

# Quest

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Nourish beginnings...  
Not all things are  
blest, but the seeds of  
all things are blest.  
The blessing  
is in the seed.  
—Muriel Rukeyser

A monthly for religious liberals

## THINKING ABOUT BEGINNINGS

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## On the First Day

BY ANA LEVY-LYONS, SENIOR MINISTER, FIRST UNITARIAN CONGREGATIONAL SOCIETY OF BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

Humans invent a lot of words to try to capture a *bigness* so large that we can't fathom it. In English alone you've got gargantuan, humungous, enormous, gigantic, ginormous, vast. Those words are serviceable when we're talking about an 18-wheeler or a blue whale or even Mt. Everest. But when we try to capture the size of the universe itself, words fail us.

Our universe is so big we really can't begin to describe it or imagine it. Here's how unimaginably big it is: when you look at those models of our solar system, they are never drawn to scale. Sometimes, if it's a really big model, it can show the relative size of the sun and the planets to scale. But it would be really hard to make a model that would show the *space between* the planets to scale. If you made the earth the size of a pea, Pluto would be a mile and a half away and it would be the size of a bacterium. And that's just our little tiny solar system.

What our universe consists of is mostly space. Empty space. Just enormity itself, with barely any content. It's as if it only exists for the sake of its own size with just occasional little specs of matter incidentally sprinkled in. And we're riding around on one of those little sprinkles, making art and killing each other and having babies and brushing our teeth, riding around and around and around, in an impossibly tiny bubble where life as we know it is precariously, temporarily possible. And the crazy, terrifying thing is, this is true. This is actually the way it is. Our reality is unfathomable.

From ancient times, people have looked up into the sky and wondered how we got here and how all of it got out there. They asked questions like, *Why is there something instead of nothing? How did it come to be that this somethingness bloomed into salty oceans and islands and insects and sunlight and stars and dust and us? And why is it beautiful?* They told stories about it and the stories evolved over the generations and they got passed down to us. The creation story that we know from the book of Genesis, told as a series of seven days, eventually got written down in Hebrew somewhere around the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE and became part of what we call the Bible.

Listen to the very first sentence: "When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was formless and void and darkness covered the face of the deep, and the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters." You might notice that this is different from how it's usually translated. Usually it's something like, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." That's the idea of creation *ex nihilo* (from nothing), which is usually the way it's portrayed. There was nothing and then—boom!—God made the heavens and the earth.

But many scholars agree that the text really describes more of a pre-existing substance out of which God began to create the heavens and the earth. The words to describe that substrate are "formless" and "void" and "the deep" and "the waters." So it sounds like it was a soupy, deep, formless Universe, completely dark.

Picture this scene of the universe before the creation of heaven and earth—infinite formless and void dark liquid, darker than anything we've ever seen. And then the first act of creation: making light. Imagine what that would have looked like. Now we have the same primordial liquid soup, infinite in every direction, lit up with pure radiance. The light wouldn't have been coming from anywhere in particular, because of course there was no sun or moon or stars yet, so that light would just be saturating the entire ocean of the universe with blinding luminescence. In the first

instant of creation, this is what it would have looked like, according to this story we've received.

Now, I know I've said that this is theology, not science, but nonetheless, check this out. According to the astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson, this glowing soup was, in fact, exactly the state of things the instant after the beginning of the universe. In his book *Origins*, he describes the universe when it was just a fraction of a second old as:

*a ferocious trillion degrees hot, and aglow with an unimaginable brilliance.... For hundreds of millennia, matter and energy cohabitated in a kind of thick soup.... Back then, if your mission had been to see across the universe...you would have seen only a glowing fog in all directions, and your entire surroundings—luminous translucent, reddish-white in color—would have been nearly as bright as the surface of the sun.*

Tyson says that this state of affairs lasted hundreds of millennia. But there's a problem here: "hundreds of millennia" is a measure of time. It's a number of years, and a year is a human concept—the time it takes the earth to orbit the Sun. What was time before the Sun or the Earth, or before anything to compare or measure one event against another? What is time without place? Without distance? Without any recurring event by which to anchor it? In a universe that is formless and void, is the concept of time even intelligible?



