



Beginnings and Ending

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Where shall I start? Where will it all end? And what will happen in between? Ah, that's the meat of the whole thing when we talk about beginnings and endings—isn't it? What will happen in between? But that is not where the attention is usually paid. And more attention is paid to first phases than to conclusions. Scan the literature, if you don't believe me. There are more entries under commencement than there are under finale.

I prefer beginnings. I like mornings when the air feels fresh and not over-breathed. I like Mondays when you can pretend that mistakes are in the past and don't matter, and you can start creating new mistakes. I like new years that offer the illusionary challenge of both dynamic planning and spontaneous creation.

But, of course, they aren't real. You know that, don't you? None of these things I just named is real. They are humanly arbitrary. Morning, for instance, is any time after you get up and before you eat lunch. Your morning and my morning, I warrant, are measured quite differently. All Mondays are not created equal, but they are created by minds that need categories of things. Mondays are named after the moon, which, itself, is in a different phase of its existence on any four consecutive Mondays. And to which new year do I refer? Mayan, Chinese or Gregorian? All of these measurements we use so emphatically—beginning, end, time and season—are mental creations, although they may have been based on astronomical signs. They require that we pick a calendar system, do not waiver from it and believe it is empirical by the prompting of experience and memory and the symbolic flashing in some corner of whatever electronic device you rely on these days. And yet, could you tell without looking, just exactly when morning started? At the ending stroke of midnight? Are you sure your clock is correct? At the moment of sunrise? Or at the moment of your rise?

Is there some evolutionary need for human beings to have a system that says *this* is the beginning, *this* is the start of something new? Or do we simply respond to the system that has been chosen for us by an accident of birth—in our case those systems of taxonomy inherited from the Greeks, the Gregorian calendar and the understanding of Cartesian 'duality'?

I'm thinking of what it might be like to have been born into the Oriental social system of Taoism where polar or seemingly contrasting forces are seen as interconnected and interdependent. Would we understand without thinking about them that what we call opposites on a line of continuum are changing values that give rise to each other in turn and interact within a greater whole? Mornings begin neither by the tick of the clock nor by the sudden appearance of the sun on the horizon. All mornings, say the Taoists, contain a piece of the night, just as all evenings contain a

piece of the day. Winter is not a dead season of plant life, but an active, hidden time of preparation for vernal emerging, summer maturing and autumnal harvest. Always birthing; never ending. Yet, the Chinese, too, have their own New Year, and thus an understanding of an old, ending year.

This is the time of year, by the Gregorian calendar, when we are most likely to talk about endings, to think about beginnings. Out with the old year, we proclaim. Except for some sentimental remembering of its events, we have little use for it. In with the new year. Such a promise of hope and creativity it gives us. I am tempted, almost, to give now a listing of all the things we have accomplished here since first we wrote a two, a zero, a one and an aught on checks and letters. To recall all who have left us by moving through space or moving beyond heartbeat. To name the successes and downplay the failures we have shared. To recall the Joys and the Sorrows. To exhort you to keep hope alive. But I remember that we that do that in June when we march to the drum of our own fiscal and summer vacation calendar.

Philosophically, I like the Taoist position. I love the beauty of the Taijitu, the divided, but endless circle that represents yin yang, with a little dark eye of yin in the light field of yang and the open eye of yang shining out of the darkness of yin. But I am a Westerner and find myself habitually falling into the Western mind set. What am I saying? I *have* the Western mind set. It owns me. But every once in a while, I appreciate adopting a different mind, a *wuji* mind, an empty mind, especially when we talk about new year and old year, when nothing really begins or ends except that assigned number have agreed to use to for the purpose of referral when it becomes history..

For a number of years I have been teaching journal writing, first here and more recently at OLLI, the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute. I worry sometimes as I recall the previous day each morning, that I am enforcing the habit of dividing my life between waking and sleeping, yesterday and today, good day and bad day, ending day and beginning day. I worry about not being able to forget the bad days because I have immortalized them by encapsulating them into undying words. I put these words, page by page, day by day, into a notebook. So far, 2010 is four inches high. I will squeeze five more pages into the notebook and then I will arbitrarily, by the Gregorian rules of beginnings and endings, purchase a new notebook and call it 2011. But *I* will not have changed. I will still be me. Even if I buy a red notebook, I will still be recording my same old life.

Look, see how tied I am to this mind set: Here is the page, arbitrarily named by the Gregorian rules of mornings and evenings, January 2, 2010. I had taken a week's vacation—a Gregorian week—right after Christmas. Here is my first entry for the day: *My mind set is different this morning. (Maybe I'm not so Cartesian, after all.) I'm operating under a new paradigm because I'm going back to work today. I am no longer inward focused and my creativity is operating under a different set of rules. The change is subtle, but obvious to me. My thought patterns are different—something is added, and other things are shifted and compacted to make room. When I am by myself, I push through the day; when I give myself over to other people or other plans, I am pulled through the day. The best days are a combination of both.*

Actually, that wasn't so bad. I acknowledged my mind set, understood how it compelled me to create and watch my day unfolding. I had forgotten that distinction, about being pushed or pulled through a day, but, come to think of it, it continues to be true. I love my solitude, but not to the exclusion of relationships. And clearly, one of the things I do like about mornings is that I give the first part of them over to recalling the previous day and using the slow dissolving of one darkening day into the unwashed hope of the next, to process my used-up day and see it through a new lens. Perhaps I am a practicing Taoist.

