



Prayer for a New Beginning

John O'Donahue

In out-of-the-way places of the heart,
Where your thoughts never think to wander,
This beginning has been quietly forming,
Waiting until you were ready to emerge.

For a long time it has watched your desire,
Feeling the emptiness growing inside you,
Noticing how you willed yourself on,
Still unable to leave what you had outgrown.

It watched you play with the seduction of safety
And the gray promises that sameness whispered,
Heard the waves of turmoil rise and relent,
Wondered would you always live like this.

Then the delight, when your courage kindled,
And out you stepped onto new ground,
Your eyes young again with energy and dream,
A path of plenitude opening before you.

Though your destination is not yet clear
You can trust the promise of this opening;
Unfurl yourself into the grace of beginning
That is at one with your life's desire.

Awaken your spirit to adventure;
Hold nothing back, learn to find ease in risk;
Soon you will be home in a new rhythm,
For your soul senses the world that awaits you.



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This morning, we are exploring spiritual practices together. At the beginning of a new year, many of us have intentions that involve recommitting to spiritual practices—to meditate, journal, garden, be in nature more, or my favorite one—to come to church more.

Exploring spiritual practice is one way that we encourage one another to spiritual growth here at Neighborhood. Spiritual practices are one important way we take care of ourselves, body, mind, and spirit. Maintaining a consistent spiritual practice can help us to be more grounded, present, compassionate in our work and our relationships.

I have been practicing meditation and yoga for over 20 years, back to my college years when I majored in religion with an emphasis on Eastern Religious traditions.

I want to address one challenging aspect of spiritual practice, and that is the actual practice part of it.

I remember being a child and taking piano lessons. I wanted to be naturally so good at the piano, but I really didn't want to practice. I wanted to be able to sit down and play so well, without mistakes. Now of course we know that's impossible, but as a teenager I became so frustrated that I was not a natural genius at playing the piano that I stopped practicing altogether.

As adults, I think many of us are still like this. I know the older I get, the more I notice I am guilty of this tendency about certain things. It is challenging to muster the patience and effort to start new practices, or to pick up old ones where we left off, knowing we will have a long way to go to get back to where we once were. I think many of us want to be naturally good at most things we do, without having to practice. I think this includes spirituality. We want to see the results of spiritual practice—for example, with meditation, we like the benefits of a calm mind and a compassionate heart, we want to be more generous, forgiving, and free—but many of us would like to just be naturally inclined to these ways of being, rather than to have to practice. We can easily become frustrated and wary what might be required of us to maintain a practice. When the going gets tough, we might dabble in different practices, trying new things, but ultimately feeling bored or distracted. I want to suggest that many of us who feel this way about spiritual practices might be approaching our practice as I approached playing the piano—as we would learn a new

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skill—with the goal of mastery in mind, *and the hope that we will be instantly and naturally inclined to it.*

The culture we live in reinforces this belief. A quick browse at youtube boasts videos on how to achieve expert status on everything from baking to home repairs. We internalize these kinds of steep climbs for learning new things and apply them even to spiritual practice—we want to be expert meditators or yogis. But the qualities we wish to cultivate cannot be so easily mastered like concrete skills. When we meditate and we find that it's difficult and the idea of mastery seems impossible-- our mind wanders, or our feet fall asleep, or we get off schedule—we lose hope that the practices could work for us. We step into a yoga studio again and all we can see is how our bodies don't bend rather than how they do. Rather than feel the benefits of the practice, we might feel as if we have failed and easily give up.

Today I want to look at a different approach to spiritual practice that I've found extremely helpful which can be applied to any spiritual or life practice you are working with. It's called "beginner's mind."

Sunryo Suzuki was a Buddhist teacher who emigrated from Japan to lead the San Francisco Zen Center in 1958. He was a part of a wave of Buddhist teachers to work specifically with Americans, and devoted himself to simplifying and translating Buddhist teachings for the American student. Suzuki Roshi's teachings became extremely popular, particularly with Alan Watts and the beat movement. What made Suzuki Roshi's teachings so accessible was his insistence that the Zen way was best practiced not by experts, but by beginners.

Listen to his teachings:

"In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities,

but in the expert's there are few. In the beginner's mind there is no thought, "I have attained something." When we have no thought of achievement, no thought of self, we are true beginners. Then we can really learn something. So the most difficult thing is always to keep your beginner's mind. There is no need to have a deep understanding of Zen. This is also the real secret of the arts: always be a beginner."

This morning, I offer the gift of the beginner's mind to you in your spiritual practices, and in your lives. Revisit your practices as if it were your first time, with curiosity and openness. Do not be afraid of the discoveries about yourself you will make—beginners cannot fail, only to learn. And remember the beginner's mind is full of possibilities.

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