order to keep the peace—a habit that can, and too often does, leave us

feeling sick to our stomach, or bitter and resentful toward others. What would it be like to say how you feel, or to reveal what you really think? Speaking honestly with people can change your relationship with them, and offers the best chance you or I have of ever making and creating healthier relationships, daring to let go of those that aren't any good for us anyway.

The fourth regret people shared with Ware also had to do with relationships: **"I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends."** When faced with the reality of one's imminent death, the relationships we've had and the love we've known and shared often becomes most important. When we get caught up in the business of life and work, we easily lose track of these relationships. Who do you want to reach out to and invite back into your life? What legacy of love are you mindful of wanting to create?

The fifth and final regret identified in that article had to do with being content and satisfied with one's life: **"I wish that I had let myself be happier."** Implicit in this statement is the suggestion that happiness is a choice we can make: that happiness becomes possible when we choose to appreciate what we have, and to act on what we know is right and good. Happiness, in any real sense, becomes possible when we're aware of our attitude, when we're willing to step outside of our usual comfort zones, daring to be more authentic, aware and appreciative of the parts of our lives that truly matter.

The question, on this cusp of the new year, is how will we learn to grow through all the days of our lives—bruised up at times, but also seasoned and made more wise through our experience.

There's a famous story from *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* that resonates with me when I think about how any real change happens in our lives—changes that are more lasting than any single resolution made in haste this

time of year. These changes come about as the result of a longer process of beginning, and faltering, and trying again when we stumble. The story is told by Portia Nelson who writes it as an "Autobiography in Five Chapters." Imagine this, perhaps as your own autobiography at some point in time.

*1) I walk down the street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I fall in. I am lost.... I am hopeless. It isn't my fault. It takes forever to find a way out.*

*2) I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I pretend I don't see it. I fall in again. I can't believe I'm in the same place. But it isn't my fault. It still takes a long time to get out.*

*3) I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I see it there. I still fall in... It's a habit. My eyes are open now. I know where I am. It is my fault. I get out immediately.*

*4) I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I walk around it.*

*5) I walk down another street.*

What street, new or old, are you walking down, aware or not of the potholes or pitfalls that challenge your way? What lessons are you learning or have you learned? What old or new insights live inside you, wanting to direct you on your way to making different and better choices, hoping to encourage you to go another way, even if it's hard, even if part of you still isn't sure it's right or if you're ready?

In this new year, may you find the courage to live a life true to yourself. May you find a balance between work and play, between the many demands we all know and having the time for people and relationships that are most important to you. May you dare to express yourself and remember to be in touch with those you love. And may you choose to walk down the new road toward happiness. *The beginning is now, and will always be....* ■

# In the Beginning . . .

BY **BRUCE A. BODE**,  
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*"In the beginning...."*

What inviting words

with which to begin a text that is to serve as an explanation and guide for a life and a religion!

The human mind is naturally drawn to beginnings, with an urge to trace things back, and back, and back—to try to get to the root. There's a sense that if you know the beginning of something, then you know what it is, and where it might be headed, and how you might deal with it. You have ground upon which to stand.

There's just one problem with this invitation to trace things back to the beginning: you never really get there. You will always be able to ask yet another question of beginnings: "And what preceded that beginning?" Thus, the search for beginnings leads to an infinite regress. After proceeding a long way down the road to the beginning of our cosmos you may say, "Ah, here, finally, is where time and space began! Here is the zero point! Here is where our universe begins!"

But then the troubling question, if you allow yourself to ask it: "But what preceded that? What were the conditions out of which time and space emerged? What reality preceded our universe? What was the nature of being *before* the Big Bang?"

You have perhaps heard the humorous story of cosmological beginnings in which the earth is understood to be a flat, circular disc resting on pillars. The inquiring mind naturally pursues deeper:

"But, pray tell, what are the pillars resting on?"

"Why, the pillars rest on large stones."

"I see. And upon what do the large stones rest?"

"Well, the large stones rest upon the broad backs of elephants."

"Ah, and may I then ask, upon what do the elephants stand?"

"On the back of a giant turtle."

"And what does the turtle rest on?"

"Oh, from there it's turtles all the way down."

Whatever your cosmology, whatever understanding you have of the nature of our cosmos and its origin, there is a point at which the curtain falls and we stand before an abyss of unknowing—the point at which it's turtles all the way down.

