

“The Art of Possibility”

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Last Sunday, marking the start
of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year,
I was only half-joking when I said
I imagined many of us, Jewish or not,
are surely ready to join the Jewish people
in turning the page of the calendar
and beginning a new year.

I know I, for one, would welcome a fresh start.
A chance to press the “reset” button.
Or fast-forward to a point on the horizon
where we will return to some sense of normalcy.

Needless to say, 2020 has been quite the year.
And we still have over three months to go.

And much of what may well be ahead in the coming months
may not be any easier than what we’ve already been through.

And, so it’s understandable
that we might be looking to somehow start over.

Louisa Fletcher’s poem about the
“The Land of Beginning Again” sums up, I suspect,
what many of us may be feeling.

I wish that there were some wonderful place
In the Land of Beginning Again.
Where all our mistakes and all our heartaches
And all of our poor selfish grief
Could be dropped like a shabby old coat at the door
and never put on again.

I wish we could come on it all unaware,
Like the hunter who finds a lost trail;
And I wish that the one whom our blindness had done

The greatest injustice of all
Could be there at the gates
like an old friend that waits
For the comrade he's gladdest to hail.

We would find all the things we intended to do
But forgot, and remembered too late,
Little praises unspoken, little promises broken,
And all the thousand and one
Little duties neglected that might have perfected
The day for one less fortunate.

It wouldn't be possible not to be kind
In the Land of Beginning Again,
And the ones we misjudged
and the ones whom we grudged
their moments of victory here,
Would find in the grasp of our loving hand-clasp
More than penitent lips could explain...

So I wish that there were some wonderful place
Called the Land of Beginning Again,
Where all our mistakes and all our heartaches,
And all of our poor selfish grief
Could be dropped like a shabby old coat at the door
And never put on again.

As many people remark every autumn,
as the leaves begin to change and the air grows crisp,
as we shift from one season to another
and return to routines only recently relaxed by summer,
this is the time that feels like the true beginning of the year.

This sense aligns particularly well
with the timing of Jewish High Holy Days,
which began last weekend with the start of Rosh Hashanah,
and will end at sundown tomorrow,
with the close of Yom Kippur.

These ten days, the Days of Awe, are a time for celebrating
and wishing one another a sweet new year.

But they are also a time for taking stock,
for reflecting on one's behaviour over the past year,
for assessing whether there is work to be done to heal hurts,
and for seeking forgiveness for any harm that's been done.

These ten days offer a process each year for starting over,
a map for finding one's way
to and through the Land of Beginning Again.

The lesson here, though, is that there's "some assembly required,"
some real work involved, to make a fresh start.

Simply wishing for some magical land
is never enough to get us there.

And even with hard work,
sometimes that distant land
can forever feel just beyond our reach.

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There's a story about an old Jewish man
who would get up at the break of dawn
and go to the Western Wall in Jerusalem,
and he would pray fervently from morning to evening.

One day, a journalist from the *London Times*,
who'd observed him do this day after day, asked him:
"You come every day to the wall.
How long have you done this and what are you praying for?"

The old man replied, "I have come here to pray
every day for 25 years.

I pray for peace and reconciliation among the people of [the world] who are so
divided by hate and conflict."

The journalist was amazed.

"How does it make you feel to come here every day

for 25 years and pray for these things
when so much conflict remains?” she asked.

The old man looked at her sadly.
I feel “Like I’m talking to a wall.”

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Whether we pray or not, I’m guessing we all know
something of that feeling—of talking to a wall,
of finding only a wall, when we’re trying to find our way.

There’s something to be said, at times,
for continuing the conversation with such a wall,
even if it seems we’re getting little or nothing back.

Answers, after all, are sometimes slow to come.

But the act of returning to the wall over and over again
may be the embodiment of an enduring hope
that eventually opens up a new way.

And when that doesn’t happen,
the silence of a wall can help us to accept the reality of what is,
to understand our circumstances for what they are.

It’s no coincidence Zen Buddhists
often sit meditation facing a blank wall,
finding it to be an invaluable if immovable teacher.

But it must be said that sometimes a wall is just a wall.
That it is an obstacle. A dead-end.
And something that we must overcome
by going over or under or around or through.

Now, which kinds of walls are which, I really can’t say.

That’s where, for each of us, deep discernment comes in,
and is the place where spiritual growth so often begins.

To ask, when we find ourselves stuck:

What is this wall, and where did it come from?

What hand did I have in building this wall?

Does it have anything to teach me?

What makes me so sure it doesn't...?

Is this wall sending me in a different direction?

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The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard once said:

If I were to wish for anything,
I should not wish for wealth and power,
but for the passionate sense of *what can be*.

Of what can be.
Of what is possible.
Of what may be on the other side of whatever wall we face.

Possibility is a funny thing.

It is both a promising and a daunting notion.

Possibility can overwhelm us and beckon us to come near.

It can draw us into deeper living,
or it divert us from our purpose.

Possibilities are, as they say, endless,
and they can run in all directions, good or bad.

It's quite easy to be stopped in our tracks
by having too many choices,
or even by having any choice at all.

Sometimes it's hard to believe we truly have options.
And often we have more permission than we realize or need.

