

*Beginning Again*, Barbara Seidl

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When I was about 4 or 5 years old, I was so extroverted that my great grandpa called me “his bumble bee” - mostly because, at family gatherings, I had a tendency to flit back and forth from person to person talking and chatting - and I was a notorious, at age 4, for striking up conversations with strangers.

Last Saturday, after the Pride Parade, I was in this throng of thousands on City Hall Plaza, channeling that inner bumble bee. I had volunteered for Freedom for All Massachusetts - a group dedicated to maintaining basic human rights for the transgender community, rights that, as you may know, will be up for a vote in November....who knew that would be a thing - that we'd be voting on human rights? I was armed with a clip board and a smile, my assignment was to find more volunteers - to sign up them up for shifts working phone banks, doing data entry, going door to door - my assignment was basically to flit from person to person, and strike up conversations with strangers. I'm all in.

For some inexplicable reason that I still don't understand, I totally sucked at that assignment. After some training and role plays, I had stepped into the crowd, and immediately felt my heart sink, my stomach heave, my palms go cold and sweaty. I rallied and tried to snag people passing by....“nope, moving too fast,” and then I tried talking to just the happy people “nope, too drunk” - I was Goldilocks with a clipboard. And getting it just right wasn't happening. I was a little short on bravery to just jump in there so I found myself under a tree practicing the script they'd

given me over and over and over again “Happy Pride! Did you know....no no no.” “Happy Pride! Did you....eerrr.” I had somehow lost my life-long ability to talk to strangers and I...I don’t know what to tell ya. Eventually, a lovely young woman found me under that tree and, glancing at my clipboard, said “hey, what have you got there?” to which I said “...uhhhh....Happy Pride! Did you know protection of transgender rights is on the ballot this November?” She said “I did, I did - I’m interested, tell me more.” She signed up for a shift (yes!), squeezed my shoulder and said “hang in there, Sweetie, you can do this.”

The day did get better. It turned out every person I talked to was incredibly gracious and kind and interested. And it seemed that the only way to be successful was to fail over and over and over again.

Indian Freedom Fighter Sri Aurobindo wrote “*by your struggling, the world is perfected*” suggesting that our visions for the world require us to fail and begin again.

Playright Melinda Lopez writes “*No ones teaches you how to do the hard things: How to stay married. How to raise a grateful child. How to lose the people you love.*” And in this community, I would add, how to cool a burning planet, how to dismantle systemic racism, how to live with some kind of integrity.... and begin again when we don’t live with integrity.

Lately, I’ve been looking for stories about bravery and heard this one about Natalia Dmytruk. (DIH-mih-truck). Let me just set the stage for a second here...in 2004, Ukraine’s presidential election reads like a dystopian novel. The candidates are the Russian-backed prime minister - loathed for corruption - and then there’s the liberal challenger - the leader of the “Power to the

People” coalition - campaigning to end corruption. The media was owned by the government - which supported the corrupt prime minister. So newscasts were regularly pro prime minister.

Now, Natalia Dmytruk was a sign language interpreter for this government -run news station. She would interpret the news live on air every day.

On the day of the presidential election, with the liberal challenger clearly in the lead, the ruling party tampered with the results and the government-run television station reported that the prime minister had won. The Power to the People Coalition called on Ukrainians to protest in front of Parliament.

Natalia took her children to the protests - which went on for days. In an interview with Washington Post’s Nora Boustany, Natalia said she felt herself transformed. *"I was impressed by the expression on my children's faces. I was so fired up by other people I observed passionately voicing their discontent....It was that special spirit and energy of people coming together, uneasily at first, but looking in the same direction. Dmytruk (would then return to work (at the tv station) and broadcast the government's version of events.*

*'I was observing it from both sides,' she said 'and I had a very negative feeling. After every broadcast I had to render in sign language I felt dirty. I wanted to wash my hands.'*

So remember now that the Power to the People Coalition had basically no access to the media - but Dmytruk did. Boustany writes that (four days after the election)