Listen to the next moment in the story: God separates the light from the darkness. And it doesn't say that they were separated in space,

like one half of the universe was light and the other dark. The implication must be that they were separated through time. The text continues, "And

there was evening and there was morning, the first day." So now picture it: we have the infinite primordial soup lit up and then dark. Lit up and then dark.

Through the creation of light alternating with dark, time was born. A differentiated "day" was now possible. Things could now happen in and through time; the stage was now set for the rest of the creation narrative and all the narratives of the future. Now there was a future and a past, a history of one day and a prehistory of hundreds of millennia. Without this checkerboard of light and dark creating time as it unrolled, the "formless and void" would have stretched out infinitely and eternally. But now stories—our stories—could begin.

The cycles of time can feel imperious and unyielding. We resist them. We resist change—we resist the next season, the coming of winter or the sweltering heat of summer. Most of all, we resist death. And yet it is these cycles of time that make meaning possible. Winter, spring, summer, fall. Light, dark, light, dark. Birth, death, birth, death. The cycles create a structure, an armature within which we thrive and within which we fall apart. Thrive, fall apart, thrive, fall apart.

Through time we measure our journeys, how far we've come since we were children. We remember love and love lost. We visualize a future of hope. The details of our lives unfold within the matrix of our cycles. It is on time itself that we hang all our dreams. As much as we curse time, we need it. Without it, our lives would be formless and void.

So now we have this enormous, humungous, gigantic, ginormous universe, soupy and swampy, that has light and dark and time. But there's one more crucial thing that happens on the first day. The text says, "God saw that the light was good." This new entity of light is deemed *good*. God merely sees it. Recognizes it. Notices it. It doesn't say that God made it good.

God *saw* that the light was good. It's as if light's goodness were somehow inherent. You don't even need God for this light to be good.

Notice, also, that the text doesn't say or imply that darkness was bad. Racism in our culture has twisted this text and created narratives where darkness is equated with black and evil, while light is equated with white and good. You see this violent trope in classic literature and in Hollywood to this day. So often the Bible is a Rorschach test. People use it to support narratives of existing power structures. But it seems clear that when the text here says "light," it's not talking about a color. It's talking about literal light—the radiant, luminous energy that renders the world visible and warm.

We can draw hope from the knowledge that, if light is good, such goodness goes everywhere. We now know that it travels from stars 55 million light years away. It glows from phosphorescence in the ocean. It reflects off of the moon. It shines in wavelengths that we can't even see. Light fills every available space. Every nook and cranny is infused with it. Everything that we know and love is blessed by its touch.

So this yawning expanse of vastness that we call our universe is full of something after all. It is full of goodness. It is inherently good. I believe that the deep roots of our theological heritage, the ancients who created this story and sent it on into the future, teach that violence and greed and suffering are the aberrations. Goodness is the existential default. Our world is drenched with it. Our challenge today is to live into this image of life, to build a faith in this vision of the world, to draw strength and resolve from it, and to make it so.

The first morning, whatever that means to you in your own life, dawns in beauty. "God saw that the light was good... and there was evening and there was morning, a first day." ■



## Beginning Again

BY MARK WARD, LEAD MINISTER, UU CONGREGATION OF ASHEVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA

It was 1999, with all its cosmological portent—the coming of a new century, a new millennium. But I didn't attend to much of it, stuck as I was in my own “slough of despond,” as John Bunyan once called it.

After 20 years in newspaper journalism, 15 of them at one newspaper, steadily working my way up in positions of increasing prominence and visibility, I had, without entirely knowing how or why, been bumped out of a job I loved. Oh, I could say it wasn't my fault, that it was economic pressure—pressures, really, that were affecting the whole industry, forcing the cutbacks that my employer undertook.

My new assignment had me working second shift, parked in front of a computer for eight hours a day picking over other people's copy. To say I was unhappy doesn't quite tell it. What it really felt like was repudiation, a judgment that I had been weighed and found wanting, that I had not simply failed but that I was, in fact, *a failure*.

Anticipating the direction where my life seemed to be taking me, I asked the people organizing worship services at the UU church we attended whether I might address the subject in a worship service. Sure, they said.

And thus emerged my sermon, “The Art of Failing.” I cringe a bit now looking back at it. I certainly felt very brave standing in front of those folks confessing my misfortune and asserting that there was some “art” to be found in that moment. We've all heard the talk—lemons into lemonade, making “beautiful” failures that bring us to some transformative place. In the moment, though, it was hard to see how that could happen. Most of what I remember feeling at the time was how

hollow the message coming from my mouth felt in my own ears.