Kaylin Haught gets at this so well in her sassy poem,
“God Says Yes To Me”:

I asked God if it was okay to be melodramatic
and she said yes
I asked her if it was okay to be short
and she said it sure is
I asked her if I could wear nail polish
or not wear nail polish
and she said honey
she calls me that sometimes
she said you can do just exactly
what you want to
Thanks God I said
And is it even okay if I don't paragraph
my letters
Sweetcakes God said
who knows where she picked that up
what I'm telling you is
Yes Yes Yes

Sometimes we sit staring at walls of our own making.

This is in no way to diminish the realities of inequality
that deny equal opportunity to all.

And it's not to ignore the way our options narrow as we age,
as way leads on to way, and the branching off of one path
means the leaving behind of others.

But the poet's point is one we would do well to heed:
there may be a lot more yes, yes, yes, in the universe
than we're typically prepared to accept, let alone embrace.

What we find to be walls and roadblocks
may be exactly what we need to break through
to a new year, a new land, a new way of being.

It's a matter of what we make of the possibilities before us.

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Benjamin Zander, the conductor of the Boston Philharmonic,
is the author of *The Art of Possibility*, a book I treasure.

He is also a professor at the New England Conservatory of Music, where he puts his heart and soul into helping young people redefine themselves by re-imagining the world around them.

I had the pleasure of playing in an orchestra
he conducted over 30 years ago.

He was and is a force of nature,
someone who tends to see gateways where others see only walls.

At the conservatory,
he is in the habit of giving all of his students an “A”
at the outset of each semester.

All that is required of them is that they write a letter in the first week of classes, post-dated to the end of the term,
describing *why* they got the grade.

And, then, they are invited—challenged!—to live into that A.

Here’s part of a letter of one student,
describing his experience after the fact:

In Taiwan, I was Number 68 out of 70 students.
I come to Boston and Mr. Zander says I am an A [student]. [Which is] very confusing.

I am number 68, but Mr. Zander says I am an A...

One day I discover I [am] much happier
as an A than Number 68.
So I decide [that, yes,] I am an A.

Zander says “An A can be given to anyone
in any walk of life— to a waitress, to your employer,
to your mother-in-law,
to the members of the opposite team,

and to the other drivers in traffic.”

“When you give an A,
you find yourself speaking to people
not from a place of measuring
how they stack up against your standards,
but from a place of respect
that gives them room to realize themselves.”

“Your eye is on the statue within the roughness of the uncut stone.
This A is not an expectation to live up to,
but a possibility to live into.”

I’d say this practice of giving an A is a spiritual practice, really;
for it affirms and invites forth our highest valuing of each other and ourselves.

It is a mindfulness practice
that calls us to believe the best about others,
a quality in short supply these days as cynicism and distrust deepen
and taint the well of goodwill
that makes human community possible and worthwhile.

From what I’m seeing in the world today, in this moment,
it seems we would all benefit from learning to trust
that most folks are doing the best they can right now.

It seems we can stand to give out more “A’s.”

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What touches me most about Zander’s work
is the way he exudes the promise of possibility in everything he does.

This promise is clearly something he learned at close hand.

He tells the story of his father,
who was imprisoned in a concentration camp
at the end of World War II.

The elder Zander remembered how some men
would get up in the morning and walk to the barbed wire fence,

looking out for long periods of time.

Eventually, he got to know a number of men in the camp.
Some were very bright.
Some were professors and some were doctors.

And then one day, they decided to set up a university,
right there in the camp.

Before long, they had forty courses being taught
on a variety of subjects.

They didn't have paper or pencils, but they had a university.

Zander shares that story in response to a question
about whether his “ideas of possibility”
are simply naïve positive thinking,
in denial of the harsh realities of life.

They aren't.

“Possibility,” Zander answers his critics,
“is a way of thinking and being...available to all of us,
no matter what our circumstances.”

I share his belief.

After all, the people in the camp were undoubtedly
in the most despicable of human conditions,
inhuman conditions, really,
but they made a choice
to embrace another possibility.

To do so, they denied nothing;
they faced their reality,
and then asked the critical question,
“Now, what's possible?”

Zander's story reminds us that a world of possibility
can be only one good question away.

Is this a wall before me, or is another way possible?

I believe this to be a fundamentally spiritual question,
for it raises so much of what we know of faith—
in ourselves, each other, and the universe.

May that faith grow in us, that we may know,
deep in our bones, even when we're stuck facing a wall,
and especially when the world feels
like it's going to hell in a handbasket,
that there are other possibilities awaiting,
in a Land of Beginning Again.

I leave you, then, with these reminders from Sheenagh Pugh,
in her poem, "Sometimes":

Sometimes things don't go, after all,
from bad to worse. Some years, muscadell
faces down frost; green thrives; the crops don't fail,
sometimes a [hu]man aims high, and all goes well.

A people sometimes will step back from war,
elect an honest [person]; decide they care
enough, that they can't leave some stranger poor.
Some [people] become what they were born for.

Sometimes our best intentions do not go
amiss; sometimes we do as we are meant to.
The sun will sometimes melt a field of sorrow
that seemed hard frozen: may it happen for you.

May it happen for each of you, indeed.

Blessed Be.