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At some point the mind  
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In such a search for beginnings, the rational mind is shown its limits, unable to investigate the ground of its own being. Nor can it account for the presence of being itself. At some point the mind must simply stop before the reality of that "which always was, is, and will be." It must stop before that which is other than and prior to its own categories of cause and effect and time and space. The probing mind that would go in search of the ultimate beginning is ultimately led back to itself and to the mystery of the presence of being itself.

But though we must always stand humbly before this ultimate cosmological question, perhaps we can say something about the creative process itself, and in this way acquaint ourselves with the ultimate power of being

out of which we all come and back into which we all return.

How does creation begin? How can we talk about the beginning of creation since we join it mid-stream? It is already well along the way before we become aware of it—we can only look back upon it. So what can we say about it?

In the first verse of the creation story from the first chapter of the Book of Genesis we find these words: *In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep* (Genesis 1:1-2a).

There's an interesting, probably unanswerable, textual question here: Is this creation out of nothing—*creatio ex nihilo*—or did the Creator God in this story have pre-existing materials with which he was working and from which the dome of the heaven above and the circular disc of the earth below were formed?

Whatever conclusion one might come to on that question, in the beginning—at the beginning of creative activity, before any creation takes place—there is no form or differentiation of any kind. There is only formless void, waste, chaos. The original waters of creation are not contained in any boundaries or forms. In the beginning, says the story, water covers everything. There is only water, but water without anything to contain it or shape it or give it form.

Water, water everywhere...water and darkness. No light at all. Pitch-black darkness. Cave-black darkness. Black-hole darkness. Submerged in water; turning and twisting in amniotic fluid; unconscious, unaware.

This is how it is in the beginning, says this story of beginnings. This is how it is prior to birth, before creation, looking back upon creation. No awareness. No consciousness. Nothing to see. Nothing to get a handle on. The paper is blank. The mind is blank. No actual

thought, idea, understanding or direction. Potential only.

And everything all mixed up together. Chaos. No recognized or recognizable form. No differentiation. This is how it is in the beginning. This, looking back, is a beginning element of a creation.

But then there is some movement in the creative process, for we read: *And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light; and there was light* (Genesis 1:2b-3). There was movement in the dark formlessness and sleepiness. A stirring. A shifting. A breeze. A gentle wind beginning to blow. The spirit of God upon the deep. The spirit of creativity moving upon the face of the waters.

In other words, into your blankness, into your slumber, into your torpidity, into your state of unknowing: a little movement, a breath, a whiff of something, a possibility, even some light. Out of the darkness of unconsciousness, out of the womb of unknowing, out of the realm of deep sleep: some light.

And with the light the first differentiation is seen in the chaos and the darkness. The first division of things, a division of light and dark. The first pair of opposites. A signal that creation has begun. Because creation always means division. It means separation into this and that. It means a division of the whole. The formless void is divided.

This is the beginning: the division into light and dark. And soon after that, another division, a huge and crude division, for into the watery void a divider is placed. *Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters.*



*And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament; ...and God called the firmament Heaven* (Genesis 1:6-8).

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**...we become aware of  
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already under way.**

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“Firmament” is not a very familiar word to us anymore. And though I heard it often enough as a youngster in connection with this Genesis creation story, it was not until years later that I understood what it meant.

To comprehend “firmament” you have to put yourself back into a more ancient time with a different cosmology, a tri-partite cosmology in which the entire universe consists of “heaven above, the earth beneath, and the water under the earth” (Exodus 20:4). And the earth, as I indicated earlier, is understood as a flat, circular disc, and the heaven above is a dome over the earth—like a covering for a cake plate—and presumably it’s a clear, solid dome in which the stars are hung as well as the sun and moon.

This firmament, this dome of heaven over the earth, is the first concrete division in our story of beginnings. Into the watery chaos comes a divider, separating the waters above the dome from the waters under the dome. When it rains you are being soaked by waters that have come through the windows of the dome of heaven.

Here, in the beginning, you now feel yourself making your first headway in the dark, watery void. A division is taking place, a great division—some kind of partition rising out of the water, separating water on one side from water on the other.

Something that before was completely unconscious now becomes crudely

conscious: waters separating before you, a dividing of the waters, a parting of the waters. That which is unconscious, which is potentiality only, now begins to become actual, emerging from water. Some differentiation taking place.

And then more differentiation, for we read: *Let the waters under the heaven [under the firmament, the dome of the sky] be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear: ... And God called the dry land Earth; and the gathering together of the waters God called the Seas* (Genesis 1:9-10).

Dry land. A place to stand. And now creation can take place in earnest, with all different forms and shapes and plans, gradual and simple at first, but becoming increasingly complex. The dome of heaven can be hung with lights, and the disc of earth can become green with vegetation and with creatures of all kinds. And the seas, similarly, can be filled with living things of all kinds.