*“Dmytruk arrived at work for the 11 a.m. broadcast and decided today would be different. ‘I was sure I would tell people the truth that day,’ she said. ‘I just felt this was the moment to do it.... Under her long silk sleeve, she had tied an orange ribbon to her wrist, the color of the opposition. She knew that when she raised her arm, the ribbon would show. The newscaster was reading the officially scripted text declaring the (Russian supported Prime Minister) the winner and Dmytruk (DIH-mih-truck) was signing along. But then, she says ‘I was not listening anymore.’ In her own daring protest, she signed: ‘I am addressing everybody who is deaf in the Ukraine...Do not trust the results of the central election committee. They are all lies. . . . And I am very ashamed to translate such lies to you. Maybe you will see me again -- ” she concluded...Dmytruk's live silent signal helped spread the news, and more people began spilling into the streets to contest the vote. Her act of courage” writes Boustany” .... emboldened protests that grew until a new election was held and the opposition candidate was declared the winner.”*

Pulitzer Prize Winner Novelist Alice Walker tells us *“the most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any.”* Dmytruk started out thinking she had no power and what she was asked to do left her with dirty hands. Transformed by the vision of who we can be – in her words *“by people coming together, uneasily at first, but looking in the same direction,”* she began again...and by her stumbling, the world was perfected.

There's an old story about a young martial arts student observing his teacher, who was sparring with an accomplished fighter. Afterwards the young student said to his teacher *“You never lose*

your balance. What is the secret?” “You are wrong,” replied the teacher “I am constantly losing my balance. My skill lies in my ability to regain it.”

*“By our stumbling the world is perfected”* – and we are constantly losing our balance. The skill lies in the ability to regain it.

My friend “Steve” is a master of regaining his balance and says his whole life is about beginning again. Steve is just a gift of a guy - smart, funny, kind - and after over ten years of struggle, was recently diagnosed as having Bipolar 2 disorder. Apparently it carries the same kind of manic and depressive periods as Bipolar 1 but they look a little bit different. As “Steve” said, *“No one goes running to their doctor after a manic period and says “Doc, you gotta help me. I’ve just had a really productive week” ..... but then I check out for two weeks” he says” and I need to pick up the pieces.”*

So after ten years of stumbling, Steve has also figured out the practices that keep him well - *“sleeping enough, eating well, physical exercise, a heavy blanket to settle the nervous system, meds, people”* and now he struggles with being willing to doing all these very necessary things to stay well. He says that, for him, beginning again after a down period starts with a simple question.

*“I ask myself” he says, “if I’m willing - and willing to what? In the end, our willingness is what we have control over. I ask am I even willing to begin again. If not, then what are the abilities*

*(I'm) willing to demonstrate to get the result (I) want? ....It may be that I'm willing to come back to this question another time. Or that I'm willing to be willing."*

By our stumbling the world is perfected - we are constantly losing our balance. The skill lies in the ability - and willingness - to regain it.

When you came in today, I believe the ushers handed you a penny. If you did not get a penny, please raise your hand and the ushers will bring you one...or you can get one from the basket on your way out. Mine is, let's see, 1998...does anyone have one older? (hear from congregation) These pennies have been around for awhile. You can tell from the scuff marks, the scratches...take a moment to examine your penny for signs of wear and tear....take a little inventory of all it's been through.

I offer this to you to keep. My hope is it will be a reminder that we, like these pennies, are made to be of use - and that some wear and tear, some stumbles and falls, doesn't make it - or us - any less valuable or any less effective. And while we may think that we, like this penny, don't have much power, may it also serve as a reminder that "the most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any."

I would like to tell you that the end to the story of my signing up volunteers after the Pride Parade is that I filled the sign-up sheet and victory in November is imminent. I didn't and it's not...and not for lack of interest or determination in the crowd. Every person I talked to signed a commitment card promising to vote to protect trans rights. Many asked for more information.

The obstacle was my willingness to stumble and regain my balance. The more I was willing to stumble in those conversations and begin again, the more I was willing to fail, the more we could succeed.

I have a bulletin board in my kitchen covered in birthday cards, pictures I love, and favorite quotations. At the top of the board in big bold letters it says “I wanna see you be brave.” For me, that starts with being willing to be transformed by the vision of who we can be and embracing the failure that is required to get us there. It means stumbling over and over and over again.

Blessed be and amen.

**Benediction, by poet Nancy Wood**

Hold on to what is good

even if it is

a handful of earth.

Hold on to what you believe

even if it is

a tree that stands by itself.

Hold on to what you must do

even if it is

a long way from here.

Hold on to my hand

even when

I have gone away from you.

The Service begins when the service ends. Blessed be, and Amen.