Failing isn't something that we like to dwell on much, and the further on we get in our lives the less such losses feel like setbacks and the more they feel like existential judgments. It's said that when you're in your 20s or early 30s you have a narrative running in your head: “I'm young, I have promise. I have everything going for me.” Setbacks, sure, but you recalibrate, lick your wounds and move on.

For me, this sermon came right about the time of my 46th birthday. Whatever narrative I might have thought I was living had faded, and the passing of time was taking on new weight. I was in need of a new story, but where would it come from?

Beginning again—it's a fact of life. Jobs change, marriages end, stuff happens. We need to let something go and find a new direction. Where do we start? It's tempting to begin, as I did, by making our lives as full as possible. I began scrambling for free-lance writing jobs, bearing down on my resume and getting it around. All productive stuff at one level, but also in many ways it was work to keep my frantic mind occupied. If I was busy, I wouldn't have to dwell on the fear and sadness I was feeling. But at the same time this busyness kept me from opening to something new.

The Buddhist writer Pema Chödrön remarks that fear often arises from a sense of poverty, a feeling that we are lacking something and we need to scramble somehow to find it and fill our gaping need. We can't relax with ourselves. Instead, we are preoccupied by this script that runs as if on a loop, repeating over and over, reciting our inadequacies. Wherever we go, it runs like elevator music, below the level of our consciousness, until every once in a while something happens that seems to reinforce this script. Then, the music swells and we're reminded: there it is again, proof of our inadequacy.

Where's the way out? Perhaps it helps to think of the process of beginning as a discipline. Oddly enough, in this circumstance, beginning starts with a full stop. Like rebooting a balky computer, we need to disrupt the scripts and simply be present to ourselves: unrated, unevaluated, unjudged. Let the busy mind settle down: enter into a moment where we are not awaiting, not hoping, not longing; just welcoming, accepting.

Here we find a moment of what the Buddhists call *maitri*, a complete acceptance or unconditional friendship with ourselves as we are. It's not something new that suddenly arises. It's not a matter of fixing or improving some debility, making up for some lack; rather a settled awareness of and appreciation for who we are. It is, in essence, accepting our inherent worthiness.

Pema Chödrön is careful to distinguish this from the phenomenon that she calls “self cherishing.” This is essentially the practice of seeking always to protect and comfort ourselves, seeking to assure that we are always happy and in no distress. To do this, though, we put up walls against potentially disturbing experiences and become self-absorbed.

Which is, as the Buddhists say, the root of all suffering, and it is the center of our experience of failure. Failure, after all, is the experience of falling short of our expectations. And where does the expectation come from? Well, it is the dream of the ego. We cherish this image that we have constructed of ourselves. We persuade ourselves that it is us—marvelous, wonderful us. We may even grow a feeling of entitlement. It's what we're due, after all. We've put in the time; we've hit the marks.

But, no. Sorry. Not going to happen. We can rant, we can weep, we can withdraw, and still, there it is—evidence, in the end, not of our unworthiness, but of the unworthy expectations we have created for ourselves.

And here the Buddhists offer an interesting perspective that takes some

reflecting to sort through. They say that we need to just sit, letting go of the scripts, the expectations, the assignments we give to ourselves. And with all of that cleared out, something appears: something true, something good.

Here's where the twist comes in: Pema Chödrön argues that as soon as we begin to know ourselves, we begin to forget ourselves. We no longer need to be so self-involved.

Perhaps life is less like the scroll of a heroic journey than a series of improv workshops. And we could hardly want a better guide on this path than Tina Fey.

So, here we are, you and I, entering this improv scene. One or another of us, or perhaps the leader of our workshop, or someone from the audience, tosses a premise into our midst. What do we do? Well, calling the game off or withdrawing into ourselves isn't an option. We're in this. The only way forward is through.

And what does Tina say? The first rule of improvisation is: agree. Don't question the premise, don't dispute the scene. Accept it and then engage with those that you're thrown in with. Our own ego fades into the background as we give ourselves to the circumstances before us. Start with a "Yes," Tina says, and see where that takes you.

