

Take Heart, Begin Again©

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OPENING WORDS

From *Walking Toward Morning: Meditations* by Victoria Safford

You know, we do it every day. Every morning we go out blinking into the glare of our freedom, into the wilderness of our work and the world, making maps as we go, looking for signs that we're on the right path. And on some good days we walk right out of our oppressions, those things that press us down from the outside or (as often) from the inside; we shake off the shackles of fear, prejudice, timidity, closed-mindedness, selfishness, self righteousness, and claim our freedom outright, terrifying as it is—our freedom to be human and humane.

Every morning, every day, we leave our houses, not knowing if it will be for the last time, and we decide what we'll take with us, what we'll carry: how much integrity, how much truth-telling, how much compassion (in case somebody along the way may need some), how much arrogance, how much anger, how much humor, how much willingness to change or be changed, to grow and to be grown. How much faith and hope, how much love and gratitude—you pack these with your lunch and medications, your date book and your papers. Every day, we gather what we think we'll need, pick up what we love and all that we so far believe, put on our history, shoulder our experience and memory, take inventory of our blessings, and we start walking toward morning.

From *RUMI*

Keep walking, though there's no place to get to.

Don't try to see through the distances.

That's not for human beings.

Move within, but don't move the way fear makes you move.

*Today, like every other day, we wake up empty
And frightened. Don't open the door to the study
and begin reading. Take down a musical instrument.
Let the beauty we love be what we do.
There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.*

READING

*Every day is a fresh beginning
Listen my soul to the glad refrain
and, spite of old sorrows
and older sinning
Troubles forecasted
and possible pain
Take heart with the day and begin again...*

By Susan Coolidge

ZEN STORY

An old monk, after years of practice decided he would take some of his things and set off to climb a mountain, to find a cave and meditate until he reached enlightenment or died trying.

As the monk climbed up, an old man was coming down the path with his own bundle over his shoulder. Now, this old man was a Bodhisattva, one who has become enlightened and stays in this realm to help others: One who appears to people at the moment they are ready for. The Bodhisattva asked the monk where he was going.

"I going up the mountain to a cave where I will meditate until I reach enlightenment or die trying. Then the monk asked, "Do you know anything about enlightenment?"

The old man, dropped his bundle. JUST LIKE THAT the monk was enlightened. Then he asked, "Now what?"

The old man, smiled, picked up his bundle and continued on the path.

SERMON

Take Heart, Begin Again

My mother's birthday is today. She would have been 104. She died at 97. When she was 87, she'd had a heart attack and came to live with us to recover. She was beginning again.

It was my time to write my sermon at home morning and she comes over and stage whispers *"I won't disturb you,"* so I get up to go to the kitchen to get myself my third cup of strong black tea. My morning pleasure is real tea. I hear the slip, slip of her slippers following. She taps the wooden kitchen table and loudly says, right into my face, *"Do you know what Jesus said about beginning again?"*

I look up at her and my thought balloon reads, "Jesus, I guess you will tell me?" Now louder, she says, *"DO YOU know what Jesus said about beginning again?"*

I raise my eyebrows to indicate curiosity. She frowns. "Don't raise your eyebrows, you will get wrinkles" then she demands, *"Where is your concordance! You have one, don't you?"*

A concordance is a big heavy book filled with phrases and words and their various locations in Hebrew and Christian Bibles.

My inner child stomps her foot and declares, "I can write a sermon by myself, I do not need your help." The soon to be ordained minister in me bides her time. Because I sense that this is sounding like the mother I grew up with, the woman who persisted. No matter the issue, struggle, obstacle, she persisted. She was a woman with unshakeable faith in two things: Her health and God. Her heart attack and numerous other physical losses had brought her to a crisis of confidence, a crisis of faith.

I say, *"No, I do not KNOW! You tell me! What did Jesus say?"*

She breathes in. Her eyes travel into memory and inspiration comes to her as if from a distant caller. With her out breath she says (with vigor), *"If you want to begin again, begin with your mind? Renew your mind!"*

There she stood, all five feet of her, completely engaged with her discovery. My ears opened and as did my heart.