The philosophy of journal writing I espouse in my classes is not one of recording events for posterity. It is one of conserving the elements of a life in order to re-use them in becoming a more effective, more wise person. That's a process all of have access to. Part of the process of this kind of journal-writing is to review previous recordings and use them to think and write more deeply about a unique occurrence or a recurring idea or value. It is likened to plowing and irrigating the

fields of your life to increase the yield of the seeds you plant each day. The seeds of your actual garden are forgotten when you cover them with soil. You cannot recall how many or exactly where you placed them. Not, that is, until they begin to grow. The same is true of your life. If you cannot recall the days or tap into the history of your life, who knows how much of it never gets to mature, never reaches a harvest?

I remember how excited I was when one student, after only six weeks of journaling, told the class he lives his life more intentionally now because he knows he's going to record it and he wants each day to be worthy of some remembering. He belongs, I discovered, to a very different kind of church than I do. Yet we come together in our beliefs that days should be lived so that they are worthy of remembering and now simply separated by nights for convenience sake.

I try to consider how our lives might be different if we didn't divide them into beginnings and endings, day and night. Could any of us survive without either calendar or clock? Would we begin to take notice of the phases of the moon, the length of the day's shadows? Do we need these references? If we don't have them, do we eventually create them for ourselves. Would it be any different if we were all Taoists.

I almost immediately think about my son, whose story that has no ending and creates no new beginnings. Some of you have heard the story and the details are not that important. Suffice it to say that he did not live near the rest of the family. Like his mother, he enjoyed setting out for new places periodically. He was easy in our minds when we thought about him and we rejoiced in his occasional personal appearances.

He worked outdoors, away from other people and loved the cyclical experience of coming to town once a month to reunite with friends, to pick up his mail, to gather his relationships for another period of reviewing in solitude and silence. A day began, unbeknownst to his family, when the post office of the town where his mail reached him by General Delivery was required by calendar and law to return to the senders all mail that hadn't been retrieved in 30 calendar days. We, his family, were amused to discover that he had missed this ritual date of coming to town, had stayed in the forest too long. We resent his mail and wrote new letters, only realizing 30 days later that something was possibly wrong when they, too, were returned. What was beginning of the day that caused our unease. What was the end of the regularity of his movements. There were searches and suppositions, there were detectives and directives. What there wasn't was an ending: No answers to questions; no death, no delivery from wondering. There was only endless days of hope, but hope is a low-nourishment meal. You cannot survive on it forever.

There came day, a very necessary day, when I said, "I cannot do this anymore." I need an ending. I had to admit to the very distinct possibility that he was now *only* in our minds. Whatever life might exist in him did not include me. Only by creating a theoretical ending to his life could I grieve. Only then could I say good-bye. Only then could I begin to heal. His life never ended, as far we know; and hope never really died. So we had to create a mock ending, an ending that would allow us to say that there could be a new beginning, a new life without him in it. This is what Eliot hints at in his poem, *Little Gidding, No. 4 of 'Four Quartets.'* Early in the poem he says, "*if you came this way, taking the route you would be likely to take, from the places you would be likely to come from . . . if you came at night like a broken king, if you came by day not knowing what you came for, it would be the same. And what you thought you came for is only a shell, a husk of meaning from which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled, if at all. Either you had no purpose or the purpose is beyond the end you figured and is altered in fulfillment.*"

"Every thing is flowing," says Muir. "It is always sunrise somewhere. The dew is never all dried at once."

You and I live in this world, the world of the living, where we have forgotten the language we knew before we were born, and cannot yet translate the words of the world we will one day own without our tongues to speak of it. This is the world of beginnings and endings, the world where

Blaise Pascal noted that “Things are always at their best in their beginnings.” He encourages us to begin, to do anything new, to create that which we can only imagine. This is a world where Hannah Arendt, the avid proclaimer of social justice, cautioned, “It is the nature of beginnings that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before. This character of starting unexpectedness is inherent in all beginnings.” And she encourages us to be not afraid when things are no longer what they are or what we thought they might be; that endings are not to be feared. This is the world we have inherited and known where Rachel Carson told us optimistically “Beginnings are apt to be shadowy,” but, she assures us, they resolve into some kind of clarity at the end.

This is the world in which we live, the system we choose or had chosen for us. It is okay to prefer beginnings, however arbitrary they may actually be. It is okay to blame endings as the basis for our unease, just so we acknowledge them eventually. Things do not always stay the same. Whether they have a cutoff and a new starting, or they blend into one another in a perfect cycle of harmony, things change. People change. Expectations and dreams resolve into something unexpected. Pay attention. That’s all we are required to do.

Do not worry about the preacher’s concern of getting it right, getting it perfect. Remember what James Stevens told us, that “Perfection is finality. Nothing is perfect. There are lumps in it.” This lumpy, messy life is all we have. If we are prone to paste stickers on it to make us feel better, stickers that say, “Start here” or “Ending approaching,” what does it matter? Greek or Taoist, what does it really matter in the end?

So as this year comes to a close, in our minds, on our calendars, remember it as you will. Honor the lumps; they show we are alive. Do not fear endings, for they herald beginnings. Do not be afraid of beginnings, for they shall reveal themselves in the sunshine of a new day. And do not cease from exploration, for even Eliot, in his tortuous exploration of life that ends in death, acknowledged that in the end *All shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.*