But don't stop there. During improvisation, we need to do more than just say *yes* to the situation. We also need to add something of our own—our own insight, our own compassion, our own genius. This doesn't mean pontificating or philosophizing or otherwise commenting on the situation at hand. It means stepping in and helping to advance the action, to move the situation forward.

That's the second rule of improvisation. Don't be afraid to contribute. Launch into it. Anything that keeps the action moving keeps the scene alive.

And in making your contributions don't be timid or tentative. The least helpful addition to the scene would be questions. *What's going on? Where are we? Who are you?* Your guess is as good as mine. In posing questions, we take ourselves out of the scene and put the onus on others to move it forward. Take ownership of your perspective, your insight, your vision. You may open a wonderful new direction for the scene to take.

And that, of course, leads to what Tina Fey calls "the best rule," the fundamental assumption underlying all improv work: There are no mistakes, only opportunities!

Really? I mean, sure, this is fun—life is an improv workshop. I get it. But there are no mistakes? I don't know about you, but I make all kinds of mistakes, and some of them are real whoppers. "Only opportunities"? Isn't that a little Pollyannaish?

Well, okay. Let me tweak that a little. Yeah, we make mistakes. Perhaps a better way to put it is: There are no failures. Failure, remember, implies exhausting our resources, coming to an end. Our mistakes do not bring us to an end, they merely bring us up short.

Like working through an improv scene that gets convoluted and confused, we discover that we need to shift gears and find a different path. It may not be newspaper journalism any more. Perhaps it's a line of work that not only provides an outlet for writing but also opens up my heart.

So, yes, opportunities. Happy accidents, in Tina Fey's words. We are offered many opportunities in our lives to begin again: to find our callings, to begin new relationships, to let go of unhelpful scripts. And we begin by making friends with ourselves, the jumble of experience, insight and aptitude that we carry into the abundant reality of the world. We say *yes* and contribute. ■

## To Be What You Might Have Been

(EXCERPT) BY  
AMY CAROL WEBB,  
MINISTER, RIVER OF  
GRASS UU CONGREGATION, DAVIE,  
FLORIDA



Darwin published *On the Origin of Species* at age 50. Colonel Sanders started Kentucky Fried Chicken with his first Social Security check. Laura Ingalls Wilder wrote the first of her *Little House on the Prairie* series at age 65. Twain published *Huckleberry Finn* at 49. Cezanne did his greatest work in his 60s.

Then there's Grandma Moses, who had her first New York art exhibit at the age of 74. Florida's Marjorie Stoneman Douglas wrote *River of Grass* at age 57, then started her historic fight to save the precious Everglades at 78—and was still an environmental activist at 100 years old. Sojourner Truth became the traveling preacher we remember at 53. Some might call these people "late bloomers."

"Late bloomer" was originally a term applied to plants that blossom late in their life cycle. Now we use it to refer to people who find their niche, their passion, their voice or vocation later in *their* life cycles and therefore seem to "arrive" later than their peers. It can also refer to folks who change course in life to follow their deepest dream.

That seed inside you, yearning to bloom, is not waiting for right conditions, for the perfect time, the easy time, the convenient time, the "if only" time. That seed inside you waits only for you to dare, to bloom. In the words of 19th-century English Unitarian Mary Ann Evans (better known as the author George Eliot), "It's never too late to be what you might have been." ■

## Starting Over... and Over... and Over (Excerpt)



BY REV. CRAIG SCOTT, MINISTER EMERITUS OF THE UU FELLOWSHIP OF TUOLUMNE COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

Each of us, at one time or another, has had the experience of starting over. In such opportunities I see what is meant by theological concepts like *redemption* and *resurrection*. We reinvent ourselves in this life; we experience resurrection over and over again as we give ourselves permission to make a new beginning.

But it is also clear that starting over can be very scary, even if liberating. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, my maternal grandparents lost everything. My grandfather owned a shoe store in the small town of Belvedere, Illinois, and the store went bankrupt. My grandmother had never really worked. It was a very scary time. But together they decided to start—of all things—an insurance business. Can you imagine trying to sell insurance in the middle of a depression? People were scuffling just to stay fed, to stay alive. Amazingly, and against all odds, their insurance business began to show a profit.

