

“A New Now”

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Meriden, CT

January 6, 2013

“Bless us with the first breath of morning.”

If only I could live my life over, I would be a better human being.

We barely utter the first petition of Stuart Kestenbaum’s poignant litany when our easy desperation for a fresh start kicks in. This isn’t the scenario for everyone at the threshold of a New Year, but it’s no coincidence that we speak of New Year’s resolutions, the New Year’s baby, and turning over a new leaf (on the calendar). It’s no coincidence that the New Year explodes with fireworks. Is this the Big Bang all over again?

If only I could live my life over, I would make wiser choices. I wouldn’t make the same mistakes. I would, I wouldn’t, I would, I wouldn’t.

Have you ever said this to yourself in a wistful moment, maybe a desperate moment? This was the point that Ivan Osokin had reached. Barely into his 20’s, Ivan found himself at a dead end. Gifted with a fine intellect, he had failed in school. Born into ample financial resources, he had squandered them. Fortunate to have found the woman of his dreams, his negligent ways guaranteed that she eventually rejected him.

As if on cue, a magician appeared. A deal is struck. Ivan is given a second chance. He can live his life once again, but with a twist. He will take into his next round the capacity to remember his previous life, but only if he *chooses* to do so. Without a second’s hesitation, he agrees. “Of course,” he says. “Of course I’ll remember, and I’ll do it differently. I’ll make wise decisions. I’ll use good judgment. I’ll win back the heart of my true love. This next time around will be different because I will be different.”

The tale of Ivan unwinds in the only novel by the early 20th century philosopher P.D. Ouspensky. As I ponder the meaning a new year, another turn around the sun, this story surfaces, alongside my resolve to do some things differently—to be more prudent, more patient, more efficient, more compassionate, to go to the Y at least THREE times a week. I’m not at the point of Ivan’s despair. After all, it’s been a pretty good year, a VERY good year; but a new year tempts us with the notion that we’re gaining a newborn’s chance to live our lives as we cycle once again around the sun. It seduces us into the act of dumping our bag of past behavior onto the layered heap of our history.

What did I learn from Ivan’s second chance? What happened as Ivan began his second journey?

“Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.”

These familiar lines of Robert Frost invoke our vision of two roads, one worn, another grassy and wanting wear. How Ivan Osokin needed Robert Frost.

Ivan arrived at the first of his pivotal choices. Two roads diverged, and Ivan, without more than a glimmer of déjà vu, took the one well worn, and off he went. Adolescence dawned; awareness dimmed. Opportunity, privilege, all presented themselves on this well-worn path, this familiar once-trod path.

What was his inducement to take another course? A gnawing sense that all was not as it should be perched on his shoulder like some Jiminy Cricket of memory and conscience. Ivan hesitated, but not long enough. He proceeded headlong down the travelled path, forgetting, choosing to forget, that it had been trod by Ivan himself. It was so easy to turn away from remembrance, so easy, so natural. Another fork in the road, another faintly familiar path and another met his footsteps. One sorry decision followed another, until at last Ivan found himself at exactly the same juncture at which he had encountered the magician. Once again he was despondent. He looked up, and there again was the magician, no longer a harbinger of promise but a cruel reminder of willful choice.

Somehow Ivan had expected to do exactly as he had done before but with different outcomes. He had moved full circle, certain that he was on a different course, only to discover that he had chosen exactly the same course.

Whether it's a lifetime or a mere year, how do we remember? How do we reflect in such a way that we move down or around a path holding lessons we have learned and listened to? And how do we move beyond the tip of our own nose as we take in that first breath of the morning?

“Bless us so that we're not just covering our own [behinds], but weeping for the rest of the world.”

It's not easy; it's not easy for any of us.

“Bless us with a winter storm so big that it closes everything down for a week and we find ourselves at the beginning of time.”

Ah, to be at the beginning of our own time, like Ivan getting a wish that only a magician could grant. With every Happy New Year is the magical notion that there is something new in the firmament itself.

Ring out the old, ring in the new,
 Ring, happy bells, across the snow:
 The year is going, let him go;
 Ring out the false, ring in the true.

Optimism rings wildly in these verses of 19th century British poet Alfred Tennyson. We say it; we sing it; we believe it. The year is new and so are we. Only a pesky cynic like that ancient Preacher of Ecclesiastes spouts such doom and gloom as can be read in the very first chapter of that OLD Testament book:

What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done;
 and there is nothing new under the sun.
 Is there a thing of which it is said, "See, this is new"?
 It has been already, in the ages before us.

The Preacher continues with commentary that rings ruefully for all who fall into the plight of our poor friend, Ivan:

There is no remembrance of former things,
 nor will there be any remembrance
 of later things yet to happen among those who come after.

Ecclesiastes 1:9-11 (Revised Standard Version)

Does this sound like a surefire recipe for existential angst if not full-blown depression? It needn't be.