This, then, is the beginning of beginnings: First, chaos in the formless void. Second, early stages of differentiation. And third, movement toward the more finely differentiated.

Enough, then, to begin a new year. Enough for the beginning of a new creative cycle.

Enough to know that creation does not happen instantaneously.

Enough to know that chaos is a necessary element in creation.

Enough to know that much may be going on beneath the surface and in the darkness.

Enough to know that we become aware of a creative process long after it is already under way.

Enough to know that we may some day be conscious enough to be partners with the creativity that has birthed us. Enough to know that patience may be useful, that trust may be helpful, and that the new year may be interesting in ways we could never, ever dream. ■



## Unexpected New Year

BY REV. DAVID S. BLANCHARD,  
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I write this, and you will read it, at the start of a “new” year. I say “new” because that is how it has been parceled out in the proper number of days and weeks and months to make a year. One is over, one is beginning. For the next couple of weeks we will all persist in writing the wrong year on checks and letters. Quickly, the new year will become simply this year, and the old year will become attached to all that’s past.

To me, New Year’s Eve has always seemed a rather arbitrary festival. A grand excuse for a good party. A useful time for reflection. An occasion for resolutions to be made—or at least toyed with—for the future. I don’t subscribe to the notion of time that the new year traditionally promotes, with the old geezer being shown the door as the young tyke in diapers makes her entrance. I think that time accumulates for each of us, and that the slate is never made blank. It’s more like a mural that we keep adding panels to, bending around the corners of our lives.

There are such things as “new years” in all of our lives. But rarely do I think they begin and end according to the Roman calendar. They begin and end, at times by choice and at times by chance, at rather arbitrary moments of

transformation. Perhaps in a moment of loss. Other times when we feel in control of our lives and make a decision to live differently. Maybe in that rare moment when we know we are in love. Or when we begin a new job, have a baby, write a poem, change our mind, get sick, lose a friend, look in a mirror.

You’ll know the time. You’ll know when your own “new year” has begun. When it happens, raise a toast, throw confetti, wear a funny hat, blow on a noisemaker. It’ll be time to mark. Even if it’s July. Especially if it’s July. Happy New Year, whenever.

*From David Blanchard’s meditation manual, Listening for Our Song, published by Skinner House Books in 2002. Available from the UUA Bookstore (www.uuabookstore.org or 800-215-9076). ■*

### As we begin the New Year,

we want to thank you for your presence, your insights, the gifts you have shared with each other and the donations you have given to us. Your care nurtures all sorts of wondrous things, from the words on these pages to online worship reaching hundreds each week.

January marks the beginning of the CLF’s fiscal year. As you evaluate how you will begin 2014, please consider how the CLF fits into your charitable giving. We hope that you will be moved to share in maintaining and strengthening the promise of our liberal spiritual voices by making a generous financial commitment.

Thank you in advance for your generous support of the CLF in 2014. We wouldn’t be here without you! ■

## In the Beginning

by Nancy Shaffer

Kate is teaching the kids about dinosaur air.

“That air you breathe—that air You have inside you every time You take a breath—that’s dinosaur air,” she says. “Dinosaurs breathed it.”

The kids’ eyes are very wide. They take deep gulps of air, just to have more dinosaur air inside them.

“The air we have is all the air we ever will have,” Kate says, “so we have to take good care of it.”

The kids gulp less. Consider the air already inside.

Kate tells more.

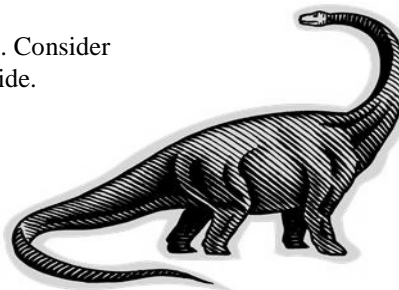
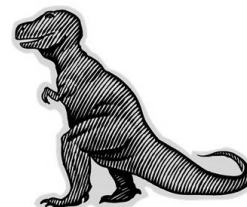
“Actually,” she says, “we’re all cousins.”

The kids look at each other, disbelieving, believing: “You?”

“We—all of us—” Kate says, “way, way back, began as cousins. Way back in the beginning.”

The kids whoop, clap each other on the back. For the rest of the day, they savor air and call each other “Cousin.”

