

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie  
 Arlington Street Church  
 5 January, 2014

## **Beginner's Mind**

The breeze at dawn  
 has secrets to tell you.  
 Don't go back to sleep.

You must ask  
 for what you really want.  
 Don't go back to sleep.

People are going back and forth  
 over the threshold  
 where the two worlds touch.

The door is round  
 and open.  
 Don't go back to sleep.<sup>1</sup>

That's Rumi, our thirteenth century Persian mystic and muse.

We gather on this beautiful morning, poised between the old year, with all of its heartache and all of its joy, and this untouched new year. It's a time of what anthropologists call *liminality*, from the Latin word<sup>2</sup> meaning "threshold." Liminality has a quality of disorientation or ambiguity;<sup>3</sup> we are suspended between what has been and what is to come. Stepping over the threshold, we embrace both limits and possibilities.

\*

Rev. George Tyger is a Unitarian Universalist minister and army chaplain. In his book *War Zone Faith: An Army Chaplain's Reflections from*

---

<sup>1</sup> Rumi (1207-1273), *Don't Go Back To Sleep*

<sup>2</sup> *limen*

<sup>3</sup> please see [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liminality](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liminality)

*Afghanistan*, he writes, “We are on a dismounted patrol to the top of some ancient ruins. A short walk, but the ground is loose and steep. Rocks and dirt slide down as we walk up. The only way to make it up a steep hill ... laden with gear is to look ahead but watch where you put your feet.

“The same holds true when moving toward any goal in life. Becoming fixated on a goal to the exclusion of the present moment can cause embarrassing and injurious tumbles. But too much attention to the details without looking ahead can cause unnecessary detours.”

He continues, “This is the balance of possibilities and limits. [Both literally and figuratively, there are the] possibilities: reaching the top, ... or just getting through the deployment and getting home; [and the] limits: an uncertain course, unstable footing, [danger,] waning ... stamina.

“...We ... navigate the obstacles while keeping our sights on all that is possible.”

George Tyger concludes, “We crest the hill and stand atop thousand-year-old ruins. We look out across the city. Children play as well-armed soldiers stroll the streets. In the distance, the earth curves and the horizon falls away. So much possibility. So many limits.... [And] there is only one sure way forward: look ahead, but watch where you put your feet.”

Don't go back to sleep.  
Look ahead, but watch where you put your feet.

\*

If we could bring a quality of attention and devotion to every moment, we would arrive in each new moment as if crossing a threshold. We would retain a spacious awareness of both limits and possibilities in birth and death and everything in between.

In 1958, Zen master Shunryu Suzuki arrived in America and began to teach. One of the very first concepts he transmitted to his students was *shoshin*, translated from Japanese as meaning “beginner’s mind.” Here are just a few paragraphs from one of his talks:

“People say that practicing Zen is difficult, but there is a misunderstanding as to why. It is not difficult because it is hard to sit ...

cross-legged..., or to attain enlightenment. It is difficult because ... [the] goal of practice is always to keep our beginner's mind....

“For a while, you will keep your beginner's mind, but if you continue to practice one, two, three years or more, although you may improve some, you are liable to lose the limitless meaning of original mind ... rich and sufficient within itself.... 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.”

Shunryu Suzuki concludes, “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. The beginner's mind is the mind of compassion. When our mind is compassionate, it is boundless.

“... [The] most difficult thing is always to keep your beginner's mind.... This is also the real secret of the arts: always be a beginner....”<sup>4</sup>

Don't go back to sleep.  
Look ahead, but watch where you put your feet.  
Keep your beginner's mind. Always be a beginner.

\*

The New Year is a threshold time, and birth and death, pilgrimage and ritual are threshold times.

Hazrat Inayat Khan, who lived from 1882 to 1927, was a Northern Indian classical musician who founded the Sufi order in the west. He was best known for his message of divine unity, focused on themes of love, harmony, and beauty, and taught that blind adherence to any book rendered religion void of spirit.<sup>5</sup>

On his deathbed, he told his ten-year-old son, Pir Vilayat Khan, to seek a great sage at the source of the holy River Ganges in India. Nine years later, Pir Vilayat Khan made the arduous overland trek to India. He writes, “In one town, I was thrown in prison as a suspected Pakistani spy. Following

---

<sup>4</sup> Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, pp. 21-22

<sup>5</sup> Please see [wikipedia.org/wiki/Inayat\\_Khan](http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Inayat_Khan)

the Ganges, above the enchanted village of Gangotri, I found a remarkable sage sitting in an ice cave. This [wise man] explained that the source of [the river] ... was a secret, and directed me to a glacier ... high in the Himalayas.”

