

New Years Day/Starting From Here

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Opening Words – (#419, Attributed to Kalidasa)

Look to this day!

For it is life, the very life of life.

In its brief course lie all the verities

and realities of your existence:

The bliss of growth,

The glory of action,

The splendor of beauty;

For yesterday is but a dream,

And tomorrow is only a vision;

But today, well lived, makes every yesterday

A dream of happiness

And every tomorrow a vision of hope.

Look well, therefore, to this day.

Readings

1. From [*Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*](#) by Shunryu Suzuki, Rôshi, a Japanese Zen Master who was one of the first authentic Buddhist teachers to live in the West:

Our “original mind” includes everything within itself. It is always rich and sufficient within itself. You should not lose your self-sufficient state of mind. This does not mean a closed mind, but actually an empty mind and a ready mind. If your mind is empty, it is always ready for anything; it is open to everything. In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities; in the expert’s mind there are few.

2. From the [*Gospel of Thomas*](#), translated by Stephen Patterson and Marvin Meyer:

Jesus said, "Know what is in front of your face, and what is hidden from you will be disclosed to you."

They said to him, "Tell us who you are so that we may believe in you."

[And he said], "You examine the face of heaven and earth, but you have not come to know the

one who is in your presence, and you do not know how to examine the present moment.”

The disciples said to Jesus, "Tell us, how will our end come?"

Jesus said, "Have you found the beginning, then, that you are looking for the end? You see, the end will be where the beginning is.

Congratulations to the one who stands at the beginning...”

3. *Ludwig Wittgenstein, Austrian-Jewish philosopher, as quoted in [The Essence of Wisdom](#) by Stephen Mitchell:*

If the place I want to arrive at could only be reached by a ladder, I would give up trying to arrive at it. For the place I really have to reach is where I must already be.

What is reachable by a ladder doesn't interest me.

Sermon – Starting From Here

Happy New Year...s resolutions.

Resolutions. It's not exactly a festive word, is it?

Still, I love New Years Day. I know that the concept of a New Year is all a construct of the mind, and this day is really packed with no more possibilities than any other day...still, the *feeling* of beginning a new year is exhilarating. There is a freedom in attempting to clean last year's slate and saying to oneself, "Ok, starting now..."

But then I start thinking *resolutions*, and *resolutions* sound so...*hard*. So *unpleasant*.

Because, look, how do I develop my list of resolutions? By looking over the past year or years or my whole lifetime...I find that I *haven't* really wiped the slate clean, I can still see the outlines of all my actions, my good intentions gone bad, my failures, my procrastination, my laziness...and thank God, right?...because now I need to pore over all those things that I have not done or done a half...way job of, or just done plain wrong in the past so that I can look at all of that and kick myself and *resolve* to do better this year. I mean, how *else* am I going to make the changes I need to make?

So I spent more than a few years making resolutions. I finally decided to make a resolution that I would no longer make resolutions...and I couldn't even keep that one. It just seemed too restricting, somehow...What if I *wanted* to make a resolution?

But why is it, I wonder, that given this admittedly calendar-driven time period in which to reflect

on our own lives; this chance to take a deep breath before we plunge into a new year; this opportunity to *be with ourselves*; we immediately jump to what we want to change.

I don't really *know* me...but I know enough to know I should change. I feel vaguely uncomfortable with myself in the present moment, so I chalk that up to the messes I've made in my past, and to the fact that my anticipated future has not arrived yet. Yes, I *will* feel at home in the present moment...the *next* present moment that comes along...as soon as I shed all that baggage of my past...and as soon as I receive just a few more of the raw materials that I need to construct my desired future.

Writer [Anthony de Mello tells the story](#) of a great teacher named Gensha who invites a court official to tea. After the customary greetings, the official, respecting the wisdom of Gensha and honored to have this meeting, says, "I do not wish to squander this opportunity of spending some time in the presence of so great a Master. Tell me, what does it mean when they say that in spite of our having it in our daily life, we do not see it?"

Gensha offered the man a piece of cake. Then he served him his tea. After eating and drinking, the official was puzzled at the lack of response from Gensha and, deciding that he had not heard the question, repeated it: "Tell me, what does it mean when they say that in spite of our having it in our daily life, we do not see it?"