*From Rev. Nancy Shaffer’s book of poetry, Instructions in Joy, published by Skinner House in 2002. Available from the UUA Bookstore (www.uuabookstore.org or 800-215-9076). ■*



## From Your Minister

BY MEG RILEY  
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CHURCH OF THE  
LARGER FELLOWSHIP



One of my favorite tricks when I am frustrated, bored or stuck is to consider where things have begun. For instance, during the awkward social situations into which pretty much all of us are periodically thrown (like standing in clumps of strangers at receptions and coffee hours), one easy path into conversation is to ask about beginnings.

"How do you know the couple?" I might ask a random person in the food line at a wedding reception. In the southern United States, whence my family hails, such a question is sufficient to launch a full-scale conversation: "Well, my Aunt Edna, she knew everyone and loved a good trip out into the country. And so when I was a young child I used to go with her to the haunted house at the pumpkin farm each fall..." and I can settle back with a smile, hearing details about people I will never meet and trusting that, eventually, about the time we are spearing pickles and putting them on our plates, a familiar name of one part of the couple just married will show up.

In introverted Minnesota, my beloved adopted state, the answer will more likely be one sentence. "My Aunt Edna introduced us." Or: "From childhood." This means that, in Minnesota, my prodding for beginnings has to be more active. I don't want to sound like a prosecuting attorney, so I poke gently. "Did you live in the same neighborhood?" or "Where did you grow up?"

What I've learned over years of this practice is that the closer to the beginning of something people go, the more animation generally emerges. "Were you friends immediately?" might lead even a reticent Minnesotan to remember and share tales of childhood rival-

ries over a beloved toy, or a time of being lost in the woods together.

I share this not only as a handy-dandy tip to avoid social awkwardness. (And it *will* come in handy, believe me.) I share it because, wherever we are, there are stories of beginnings and creation all around us. Aligning ourselves with those stories can bring ease to our inner dis-ease, as well as overcoming chasms between us.

Many introductory workshops for white people about racism, for instance, start by having us verbalize when we first became aware of racism and our racial privilege. Going back to our first encounter, to the younger self's mind, gives us an entry point into a huge concept. Identifying with that beginning may help us know and say how bewilderingly large racism was and is, even though many white adults have been trained never to acknowledge or even see it.

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"Plant a radish,  
get a radish...."

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Or we may be inspired to return to childhood to remember the beginnings of other emotions and thoughts that cause us to suffer now—to revisit, say, that scared kindergartener who was shamed by the teacher, which helps us understand why we are feeling irrational fear about starting graduate school now. It's not that recognizing the beginning removes today's fear or ignorance or anything else going on now. It's that, in recognizing the beginning we may be able to see the pattern in a clear, highly concentrated way. "The pattern's the pattern's the pattern," a friend of mine says when poking around in her own struggles.

There is power in tracing ideas, emotions, relationships, or desires back to their beginnings. In the seed we can see the plant that will ultimately emerge. "Plant a radish, get a radish, not a Brussels sprout," goes the song from

the musical *The Fantasticks*. Sometimes, going back to that moment when we (or someone else) planted a seed that became a radish plant can help us to discover why we can never harvest those Brussels sprouts we long for. (OK, I feel the limits of this metaphor—most people don't spend a lot of time longing for Brussels sprouts. But you get my drift.)

When we're in the woods, the trees and rocks have beginning stories of lava and the ice age and emerging from the ocean. When we are with people we know well, origin stories of love and new choices and activities abound. When we're with strangers, all around us are stories of birth. When we join an organization, or a congregation, or a club, knowing how it began can often explain current situations that are at first baffling. Learning about how something began can tell us a great deal about its current state of being.

In Minnesota's January, in the coldest, most frozen, most immobile time of the year, it is hard to know where to look for beginnings of anything that is growing. Is it possible that the seeds which were thrown off of last year's flowers, even now in their dormancy, are beginning to dream of the beauty they will become in a few months? Likewise, it is hard to figure out where some parts of ourselves begin, particularly inner regions we're not familiar with, and those we've neglected or ignored for long stretches of time. However, we can visualize, remember, imagine their beginning, thus breaking the silence, thawing those places so that we can access them again.

So, next time you're feeling trapped or stuck—socially, emotionally, intellectually, spiritually—try this experiment. Look for help by tracing how something began, either in conversation or in your own heart and mind. And see if acknowledging that seed, that tiny invisible place of beginning, holds the beginning of your freedom. ■



January 2014

## REsources for Living

BY LYNN UNGAR, MINISTER FOR LIFESPAN LEARNING, CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP



Have you recently started up something new? Even if you haven't, you probably remember a time when you did. I certainly have very clear memories from several years ago when I decided for the first time to take an aerobics class. I'd joined a gym for the first time in my life, and it quickly became clear that running on a treadmill was way, way too boring to keep doing on a regular basis.