Pir Vilayat Khan continues, “I followed the trail. As I was walking ... far away from any last humans, there were footprints in the snow.... I followed them for quite a few hours and finally came to a large cave. There at the opening, sitting like a king, was a fantastic rishi [a Hindu holy man]. He made a sign to me ... not to come in.

“So I sat in the snow cross-legged, closed my eyes, and then, after some time when I opened my eyes, he was smiling.... [He asked,] ‘Why have you come so far to see who you should be?’ I answered, ‘It’s wonderful to see myself in you.’

“Then he said, ‘You don’t need a guru.’ I replied, ‘My guru is my father. I’m not looking for a guru.’ He said, ‘Well, then, if you’re not looking for a guru, come right in.’

“Then he gave me a practice, which was to look into my heart with the third eye until I could feel it open like a lotus. I did this. Then he said, ‘Rest in the light. Not the physical light, nor the reflex image; get to the real light. That’s all that’s important.’

“He wasn’t the kind of person [with whom] you could chat.... He was totally [enlightened].... He said, ‘The time has almost come when there will not be rishis living in caves anymore as I do. It is now the time when illuminated beings will ... be [among the] people in the world.’

Pir Vilayat Khan concludes, “After several days, ... I had a wonderful feeling of peace and happiness.... I didn’t want to leave, but I knew I had to go back down into the world again. It was a huge step in the journey that has lasted a lifetime.”<sup>6</sup>

Don’t go back to sleep.  
Look ahead, but watch where you put your feet.  
Keep your beginner’s mind. Always be a beginner.  
Look into your heart, and feel it open like a lotus.

---

<sup>6</sup> Pir Vilayat Khan in Jack Kornfield, *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry*, pp. 18-19

\*

Arlington Street's Rev. Myke Johnson, now the minister at our church on Allen Avenue in Portland, Maine, writes, "It is said that if a group of people sleep arranged in a circle – heads at the center and feet out, like spokes – they create a dream circle...."

"...I like the metaphor," she continues. "The word *dream* is used to describe both our strange nighttime adventures and ... our waking ... visions for our lives.... [To dream] in circles is [to share] those waking dreams, entering into the magic that can happen when we join our visions together. We talk and we listen. We plan and we act. We are energized by each other, and we grow strong and bold. When we dream in circles, anything is possible. As [cultural anthropologist] Margaret Mead famously said, 'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.'"<sup>7</sup>

Don't go back to sleep.

Look ahead, but watch where you put your feet.

Keep your beginner's mind. Always be a beginner.

Look into your heart, and feel it open like a lotus.

Awaken from dreaming, and together, we can change the world.

\*

Beloved spiritual companions,

The breeze at dawn

has secrets to tell you.

Don't go back to sleep.

You must ask

for what you really want.

Don't go back to sleep.

People are going back and forth

over the threshold

where the two worlds touch.

The door is round

and open.

---

<sup>7</sup> Rev. Myke Johnson, *Dream Circles*

Please see [questformeaning.org/page/reflecting/dreaming-in-circles](http://questformeaning.org/page/reflecting/dreaming-in-circles)

Don't go back to sleep.<sup>8</sup>

So much possibility. So many limits.... [And] there is only one sure way forward.... We ... navigate the obstacles while keeping our sights on all that is possible.<sup>9</sup>

"In the beginner's mind, there are many possibilities; in the expert's mind, there are few."<sup>10</sup>

May we "rest in the light.... the real light. That's all that's important.... It is now the time when illuminated beings will ... be [among the] people in the world."<sup>11</sup>

"We talk and we listen. We plan and we act. We are energized by each other, and we grow strong and bold. When we dream in circles, anything is possible."<sup>12</sup>

Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke said,  
 "And now let us believe in the New Year that is given us:  
 new, untouched,  
 full of things that have never been."

---

<sup>8</sup> Rumi (1207-1273), *Don't Go Back To Sleep*

<sup>9</sup> Rev. George Tyger, *War Zone Faith: An Army Chaplain's Reflections from Afghanistan*

<sup>10</sup> Shunryu Suzuki, *op cit*, p. 21

<sup>11</sup> Pir Vilayat Khan, in Kornfield, *op cit*, p.19

<sup>12</sup> Rev. Myke Johnson, *op cit*