



# Unitarian Universalist Congregation of York

“What Does It Mean to Begin?”

Delivered 21 August 2022

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Who here has a favorite first line? From a book, or a maybe a poem, or a movie - maybe the first line that a favorite character speaks?

You know, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,” “Call me Ishmael,” anyone? “All of this happened, more or less.”

I definitely have a favorite first line of a book. “The man in black fled across the desert, and the gunslinger followed.” Anyone recognize this one? Any other big Stephen King nerds like me? This is the first line of the first volume of what is rightly considered Stephen King’s magnum opus, a seven-novel series called *The Dark Tower*.

What makes it such a good first line for me, something so memorable, is that no matter how many times I read these books - and I have read them many times - this first line makes me CURIOUS. Obviously, by now I know what happens in this book, and in the series of books to follow. When I pick up the book to start re-reading for the umpteenth time, some part of my brain knows all this - I know who the man in black is (well, to the degree that that’s possible), and I know who the gunslinger is. I even know the name of the desert.

But the line invites curiosity and questions. Who are these people? Why is one chasing the other? Did one of them do something wrong? Did both of them? Did neither of them? How are they getting across this desert? Are they on foot or horseback, on motorcycle or some kind of futuristic hover-cart?

The magic of curiosity, the magic of not-knowing, is that it can transform almost any situation.

Because of course there's more than one approach to not-knowing, right? What is one very common reaction to not knowing about what is to come? [invite answers] Sure, right - what I'm thinking of most specifically is fear. Horror movies use this all the time - once they have you curious about what's at the bottom of the stairs...until you know, you are ON EDGE.

When we don't know what is to come - what is around that corner? How will that interview go? Will I like my new teachers, what about the new kids in my classes? Will I make friends in my new city? Is this person trying to sell me something? - of course that can be scary.

The thing about beginnings, about new situations and new starts, is: How do we decide what the best way to approach them is? With fear? Apprehension? Or with curiosity and interest?

What about simply *noticing*?

I am sure that many of you are familiar with the concept of "beginner's mind." It's a really useful concept from the Zen Buddhist tradition. Having a "beginner's mind" allows us to approach any situation - new or familiar, scary or fascinating - without any expectations or preconceived notions of the eventual outcome. Having a beginner's mind means open, engaging curiosity.

In a new situation that we approach with a beginner's mind, it is NOTICING that allows us to refine our approach.

When I was a kid I was super scared of dogs because some people who lived near me were not very responsible pet parents and let their dogs go running around our neighborhood off-leash and unsupervised. So for a long time, my default setting when I saw a dog out and about was fear. For the record, none

of these loose dogs ever hurt me, but they barked and sometimes wanted to play in a way that I didn't understand, and I mistook it for aggression. Now, fortunately, I am older and I know lots of awesome dogs and I've learned a little more about them. Right now I live in a neighborhood where there are a lot of dogs! I see many of them when I am out on my morning walks and they are out on their walks with their people. When I am meeting a new dog for the first time, I will do my best to hold no expectations - of the dog's behavior, nor of the owner - for our interaction. I will try my best to notice non-verbal cues both from dog and person. I will also try to notice my own reactions. Am I appearing friendly...or overly so? Could my actions be considered aggressive? From the clues that I notice, with an open mind, I can give more space to a nervous dog, or I can happily pet and greet a friendly one. Both fear and curiosity are mixed up in the great potential that exists in each new encounter I have with dogs.

And in fact, that's a pretty great way to approach beginnings of all kinds. Notice: am I reacting with fear? What information am I receiving that makes fear seem like the proper choice? What if I got curious about that instead?

Beginner's mind doesn't want you to ignore the valid signals that tell you a situation might be dangerous! Beginner's mind simply doesn't want that to be your default assumption. Beginner's mind is taught as a part of meditation practice, as a way to get curious about those things that come up when you try to meditate. Not to get angry at them, or feel guilty about them, but just curious and receptive to the whole process.

In doing a little refresher reading on beginner's mind, I found an article in the magazine *Tricycle: A Buddhist Review* by Yvonne Rand where she shares a practice called the half-smile. Here's how she describes it: "The practice of the half-smile has nothing to do with feeling like smiling. For those of you who have not done this practice before, you can think of it as 'mouth yoga.' Just lift the corners of your mouth slightly—not a full smile or a grin—for the space of three full breaths. Let your attention be on the sensation of slightly lifted

corners of the mouth and then with the three breaths.”

(<https://tricycle.org/magazine/cultivating-beginners-mind/>)

I wonder if we could try this together right now. You can close your eyes or not, make yourself comfortable in your seat, and give that little half-smile. Hold it for the length of three full breaths, inhale and exhale.

Thanks for doing that with me!

She writes that as she cultivated the habit of using this practice, eventually it began occurring to her to use at many times throughout the day - whenever she noticed that she was starting to become nervous or anxious, she could pause for the space of three full breaths, thinking only about the corners of her mouth. Not about the thing making her anxious or afraid.

Of course the key word there is...notice! In our chalice lighting today, and during our backpack blessing, we noticed that we don't even always recognize beginnings until after they have happened. And that's okay! We are constantly receiving information from many directions, and so it only makes sense that some things evade our notice. And patterns can't be recognized at the beginning because in order to become a pattern, they need to repeat!

I didn't notice I had become a regular reader of poetry for quite some time. I resisted it, for reasons not unlike some of those listed in today's reading "How To Read a Poem: Beginner's Manual" by Pamela Spiro Wagner:

“First, forget everything you have learned,  
that poetry is difficult,  
that it cannot be appreciated by the likes of you,  
with your high school equivalency diploma  
and steel-tipped boots,  
or your white collar misunderstandings.

Do not assume meanings hidden from you:

the best poems mean what they say and say it.”

Forget everything you have learned! Do not assume! Maintain a beginner’s mind. Keep your mind fresh and awake, ready for new opportunities and new ideas.

We share these ideas today to honor this season of beginnings, but also to give ourselves time and space to recognize that there are potential beginnings around every corner, and sometimes they are more meaningful than the big ones we plan for and dream about. Don’t let fear or uncertainty block your genuine curiosity. When you hear the first line of a book or poem and you wonder, “Is this for me?” - get curious! When you are uncertain about a situation or a person, get curious! And maybe, if you feel a little apprehensive, give that mysterious half smile.

If someone nearby thinks you are smiling at them, that’s okay. Let your mysterious half-smile open a world of possibility.

This journey we’re all on can be a long one. Think of this as one long reminder to be gentle with yourself, to be open to new and different ways of being, and to gather your companions for the journey as well.

Now please join as we sing hymn # 348, “Guide My Feet.”