My grandfather died just as the Depression was coming to an end. But my grandmother, an Illinois farm-girl, went on to build a very successful business. And she continued to sell insurance until she was almost 80. It turned out that she had remarkable people skills. She connected with her customers, continued to follow up with them, entered into their lives. Now, of course I'm not saying that the Depression was a good thing. Far from it! But it provided my grandmother with an opportunity to start over, and to develop skills she didn't know she had.

My parents, who were just entering adulthood when the Depression hit, were also deeply affected by that experience, but in a different way. For them, that era created economic fears that would last their lifetimes. And I'm sure this is true for many people who lived through the Depression. My parents had terrible fears of financial collapse, despite my grandmother's success. They had a deep, deep fear of what they called "starting over." They saw changing careers, or relocating, or anything that would upset the status quo, as a potential disaster.

I was born after the Depression, and I look at starting over very differently. Sure, it's scary when you're out of a job, or you're going through a divorce, or some financial catastrophe has hit, and you don't know what comes next. When you come right down to it, any sort of change is scary and we tend to resist it. But each and every time I have undergone a process of starting over, of reinventing myself in some way, it has turned out to be an opportunity to grow.

Human beings tend to look for security and want to hang on to things as they are. But when we have an opportunity to reassess who we are and where we've been, and maybe redirect our lives, then we also have the chance to come closer to fulfilling our potential. To people who came of age during the Depression, changing careers in one's later years is unthinkable. Yet for me, entering into UU ministry in my sixties has been a transformative experience, connecting me with a part of myself that was longing to be expressed.

Moving into the future takes a considerable leap of faith. I am always amazed at the strength of the human spirit, at the way that we can suffer reverses, be hurt in so many ways, suffer catastrophes, and yet somehow regroup, pick ourselves up, and carry on into a future we don't control, as we make a new start, over and over and over. ■

## Beginnings

by Ted O., CLF PRISONER MEMBER, TEXAS

I have a celly who says he's going to procrastinate later. Then he laughs and we both smile. Of course, it's meant as a joke, but as with many funny things, it's cut from the cloth of truth. I often think that I will have time to start my new beginning later. And quite often I do; sometimes it's my choice and other times not so much.

New beginnings can be tough because they take us out of our comfort zone. Other times we are thrust into new beginnings because of incarceration, a separation, a medical diagnosis or even a death. And then there are the times when we are thrust into a new beginning for the second time, as if the first time wasn't enough. Yeah, it's not exactly a red letter day to find myself incarcerated again for making the same mistake.

I'm not alone in this. I realize many people choose to burn themselves again with the tempting thought that this time will be different, whether it's with a spouse, drugs and alcohol or just the luxury of anger that we can ill afford. However we arrive at this place, it is up to us to begin our spiritual journey again, no matter how out of our comfort zone we may be.

I had to wallow in self pity for a season until I came to the realization that I'm not a screw-up, I just screwed up. Getting back on track meant writing the CLF. The first letter to the prisoner ministry was procrastinated far too long. Then one day I could stand it no more. I had to reach out to the UU environment to begin the healing process my soul yearns for and the restoration of a Spirit-centered life.

I'm glad that I've overcome the friction that kept me doing nothing. Now the ball is rolling again. I'm plugged into the CLF. With your acceptance, love and prayers I'm happily beginning again. ■



## From Your Minister

BY MEG RILEY  
SENIOR MINISTER,  
CHURCH OF THE  
LARGER FELLOWSHIP

At one of the garage sales I love to frequent I picked up a game called “Origins” with a subtitle—“The Game that Unlocks the Secret of Our Past.” The game includes a board with spaces for topics like “products,” or “names,” or “inventions.” To win, you move around the board by coming up with the name of something after its origin is described to you.

In playing this game, I have learned the origins of the phrase “on the fritz,” the invention of the automatic dishwasher, and of the name of McDonald’s. At least so I’m told! The reality is, whenever we look for the beginning of anything, it gets more complicated.

I mean, take the phrase “on the fritz.” The card says that it came about during World War I, when anti-German sentiment was high, and the most common German name in the US was Frederick, nicknamed Fritz. To say something was “on the fritz” was to say it was broken, not working, no good. Hmmm. That’s the origin of that particular phrase, but what is the origin of characterizing badness or brokenness in the image of a particular group of people who are out of favor? How widespread must this have been, this World War I version of *that’s so gay!* or a million other slurs, that it is still in our vocabulary? (I had always thought it was a Yiddish word, as are so many other words in the “itz” family.) Was there a particular Fritz who launched this? And so it goes, back and back...origin after origin.

