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“All Beginnings Are Hard”

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“For the Children”:

The rising hills, the slopes,
of statistics
lie before us.
the steep climb
of everything, going up,
up, as we all
go down.
In the next century
or the one beyond that,
they say,
are valleys, pastures,
we can meet there in peace
if we make it.
To climb these coming crests
one word to you, to
you and your children:
stay together
learn the flowers
go light
--Gary Snyder

How many times have you moved in your life? I was counting the other day, and realized I've moved twenty times. Each time I move, I'm excited about it. I think, wow, I'm going off on a new adventure! My new life is going to be great!

Then, when I get there, reality sets in. I have to figure out where the food co-op and the bank and the bookstore are. I have to find a doctor, a dentist, a therapist, and most terrifyingly, a new hair stylist. I miss my old friends painfully, and it takes a long time to make new friends. During the first month my body is so stressed by the constant newness of everything that I can hardly eat, and I lose ten or fifteen pounds. (But don't worry about me wasting away, because I always seem to gain it back.) It turns out that the new beginning I was so looking forward to is hard, very hard.

When I moved here, the usual challenges of moving were compounded by the fact that my first living situation turned out to be extremely bad for my health. I had to move again, which I did with a lot of help from you, just two weeks ago. And to add even more stress to the situation, when Emily Mitchell announced in the Flash that the Interim Task Force had found an interim minister, she included words like this in her description of me: “Brilliant! Creative! Warm! Loving!”

Oh, great! You're all expecting Wonder Woman, and I can't even find the box with the envelopes in it so I can pay my bills. So let's just get one thing straight: I am not Wonder Woman. What I am is a well-trained minister, sharing with you a time of new beginnings.

There is a line from the Talmud that says, "All beginnings are hard." This is a proverb in many other cultures around the world also, so it must be something of a universal human experience. And isn't it the truth. I remember my first baby—oh, how I loved him. I could not believe such love was even possible. **And**, well, first there were the pregnancy and birth, which were certainly hard, and then—he needed to nurse every two hours, for an hour each time, and I thought I would die of sleep deprivation. I read an interview with Johnny Depp once in which he was talking about the sleeplessness of new parenthood. He said, we talk about sleep like it's the new drug: oh, man, I got six hours last night!

So even a beginning we look forward to with all our hearts is still hard. Partly it's because of the newness of everything, which stresses our nervous systems. And partly it's because every beginning is also an ending. Motherhood was the end of a time when I could act only to please myself and my husband—from then on my love for my child dictated my life. I was only 23 when my son was born, and sometimes I longed to put a red dress on and go out dancing. But my children's father and I had no money for a babysitter, so...we stayed in. We loved becoming parents, *and* it was the end of our time just as a couple. It was hard.

Everyone here is facing some hard new beginning. Some have just lost a loved one and are beginning a new life without them. Some are in the middle of moving to a new home. Some have just moved your parents. Some are beginning a new life after a divorce. Some of you have children who have just left for college—oh, what a hard beginning that can be! —and some of your children are just starting a new school year. My kids had nightmares every single year as the school year began. They had all those what if questions that Wemberly did in our story.

And then there is the new beginning you are facing as a congregation. Your beloved Kevin Tarsa, whom I have heard described as the spiritual heart and soul of the congregation, has gone. I have arrived. Many of you are anxious about what will happen now. Many of you come here because you like it as it is. What if things change so much that you no longer feel comfortable? What if so many new people come that the community feels different? What if the interim minister is mean? ...what if...what if...what if?

Every beginning is hard, because every beginning is also an ending. Each thing that happens is both at once. This is the nature of the universe, as far as we can understand it. The whole is always in process, always becoming, always in flow. All things, and all beings, are in motion, ever changing. Even rock, which seems so solid and stable, consists of subatomic particles that are in constant motion. Our bodies are but temporary aggregates of molecules coalesced from the larger whole into living systems that grow and change and then eventually die, releasing those molecules back into the larger universe. Change is a constant. What's more, because all these living moving things and beings are all together in one system, they keep bumping into each other. The movement of one thing influences the movement of another. So not only is change a constant, change in one part of the system produces change in every other part. This is the physical explanation for interdependence.

If change is constant, and one change produces more change, then maybe—just maybe—it's not the change that's the problem so much as the way we deal with it. Are there ways to make change easier on ourselves?

Gary Snyder's poem gives us some clues. Stay together. Learn the flowers. Go light. Interesting, because the world's religions tell us exactly the same things, in different words.

What can they mean? Let me tell you a story to illustrate.

The hardest beginning I ever faced was when my kids were five and eight. I was really excited because I had finished graduate school in Washington and gotten a teaching job in Northern California. My children's father and I sold our little house, packed up the kids and the dog and the cat, and moved. Our marriage had been in trouble for years, and we thought this would be a fresh start. We were going to be closer to our families, and we had good friends in the town where we were moving. It seemed like things were finally looking up. But within months, my spouse was hospitalized for being violently suicidal. When he was released, we began a long and awful divorce. I moved into my own house with the kids. I was a single parent, working full time, and to make things worse, my new job was turning out to be a really bad fit. My kids were having nightmares about their father killing himself. My family was angry with me about the divorce because they didn't know the whole truth about my marriage. I had left my community of friends behind in Washington. So here I was, starting a whole new life, all alone. My grief over all that was ending and the newness of everything had me stressed out of my mind.