If you want to change your life, change your mind! Biblical wisdom? Hmm. I found the concordance, "LOOK IT UP!", she directed. She bent over the book. "LOOK UP RENEW!", she commanded.

Romans 2: 12 Paul's letter to early Christians.
BE THOU TRANSFORMED BY THE RENEWING OF YOUR MIND.

If you want to begin again, begin with your mind.

I have learned it is one thing to read it, hear it, think it. But it is not so easy to live. It may be that we cannot think our way into transformation. I also wonder whether when we say we transform our minds, we really mean that we are transforming our hearts. Still, renewing our mind is a place we can begin.

As we step onto a new path, into the process, as we begin to move within, remember RUMI: *Don't move the way fear makes you move.*

SING

As I breathe in, I breathe in peace. As I breathe out, I breathe out love.

Today is also another anniversary for me. Seventeen years ago today, I was ordained. In the years before and in the years after I have been transformed by the communities I have been part of and served.

Congregants I grew to know well have called me into renewal and transformation. Today is Palm Springs PRIDE. In 2004 or so, a congregant I admired and had supported in issues of LGBTQ equality, called and asked me to go with her to the capital of Connecticut, Hartford, to a rally for Marriage Equality. She asked me to sign up to speak and to stand up for those folks back home in the congregation who were gay, or lesbian or bisexual or transgender, and who wanted full inclusion under the law: those who wanted to have the right to create a more perfect union, we call marriage.

When I took to the podium, I saw a thousand people. Wow! I began by telling them who I was and where I was from. People cheered! It wasn't for me, it

was for the clergywoman standing up for full inclusion, dignity and worthiness for all with no exceptions. I answered her call. I did it because I loved her and her partner, and their love for each other. Eventually I was honored to officiate at their most perfect union. Success?

I do have a lovely certificate of special congressional recognition by my desk. But I received it, as did the UU congregation where I most recently served in Danbury, from Congresswoman Estes of Connecticut because she had read how our roadside rainbow flag (in 2015 and 2016) had been burned, was replaced then was burned again. Then it was fire proofed so then the whole pole was cut off. Still we persisted and put another flag back up.

After congregational meetings about the flag, we decided to go public. And so many rainbow flags were given to us, we were able to give them away to others, and we gathered on the lawn with interfaith supporters, to rededicate the flags, to renew our hearts, to be able to persist, to acknowledge that some of us were fearful. But we gathered and renewed each other's faith and reminded each other about what mattered to us most of all. For me, it's the our first Principle- *The worth and dignity of every person*. I have kept a piece of the charred flag with me.

When the shooting in Orlando happened, I organized (with other committed colleagues in the interfaith community) to condemn the violence and hate and remember those lost in the fire. Even Danbury town hall flew a rainbow flag, for a few hours.

Congresswoman Estes came to services to recognize us and our efforts.

Look, most of us don't get recognized. We don't stand up for justice to be recognized. So let me admit it is nice to have an "atta girl" now and then. That helps a person take heart.

To learn, because others show you, that you are not alone in your hope and your work, standing for your own and other's worth and dignity, that helps me take heart and begin again and again.

One step after another, marching, stepping up, being willing to be seen. We change hearts that way, even our own capacity to stand up, stand for, stand

with, stand on the side of love is enlarged. It seems movements for equality are never done. They are incomplete. So persist.

Like Rumi reminds us, there are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.

And one of those hundreds of ways is what the Cheerleaders at Howard University do in the pregame...They take the knee as protest to violence against people of color. Sydney Stallworth, a junior, said, "Injustice is still continuing, so we're going to continue to kneel until we see a change."

SING. As I breathe in, I breathe in peace. As I breathe out, I breathe out love.

I don't know about you but I was losing heart this fall.

