

The Journey: A Guide for Reflection

September 2026

Beginnings



I still have three boxes in our basement that I haven't quite gotten to in our settling in. I know what's in them: miscellaneous files, papers, office supplies, random nicknacks and artwork. Nothing essential or important. Each day as I walk by them, I think that maybe *today*, I'll finally get to unpacking them... And also, each day, I find myself putting them off.

A beginning is almost never exactly as we picture it. It's the moving truck in our driveway arriving sooner than we thought. It's new routines and rhythms, melding what has been with what is and will still yet be; a sort of dance in a new community and city. It's a first day of school. A first day on the job. A first Sunday in the pulpit. Often with our beginnings, we're asked to match our expectations with what is truly happening and ongoing, and sometimes what is necessary and emergent.

September is a time that's rich with beginnings. School is starting alongside our new congregational year (our first of many together!). At sundown on September 11th begins the year 5787 for our Jewish neighbours, welcoming the year with honey, apples, and the call of the shofar. September 30th, as our National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, gives us harder questions to sit with: *Whose beginning, and at what cost?* We know that the stories of this land didn't begin with settlers writing them down.

Our cultural understandings of beginnings often cast them as heroic. That we know exactly where we are going. That we embark on our beginnings by our own energy and might. *That we also don't look the least bit uncertain as we begin!* However, almost every beginning I have lived through starts with questions I can't answer, and also help that I don't yet know how to ask for.

The Irish poet John O'Donohue insists that no beginning is ever "empty or isolated". Renewed energy and shelter is found when a beginning is embraced. We can think of a congregational community through this same lens: the way a room full of people you are just starting to meet is somehow already holding you. A beginning that is mutually navigated and witnessed.

So, this month, I want to suggest that our beginning doesn't need a fully mapped out pathway or firm destination. Instead, this beginning requires questions; the slow ones that take time to both savour and answer: *Who am I becoming? What or where is home in this moment? How am I connected to others in the midst of this start, as I envision the life I'm weaving?*

I invite you to find your own questions to hold at the threshold of this new day and this new season of our shared ministry. Likewise, I beg for your grace and patience with my aspirations to do and be all, right away... And your care and holding, reminding me I'm not alone. To borrow from O'Donohue:

*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.*

With faith and love,

Rev. Alex Jensen

Questions to Live With

1. Which good thing in your life began with a small step you were not sure about?
2. What have your most joyful and your most painful beginnings each taught you about yourself?
3. It is often said that every ending carries the seed of a beginning. Where have you found that true, and where has it rung hollow?
4. Do you need everything in place before you start, or do you jump in and work it out as you go? Have you ever figured out what made you that way?
5. What old story is standing between you and your new beginning?
6. Aging is usually narrated as a series of endings. What changes if you listen to it as a series of beginnings?
7. If none of these reaches what you actually need to explore about beginnings this month, what is your question?

For Inspiration

All of us have the same beginning. We began first with the relationship to the earth, and then the relationship to the sky world, and then a relationship to the plant world and then the relationship to the animal world and then the relationship to each other. - Lee Maracle (Stó:lō), Author and Poet

Teachings come from everywhere when you open yourself to them. That's the trick of it really, to open yourself to everything and everything opens itself to you. - Richard Wagamese (Ojibway), Author

*Each new hour holds new chances
For a new beginning.
Do not be wedded forever
To fear, yoked eternally
To brutishness.
The horizon leans forward,
Offering you space to place new steps
of change.* - Maya Angelou, Poet

There is something deep in us that conspires with what wants to remain within safe boundaries and stay the same. - John O'Donohue, Theologian and Poet

*It may be that when we no longer
know what to do,
we have come to our real work;
and that when we no longer know
which way to go,
we have begun our real journey.
The impeded stream is the one that
sings.* - Wendell Berry, Poet and Farmer

There is nothing more pathetic than caution, when headlong might save a life, even, possibly, your own. - Mary Oliver, Poet