"Yes, of course," said Gensha, smiling. "*This is* what it means: that we do not see it, even though we have it in our daily life."

They said to Jesus, "Tell us who you are so that we may believe in you."

[And he said], "You examine the face of heaven and earth, but you have not come to know the one who is in your presence, and you do not know how to examine the present moment."

What's another way to say that? How about this: "You want to know who I am and I'm standing right in front of you...You want to know what is happening right now, but you are not paying attention to this moment."

The disciples couldn't see who he was because they were wondering what they were missing. They couldn't be in the moment, because they were wondering what it all might mean for their future. They were looking backward and forward and up and down, looking for Wittgenstein's ladder, because they were so sure that the place where they were supposed to be was not where they were, but maybe if they had a ladder, they could get there...

But Wittgenstein learned to ignore destinations that required a ladder, writing, "...[T]he place I really have to reach is where I must already be." Jesus was not interested in ladders. Buddha was

not interested in ladders. Eckhart Tolle, author of [The Power of Now](#), is not interested in ladders.

He says the great philosopher Descartes got it way wrong when he said, “I think, therefore I am.” Believing that we are what we think, that Minds ‘R Us, in other words, is to believe that our thoughts can lead us to where we need to be, so we begin climbing the ladder of thoughts only to find, at the top of the ladder, another ladder, and another, and another. The wonderful secret is, I gather from Tolle, that we need not feel compelled to climb the ladders that our thoughts create. We can watch the construction of the ladders from a distance. We can actually experience ourselves as separate from our thoughts, and realize that we are more than what we think and more, even, than simply “thinkers.”

Isn't that great news? You are most assuredly more than you think.

It's easy to get lost here, as thoughts and words try to point to something outside themselves, but let me give you a quick example. A good friend of mine was at a Zen retreat and, having some time to talk about her experiences there with the Roshi, the teacher, he asked her how things were going. “Well, okay,” she said, “but it is hard to be peaceful in my meditation. I have all of these thoughts about what's going on in my life, one thing after another, swirling around in my head, and it's hard to disperse them.”

“Well,” he said, calmly, “Remember that your thoughts are really none of your business.”

Your thoughts are really none of your business.

And what does all of this have to do with resolutions, you are asking. Only this. I believe that New Years *can be* an important symbolic day for us to look at ourselves. To *observe* ourselves. But, too often, we confuse *looking* with *thinking*, and as we *think* about ourselves we are judging or justifying or assessing or excusing or criticizing... The pop Christian song, [Put Your Hand in the Hand](#), has a line that says, “Take a look at yourself and you can look at others differently,” and I think that's the context we usually hear this in.

You think others are bad? Take a look at yourself. You think others make mistakes? Take a look at yourself. The implication is that we will, of course, not like what we see; that we let ourselves off easily and that's why we criticize others. Jesus says, “Take the log out of your own eye, before you take the speck from your brother's.” (Matthew 7:5) Just look at yourself! Right?

But Jesus also said, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” (Matthew 22:39) which I was brought up to interpret as “Love your neighbor *as much as* you love yourself,” with the implication that *of course* we all love ourselves a whole bunch so why not spread a little of that around to other people. But my experience is that many people do *not* appear to love themselves; they treat

themselves without much compassion at all, and this neglect and insensitivity carries over into their relationships with other people. Jesus might well have meant: “Love your neighbor *as well as yourself.*” Looking at ourselves, not judging, not justifying, but watching with compassion *will* cause us to look at others differently. The compassion we find for ourselves, sometimes the hardest compassion to muster, *will* infuse our relationships with others.

But many things obstruct our ability to view ourselves with compassion; we use thoughts and resolutions to measure the distance between where we are and where we *think* we should be, even while the great religious teachers are telling us that the place we really have to reach is where we are. Religion itself has taken to selling ladders to aid us in climbing to the grand heights it promises while Lao Tse and Chuang Tzu and Buddha and Jeremiah and Jesus and Muhammad and Meister Eckhart and Hermann Hesse and Rumi and the Dalai Lama and...countless others cry out along with Ludwig Wittgenstein, “If you need a ladder to reach it, it’s not where you need to be!” It is not a matter of collecting and storing all the right thoughts. It is not a matter of logging all the right actions. It is not a matter of getting further down the road or onto the next level or into the advanced class...it’s all about being at the beginning!