It was too much: The hurricanes- Irma, Maria. Heartbreak. Outrage!
The Shooting in Las Vegas. So many dead and hundreds of wounded people.
Avoidable. Traumatic.

I remember Mr. Rogers saying, "Look for all the good people, helping."

Then I look at news about Washington. Russian hackers. Repeal. Replace.

I remember what Lily Tomlin said, "No matter how cynical I get, I can't seem to keep up."

Now it's October and the fires are raging in Santa Rosa and I am no longer an east coaster and I have a close friend living in Santa Rosa – she moved there from Connecticut a year ago.

She had to evacuate. She waited for days to see if her house would burn or not. Meanwhile other homes were now cinders. People died. How to take heart? How to breathe in peace when it is all ashes in her throat.

I was in Ralph's market, living with my unsettled heart and comforting my fears by grocery shopping and filled with concern for my friend and bit of loss of hope for the future of our country. I stop by a frozen food bin. One side was refrigerated wines (very strange to have that in a grocery store) and the far

side held juices. In the middle of a wide aisle was a giant frozen food bin filled with shrimp.

A young man had left his cart mid-aisle and wandered away to another shelf. My cart was also in the aisle so it is blocked. A woman was trying to push her cart through but she couldn't so she backed up to take the longer path around. The young man noticed, moved his cart and apologized. We all smile. He laughs. She laughs. I laugh.

And out of my mouth comes, "The grocery carts seem to be having babies!" And her face opens into joy and all of sudden we are hugging! In Ralphs!

I turn back to the wine bottles, and say over our two carts, "I'm standing here thinking of my friend in Santa Rosa with the fires. Her house may be ashes by now." I shrug. Disheartened.

And she says, "My daughter died." I look at her and wonder how she can even be standing up.

I pause, I breathe in peace, "Well, everything penetrates into your heart." I hope I am breathing out love.

She pauses, says "It was a year ago." She goes on. I listen. She adds, "I know she is with God, but I am so sad. I don't know why I told you that." I said, "Well sometimes we are so full, we spill over and have to tell. Maybe it's easier to tell a stranger." I listen some more then her cell phone buzzed...her husband...a space. It felt incomplete. I wondered what else to do, if anything.

SING : As I breathe in, I breathe in peace. As I breathe out, I breathe out love.

This what I wanted to say to her:

We are all broken.

We are all carrying our burdens and blessings as we move though the aisles.

We are all broken and blessed no matter who we are, who we love, where we come from and where we've gotten to.

We are all filled with worth. We are all worthy of dignity.

If you want to transform yourself, renew your mind.

If you want to renew your mind, breathe in peace.
Breathe in and out and in and out until you are breathing out love.

And who knows...it may not get you anywhere close to enlightened, and even if you already are...you still have to choose what to carry, how much to carry: anger, humor, faith, fear, kindness, cynicism.
In spite of old sorrows and older sinning,
In the face of troubles forecast and probable pain, since we are human.

Wendell Berry said: "Be joyful even though you have considered all the facts."

Every day is a fresh beginning. Listen my soul to that glad refrain.
Places like this help us take heart and begin again and again and again.
Allow yourself to put down the baggage, the bundles, the burdens while you are here for your Sabbath time.
And then we each pick up our life as we walk into this morning.
You finish the service with how you live your life each day.

It is not the burdens that change...it is the person

The journey is an inner journey of practice. As we make our way on the path of life...however we are, whomever we are, who ever we love, wherever we have come from or gotten to, communities like this invite us to have faith that we can...start over this day.

It is not about what you carry but how you carry it.

Don't move the way fear makes you move. Move the way love makes you move. And keep walking. You might meet a Bodisatva disguised as the one in the chair next to you, or a woman pushing a grocery cart, or a memory of your mother, or a Bible passage, or you might be a Bodisatva for another traveler.

Let yourself kneel and pray or kneel and protest, or kneel and kiss the ground of your very being because you are being part of that great arc of the universe that we can bend towards love and justice.

THANK YOU.

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