Let every moment be a reminder that you are more than the sum of your mistakes. It's allowed to start over. And so are you.- Rudy Francisco, Poet

Another world is not only possible,
she's on her way. Maybe many of us
won't be here to greet her, but on a
quiet day, if I listen very carefully, I can
hear her breathing. - Arundhati Roy,
Author

One can waste years this way,
systematically postponing precisely the
things one cares about the most. -
Oliver Burkeman, Writer

Beginners are alive in beautiful ways.
They notice more. They ask better
questions. There is humility in being a
beginner. And there is freedom. - Julie
Bauch, Writer

For a long time it had seemed to me
that life was about to begin. But there
was always some obstacle in the way,
something to be gotten through first. At
last it dawned on me that these
obstacles were my life. - Alfred D.
Souza, Writer

A job left undone is its own torment, a
dream unrealized, its own kind of hell. -
Nick Cave, Songwriter

It is never too late to be what you might
have been.- Adelaide Anne Procter,
Poet

We can never be born enough. - E. E.
Cummings, Poet

There will come a time when you
believe everything is finished. That will
be the beginning. - Louis L'Amour,
Author

All endings are also beginnings. We just
don't know it at the time. - Mitch
Albom, Author

Spiritual Exercises

Option One - Sacred Conversations

One useful way to picture a spiritual life is as three ongoing relationships, each with its own question: belonging (to whom or what do I belong?), becoming (who am I becoming?), and the beyond (what is larger than me?). This framing comes from the Sacred Design Lab, and it is a good scaffold for a year that is just starting.

This month's exercise is to begin the congregational year deliberately rather than by drift. Choose one or more of the following, and share as much or as little of it as you wish in your Journey Group.

1. Make three promises for the year ahead: one for your belonging, one for your becoming, one for your relationship with whatever you understand to be beyond you. Keep them small enough to be real. Set a reminder to revisit them in December and again in March.
2. Revisit a story from your own life: a difficult ending that turned into a beginning, or a time you tried to build a new life while the people around you wanted the old one back. Notice what you see in it now that you did not see then.
3. Take two or three of the questions above into a real conversation with someone close to you. Tell them in advance that this will not be a usual sort of chat, and answer the questions yourself as well.

Option Two - Which Companion Piece Speaks to You?

Sometimes we come across a quote, question, song, article, or movie and it perfectly captures what's going on for us right now or allows us to view our current circumstances in a new light. With this in mind, spend some time this month going through the month's resources to find a piece or a quote that speaks most powerfully to you. (Or "shimmers" most strongly for you.) Consider additional pieces across your life beyond the monthly resources that also speak to you.

Come to your group ready to share the piece you picked, why it called to you, and what insight, memory, or message of comfort or challenge it offered you.

Option Three - The Story that Isn't Done with Us Yet

A core focus of Journey Groups is inviting us to reconnect with parts of ourselves by reconnecting with memories and stories from our lives. When we return to these stories, we often notice some new aspect of it or find ourselves viewing it through a new lens. Or to put it another way, quite often our stories are not done with us yet. They have something to say to us.

So, choose one of the prompts below to revisit a story from your past. Then come to your group ready to tell it, along with how you encountered it anew and how that left you with a message of comfort or challenge.

- Revisit a personal story about...
- A small step that made a big difference.

- Trying to invent a new life when everyone around you was pressuring you, directly or indirectly, to recover your old life and allow things to “go back to normal.”
- Missing the boat: a time when you wished you would have taken a path but didn’t.
- A difficult ending that turned out to be a beautiful beginning.

Join Us

Join A Journey Group

Journey Groups are a good way to go deeper with the monthly theme, sharing with a small group of people for a couple of hours each month. Groups meet online by Zoom at a range of times through the month.

For more information, visit FirstUnitarianToronto.org/journey-groups/

Upcoming Themes

- October - Agency & Acceptance
- November – Change & Stability
- December – Humility & Pride