What got me through? How did I survive that terrible change?

Gary Snyder says: stay together. Well, a big part of my problem was that my husband and I were not staying together, and I had no friends or family to help me. I felt bereft of all love.

But I was a Unitarian Universalist. I knew that the heart of our faith is love. I knew that if I could find a UU community somewhere near, there would be a group of people who would love me just as I was, and whose actions would embody that love. Fortunately for me, there was a UU fellowship in my new town. And at this fellowship, when someone new came in, the older members assigned someone to companion them into the community. An older couple was assigned to me, and they virtually adopted me and my children. If I needed someone to pick up my kids after school, they were there. When my car broke down, they were there. They introduced me to other women with children, and some of us started a women's spirituality group. Together, we explored important questions, and we also took care of one another. If a family was sick, another family brought soup. If a baby was born, women signed up to come hold the baby so the new parents could take a shower. Eventually I was not only receiving love and help from my community, I was giving it. In this way, the community embodied the love that is at the heart of Unitarian Universalism. In this way, I found people with whom to stay together.

Gary Snyder also says: Learn the flowers.

When a person is going through a terrible time, or even just coping with the stress of newness, it can be hard to see beauty in the world. But on the other hand, sometimes grief and pain, or anxiety, make us so raw that the world bursts in on our naked hearts with extraordinary glory. Once, I was looking out from a window at the top of a hill, down over a bay and a spit of sand dunes separating the bay from the ocean. There were pines growing on the dunes there, just a little fuzz of green from my vantage point. It was a gray, rainy day, and I wondered if my life would ever have joy in it again. Suddenly the clouds opened up, the ocean and the bay turned bright shiny silver, and a huge double rainbow touched down on the tops of the pines. I staggered from the beauty of it, almost fell over. I felt I had been vouchsafed a vision. Healing was possible. Beauty made it possible. There was strength available to me if I would ground myself in the place where I was, if I would get to know its particular beauty and understand it, if I would understand myself as part of it. I knew then that I must go out every single day, no matter how I was feeling, and gather strength from the forests and the sea. I knew

also that in order for beauty to remain in the world, I must protect it and care for it. Wherever we are, we must know ourselves to be part of that place, and we must care for it as it cares for us. In beauty lies our salvation.

Stay together. Learn the flowers. Go Light. Hmm, go light.

In that terrible new beginning, I found that if I were going to survive, I would need to let go of all kinds of things. I could keep only the absolute essentials. What was essential? Caring for my children, which meant caring for my self. What was not essential? Perfection, in any part of my life. Being the perfect teacher. Getting tenure. Raising the perfect kids, giving them the perfect life. I began letting go of all kinds of old baggage. I began the lifelong process of dealing with my heritage as an adult child of an alcoholic, and healing my childhood wounds. I began making my life and my children's lives as simple as possible.

As I tried to let go, I found that one of the most important and useful tools available to me was spiritual practice. I was experiencing a tremendous amount of fear and anxiety. Letting go of things that had been important to me raised even more fear and anxiety. Brain researchers have shown that practices such as meditation, prayer, chanting, singing, dancing, walking, communing with trees and rocks and water—all of these calm our limbic systems, the part of the brain responsible for those fears. As I began to learn some of these spiritual practices, and practice them both alone and in community, I began to be able to let go. I began to be able to surrender, and trust in love to carry me through. And it did.

Now, the thing about going light—about letting go of everything that is not essential—is that it is one of the most important things that human beings need to do. Especially North American human beings. This is true both for our own health and for the health of the planet. One of the reasons people have such a hard time with change is that we are so attached to the way things were. We are attached to our stuff. We are attached to our routines. We are attached even to things we know are unhealthy, because without them, who are we? When we are attached to things and ways of being, we want to safeguard them. We can become rigid and fearful about losing them. Sometimes people are even willing to go to war over a way of life.

This is why all the world's religions teach us to release these attachments. They teach us to surrender to love, to know that we are part of the moving, flowing whole, and trust that we will be all right. It is why religion offers spiritual practices that help people let go. It is why all religion teaches us to gather in community, to strengthen each other, to offer each other love. It is why religion teaches us to seek and create beauty.

Stay together. Learn the flowers. Go light.

If we are full to the brim with love, if we are deeply connected to each other and our place in the web of all life, if our senses are replete with beauty, we can have no room in our hearts for greed or fear or loneliness. We can let go of all we do not need. We can surrender to the flow of change that is this life. We can trust that we are ever held in love. And if we can do that, and act in the world accordingly, we will influence others to do the same. And when we have done that, we have become the change we wish to see.

May it be so.

Blessed be.