In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities. You must be born again. You must be as a child.

Have you found the beginning, then, that you are looking for the end? You see, the end will be where the beginning is...Congratulations to the one who stands at the beginning!

I was surprised to hear Cardinal Theodore McCarrick of the Roman Catholic Church of Washington DC state so bluntly [in his interview with Barbara Walters on the special she did about Heaven](#) that “This life is not what we're made for. We're made for heaven. We're made for the future.” So, really, this whole existence is just waiting for the next (the *real*) life to begin. Wow! And I complain about waiting in lines at the grocery store...think of your whole life on earth as one great, stalled checkout lane.

For my part, I related to Richard Gere, who said that he was much more interested in life *before* death rather than life *after*. “I don't think necessarily heaven and hell happen in some other life,” he continued. “I think it's right now.”

But while I gave my intellectual assent to Gere, in greater or lesser degrees, many of us find ourselves waiting for life to begin. As soon as *something* happens, then we’ll really start living. As soon as the house closes; as soon as I retire; as soon as I read this book; as soon as we get a church building; as soon as the baby is born; as soon as I get that job; as soon as I finish my class; as soon as they get back to me; as soon as I get to see him, her, them, it...we are waiting.

“Life is what happens when you are making other plans” said John Lennon. Planning for heaven, planning for retirement, planning for vacation, planning for fulfillment, planning for a relationship, planning for something vague we’re not quite sure what, but we’ll know it when we see it...Waiting.

One of the most famous plays of the 20th century is entitled, *Waiting for Godot*, by Samuel Beckett. The two main characters of the play wait for this mysterious figure named Godot throughout the play and, alas, he never shows up. It may, indeed, be about the absence of God, as some critics suggest, but I think that it really struck a chord with people because it’s about *waiting*. The present moment is totally submerged in the back-and-forth pushing and pulling of the characters’ thoughts, as they swing between worrying that they’ve missed Godot, or anticipating how everything will change for the better once he gets there.

This play is often classified as Theatre of the Absurd. Well, it may be absurd, but it also rings true to me; realistic; indicative of the kind of chasing-of-the-tail maelstroms that our thoughts can drag us into at times. What if Godot came yesterday when I wasn’t looking? What if he doesn’t come tomorrow? What if he just walked by and I didn’t recognize him?

How many times do you ask “what if” questions about your own life? Second-guess decisions? Linger over regrets? Worry about future possibilities of failure or hardship? What if what if what if?

Here is my resolution for the new year. To replace the ‘f’ with an ‘s’. The meaningful question is *never* “what if.” The meaningful question, and one that deserves our deepest attention, is “what *is*?” What is?

I was wrong before: This day *is* packed with more possibilities than any other day...not because it is New Years, but because it is *today*. There is no other day that you have, ever...only today. Look to this day, for it is life, the very life of life. In its brief course lie all the verities and realities of your existence...Look well, therefore, to this day.

“What if” loses all meaning when we become aware that we are *living in possibility*. The question becomes: what *is*?

Let’s take a few moments of silence to bring ourselves into this present moment...to gently, compassionately watch our thoughts. We need not shoo them away, nor hang onto them for dear life...simply let them flow to wherever it is they need to go, and follow your breath into now, right now, and here.

I invite those who wish to share something to feel free to speak at this time. You may either

come forward, or raise your hand and I will bring the microphone to you. If you would like to, give us a report from your present moment:

We are all beginners in this present moment. There is no past to mourn or regret, nor future to anticipate or worry about. Our minds are beginner minds; not tyrants but tools, empty and ready. Congratulations to all of you who stand at the beginning.

And Happy Happy New Year.

Closing Words (#685 – T.S. Eliot)

I.

What we call a beginning is often the end
and to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.

II.

We shall not cease from exploration
and the end of all our exploring
will be to arrive where we started
and know the place for the first time.