What are our options? January 1 is a recent phenomenon in the history of the world. How are we redeemed from cycling and recycling our often sorry penchant for willful behavior that bears the consequences of our not having learned from past mistakes? How are we called to revisit those times in our lives when all seemed to be well, when circumstance and judgment moved in a finely choreographed dance? Surely we didn't all and always take the road most traveled by. Surely we sometimes took that unworn path—for better and worse, but with the prospect of paying closer attention.

What was Ivan turning his back on? Transformation does not come easy for any of us. Each of us, however, can pay attention. We can draw inspiration from January's namesake, the Roman god Janus, with two faces—one to observe the past, one to assess whatever intimations there might be of what lay ahead. We can tend to the past and reflect on it, seeking wisdom from what we have spiritually and culturally inherited from our forebears. We can anticipate a future given what we've learned from history—depending on how and what we've read and retained—and from the lessons imparted by our forebears, and from our reflections, individual and communal, about what shapes a life worth living. Above all, we can pay attention. When we pay attention, we stretch the moment as our youngsters did their rubber bands. No more "just a moments," but the fullness of each moment lived with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, and with all our strength.

Some of us have experienced the daunting task of teaching our youngsters to drive. Of course someone bore the task of teaching us to drive, but I'm thinking right now about my approach to teaching one of my daughters to drive. How many times did I tell her: "Pay attention! Pay attention! So you're doomed to learn on a stick shift; you'll get the feel of the clutch and the accelerator, but paying attention will never come by instinct. Pay attention!" If we're lucky, it's only a fender bender that marks the first failure of attention.

Paying attention is no less critical for how we live our lives. Remembrance is simply another form of attention; anticipation, yet another. Between remembrance and anticipation is presence. Presence is mindfulness, wakefulness, awareness, an eternal now that encompasses past and future. Presence is our luminous companion as we reach one of those forks in the road

that defined Ivan's points of decision. What does it look like, what does it feel like, when we're at one of those points of choice and find ourselves also at a point of *déjà vu*? I've been here once before. What did I learn? How shall I act?

Whence comes that transformation of spirit and psyche that we might not repeat our mistakes? Whence comes redemptive remembrance, that we might find more fruitful ways of proceeding in our relationships, our commitments, our allocation of time and energy and finances and talents and affections? How might we travel again around the sun as beings with awakened consciousness?

The Kwanzaa candles are still warm. The Advent candles are barely burned down. The candles of Hanukkah coalesce with the 28 candles we kindled just three weeks ago. The holidays and holy days of this December held raw opportunities for awakened consciousness. Many of us held loved ones especially close, because the high hopes for other loved ones had come crashing down. Many of us longed for the presence of loved ones because history and humankind had conspired to bring distance or time or both between us? Yet we held dear the hope that burned in every candle. We hung on each resonant note of "Silent Night, Holy Night." We proclaimed once again the universal song of love: "Peace on earth, good will to all"

Now is the time when that song tests our mettle, our mettle of spirit and deed. Now is the time when the magician appears to us, whatever our circumstance, and suggests another spin around the sun, with the qualifier that we can if we choose remember; we can if we choose be historians of our lives, individual and communal. We needn't repeat past mistakes. We needn't be Ivans succumbing once again to the well-traveled road.

There is surely much to muse over as we contemplate this New Now.

"Bless us with the first breath of morning," the first morning of a new year, the second morning, the third morning and on into however many mornings are left.

Howard Thurman, the late 20th century philosopher, theologian, civil rights leader, grandson of a slave, peacemaker, fellow traveler, speaks to me this morning as I consider how to negotiate this next journey around the sun.

"It is no ordinary thing to undertake the assessment of one's life, to take the backward look over the way that one has come, and to remember. To remember how it was with oneself a year ago—with what hopes and enthusiasm and visions one greeted the beginning of the year. Or to remember how one dragged one's feet into the year, and how as the months moved into view many things changed so that there is in some of our hearts quiet rejoicing that life has fallen for us in easy places. For some others there is the simple anguish that comes from the frustrations which were unanticipated, which had to be endured, and there is left a residue of weariness and heartache for which there does not seem to be any solace or any comfort."

How is it for you, I wonder? How is it for us? As a church, a congregation, players in the larger community that is our global family, how will we proceed in this new year if we do indeed assess our living and dare to realize that we are not helpless against the forces that lure us into the numbness of forgetting?

Might we take heart from the concluding words of Thurman:

“It is good to be here and to feel our way into each other’s presence, each other’s experiencing, each other’s heart and mind, and in that feeling to sense the strength which carries from the shoulder that touches and the heart that cares.”

We speak of the Spirit of Life; we are each spirits of life, offspring of the miracle that is life itself. We are gifted with memory; we are gifted with anticipation; we are gifted with the capacity to pay attention that holds reflection, anticipation, and presence. Let us be present in the community of care that moves from the inside out, as we journey together in a more mindful arc around the sun. I wish you every blessing of this New Now. Amen

Sources

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