So I figured I'd try one of the classes that they offered at the gym. I snuck into a spot in the back of the room and did my best to follow what the toned and perky teacher was doing up front. To say this was not my strong suit would be like saying that the Amazon rain forest is large and green. I couldn't tell my right from my left, headed forward when I was supposed to be going backward and was beet red and panting before 10 minutes were up. At 20 minutes I figured that was good enough and went home.

I might have given up that day at the end of the warm-up, confused and exhausted, but something in me declared that it was worth coming back. And coming back and coming back.

I know it sounds like my first try at aerobics was a pretty horrible experience, but really it wasn't. I was just a beginner. I didn't know the routines, or even how to learn the routines. I wasn't in shape, and had never much had the experience of exercising for the sake of exercise. Some while later I realized that I didn't even know what "exhausted" really felt like, as opposed to "hot and sweaty." That's how it is when you're a complete beginner at something. You just don't know.

And while most of us might think of being a complete beginner as something that we should try to get

through as soon as possible, the Buddhist tradition has a very different take on the matter. In Buddhism, "Beginner's Mind" is a

goal, a blessed state that people, ironically, work hard to achieve. Beginner's Mind, or *shoshin*, describes a state of being open, of being without assumptions or preconceptions, of eagerness to experience whatever is out there, of creativity and optimism. The Zen Buddhist teacher Shunryu Suzuki, who wrote the book *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, says: "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, in the expert's mind there are few."

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**"In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, in the expert's mind there are few."**

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When we are experts at something we know how it is supposed to be done. We are ready to judge whether we, or anyone else, are doing it the "right way." But with Beginner's Mind there is the possibility that the "right way" could turn out to be entirely different than what the experts had imagined.

A few years ago I saw a video—I wish I could find my way back to the link—of a woman who had taught herself to play guitar. Just herself. No instructional videos or books, and no one else in her village who played. And so everything about the way she played, from the way she held the instrument to the parts of her hands she used to play, was totally different from anything I had ever seen before. It was totally different from anything *anyone* had seen before. Her sound and her style were utterly unique, because she had truly come to the guitar with Beginner's Mind, and out of that complete openness she had come up with something beautiful

that had never occurred to anyone else in the world.

It might seem like there could be nothing easier than practicing Beginner's Mind. After all, how hard is it not to know things? But it isn't easy at all. Whatever we might be doing, however inexperienced or expert we might be, we carry the weight of our worries about whether we are right, whether we look stupid, whether we are better or worse than other people in the room. We carry our arrogance about all we've learned and we carry our need to impress the people around us and our goals of being just like the people we admire. We carry the desire to show other people how to do it "right" and the fear that we will never be "right" ourselves.

Beginner's Mind, the state of absolute simplicity, just isn't that simple in real life. But it is, in fact, something that you can practice. Zen meditation is one way. Another way is to take up something new, just for the joy of trying it out. Taking up a musical instrument or learning a new language or throwing pottery or whittling or skiing or, yes, aerobics can be a way to embrace the experience of not knowing, with the pleasure of opening yourself to something new. It helps if it's something that you don't feel like you have to be good at, that nobody is giving you a grade or work review on. It's easier if the people you feel competitive with—your siblings or your close friends or your spouse—are not all that interested in whatever you take up.

But whatever the circumstances, it's all opportunity to practice letting go of the voices that will want to fill up your Beginner's Mind with what you're *supposed* to do, and how you're *supposed* to be and just open yourself to the joy of stepping out onto a new path, whether you dance or stumble along your way. ■







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## Where it Begins

BY **KAREN HERING**, CONSULTING LITERARY MINISTER, UNITY CHURCH-UNITARIAN, ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

The journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step, Lao Tzu said in the Tao. But a better translation of this familiar passage is to say the journey begins beneath our feet—not in the first step but in the stillness that precedes it, in the place where we stand before we move, in the very ground of our being.

So we take off our shoes, standing on the holy ground of this earth. We fold our hands, pausing their habit of doing, doing, doing. And when we bow our heads, we can begin to listen for a story larger than our own, waiting first for a holy word, a sacred connection and understanding in which to root our lives and our work for peace and justice. May our listening be our prayer. May our prayer be our deep listening.

*From the chapter "Prayer as Listening" in Karen Hering's book Writing to Wake the Soul: Opening the Sacred Conversation Within, published by Beyond Words Publishing in 2013.*