Or take the invention of the automatic dishwasher. The game card tells me it was invented in 1880 by a woman named Josephine Cocharane who proclaimed, “That’s it. I’ve had enough.

If no one else is going to invent it, I will!” and proceeded to string together wheels and a copper boiler to make this happen. Well, that’s cool! But who was Josephine? What gave her the confidence to believe that she could build something out of a copper boiler and a wheel? When she said “If no one else is going to invent it, I will!” was that because she had already begged her father or husband to make it? And so it goes, back and back.

As a gardener, I see that beginnings and endings and middles are often a matter of perspective. I mean, in spring, when I’m putting tiny seeds into cups of dirt under grow-lights, and watching little green sprouts come up into the light, it’s easy to think, “This is the beginning. Seeds.” Then, in fall, after the harvest and after the bright colors have faded to brown, I think, “We’ve come to the end. Here is death.” And then I gather the seeds falling out of the dried up flowers, and I think, “This is the beginning of life.”




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Really, beginnings are what we decide to call the beginning. Ideally, we see them around us every day, and feel them each time we wake up in our mind, body or spirit. When I was young, a book called *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind* was very popular. Written by Shunryu Suzuki, one of the foundational teachers to bring Buddhism from the East to the West, the premise of the book is that once we decide we know stuff we quit learning. Suzuki wrote: “The goal of practice is always to keep our beginner’s mind.” “In the begin-

ner’s mind, there are many possibilities, but in the expert’s, there are few.” And practice, for Suzuki, is “just to live, always in reality, in its exact sense.” *Reality, in its exact sense.*

I don’t live in the exact sense of reality too often, if you want to know the truth. I’m often walking around in beliefs that I came to years ago, which are obscuring my clarity now. Often I live more like a jaded reporter who’s already written the story and is just looking for a quote to fill in what I already know (*an expert*), rather than as a true investigator, curious to see what is actually there and describe it (*a beginner*).

If I try to have an exact sense of beginnings, I experience motion. Past, present and future start to blur. Their melding interferes with my ability to live in reality, in its exact sense. I mean, consider this: in a number of non-Western cultures and languages, the past is conceived of as ahead of us, while the future is behind us. That is because we can look ahead and see the past, while the future is unknown, hidden from view behind us. I don’t know about you, but I find that concept both intriguing and physically disorienting. While it makes sense that the past is there to be studied and the future is not, I have spent my entire life hearing about the future before me. (And I wonder if my country might be healthier if we kept the past before us...but that’s another column.)

If the past is in front of me, I have a better ability to examine wave after wave of beginnings. (Suzuki wrote, “Waves are the practice of the water.”) What would it mean to keep the past in front of me? Looking as clearly as I can at origins—of my own beliefs and habits and biases, of cultural beliefs and habits and biases—helps me to shape my present, to choose consciously how I will live right now. And that, in the end, is what molds the future that will always remain hidden behind us. ■

## REsources for Living

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



Call me old-fashioned, but in my mind September always means the start of the school year. Yes, my daughter has started school in August for years, and goodness knows when the school year starts in your particular school district. But when I was a kid, you always started your new grade, your new classroom, your new teacher, with new books and clothes and possibly even new friends on the day after the first Monday in September.

As far as I'm concerned, September marks the start of the New Year, even if the school calendar says differently. Even if Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year, actually falls in early October this year. September is about beginnings.

### Beginnings are really hard work.

Which has led me to think a little differently about beginnings. I tend to consider endings as hard. Endings involve loss, and grief that comes with losing what you cared about. Endings can make you feel like a failure, or like you have no control over your life. But here's the thing about endings. You don't really have to *do* anything about them. If you have lost a friendship or a job or a marriage or beloved stuffed animal, you will probably feel sad, and likely angry, and possibly guilty or regretful. But if something has truly ended, there's nothing you can do about it, except just learn to live with the loss.

But beginnings, although they may be exciting and promising, are a heck of a lot of effort. It's not easy to walk into a room full of people you don't know. When you start a new job you have to learn a whole new set of policies and procedures. When you start a new grade in school you not only

have to learn the classroom rules and meet new people and figure out just what your teacher expects, you're also facing a

whole bundle of new things to learn, from multiplication to writing paragraphs, from cursive to algebra. Endings may be hard because of how they feel, but beginnings are where the real work comes in.

And it isn't always pretty. Anyone who has taken up the violin or the clarinet knows that when you begin to play, it isn't just that it doesn't sound very good yet; it sounds *horrible*. You have to get through a whole lot of shrieks and squawks and what a friend of mine calls "ironing cats" before you get to a single note that sounds nice, let alone a whole song. Anyone who has learned to ski or skateboard or ice skate has done a whole lot of falling down before they became fast and graceful. Anyone who has given birth to a baby knows that the process is messy and painful and exhausting.

Beginnings are really hard work. Which means that any time you take on something new, you're basically committing an act of faith. We walk up to the open door of a new relationship, a new skill, a new job or hobby or idea without knowing where it will take us. But you know that you're going to have to put some work in before you have any idea of what your new beginning will grow into.

And maybe it won't pay off. Maybe all you'll know at the end of a year of studying calculus is that you really hate calculus. Maybe karate or playing the flute turns out to be not nearly as fun as you imagined. Maybe the person you spent so much time getting to know turns out to be someone that you would have been better off not knowing so well. It happens.

And what makes it even more complicated is that there is no rule for knowing when you should have reached the point where you're no longer a beginner. There's no way to say whether if you kept trying for another week or month or year that

what you've taken on might get easier or more rewarding or more fun. You just kind of have to take it on faith.

Or, better still, maybe you can learn to enjoy being a beginner. After all, if you're a beginner, no one expects you to be good. Experts have all sorts of pressure on them, but beginners are free to just muck about and do their best and no one expects any different. And beginners learn faster than experts. If you're really good at something, then there's only so much room for improvement. But if you're trying out something totally new then the amount you know changes very quickly. If you only know three words in French, but you learn six new words—why, you've just tripled your vocabulary!

But best of all, so long as you can remain a beginner, you get the special sense of excitement that comes with exploring the unknown. To be a beginner is to be filled with the sense of possibility, with the feeling of new worlds unfolding in front of you.

If you can keep that quality of being a beginner through all the weeks and months and years that it takes to become an expert, then life will never be dull, because you will always be on a path where you expect new wonders to arise all the way along your journey. ■

At the CLF we have steadily grown our commitment to being a public voice for justice and living out our UU values in the world. Whether it's by inviting our prisoner members to write a reflection to *Quest Monthly* or supporting direct action work with the Black Lives Matter movement, we continue to begin anew in justice. Can you give \$100 to help us in our commitment to a new beginning and to being a UU public voice for justice? You can give by visiting [clfu.org/giveor](http://clfu.org/giveor) by calling 1.800.231.3027. ■



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**Did You Know**

that the CLF has welcomed three new learning fellows? Kevin Jagoe, Lauren Way and Amanda Weatherspoon will be joining us for the next two years.

**Quest Monthly Editorial Team:** Meg Riley; Janet Lane; Kat Liu; Jody Malloy; Beth Murray; Cindy Salloway; Jaco ten Hove; Arliss Ungar; Lynn Ungar, editor

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Photo by Merrel D. Booker, Jr.



## The Legacy of Caring

BY THANDEKA, AFFECT THEOLOGIAN  
IN RESIDENCE AT ANDOVER NEWTON  
THEOLOGICAL SCHOOL,  
MASACHUSETTS

Despair is my private pain  
Born from what I have failed to say  
failed to do  
failed to overcome.  
Be still my inner self  
let me rise to you  
let me reach down into your pain  
and soothe you.  
I turn to you  
to renew my life  
I turn to the world  
the streets of the city  
the worn tapestries of

brokerage firms  
crack dealers  
private estates  
personal things in the bag lady's cart  
rage and pain in the faces that turn from me  
afraid of their own inner worlds.

This common world I love anew  
As the life blood of generations  
who refused to surrender their humanity  
in an inhumane world  
courses through my veins.  
From within this world  
my despair is transformed to hope  
and I begin anew  
the legacy of caring. ■

*From Been in the Storm So Long: A Meditation Manual, edited by Mark D Morrison-Reed and Jacqui James. Published by Skinner House Books in 1991 and available through inSpirit, a UU Book and Gift Shop (www.uuabookstore.org).*



