

**READING : *New Beginnings...by Rev. Anne Forester***

If you were hoping to learn something, learn this: new beginnings are going to be presented to you all your life. Get used to them and take advantage of them. If you're inclined to take new beginnings hard, they will always be hard. Get used to that. If you accept new beginnings as novelties, as scenery on the journey, you're one of the lucky ones.

New beginnings. They don't stay new forever. Kittens grow up to be cats, if they don't get run over first. Mornings turn into evenings. Mondays become Fridays eventually. It seems to me we commit a terrible waste not to utilize the space in between the transformation.

Beginnings are opportunities for making endings better. Beginnings are challenges that give you an opportunity to show off a little. Beginnings are the rush of adrenaline that you get when your feet leave the high dive and you know you can't get them back.

Beginnings are the first star of the evening, the one you make a wish on; beginnings are the first flower in spring, the one that only hints at the treasures to come.

Beginnings take courage and they take innovation and they take a so-what attitude toward failure. But they don't take much effort. They're going to happen whether you chose them or not.

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**In the Beginning...**  
**By Rev. Don Southworth**  
**ERUUF**  
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**From the book of Genesis...**

*In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light; and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good; and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day.*

Okay, so most of us don't think it all *really* began that way and I admit that the start of a new Lead Minister does not *quite* compare to the beginning of creation... but I wanted to get your attention. In the lives of us at the Eno River Unitarian Universalist Fellowship today does mark a **re**-creation – a new day, a new beginning – a new ministry.

This morning I invite you to reflect on beginnings. Beginnings that come with a second called Lead Minister in twenty-three years. Beginnings that come when we choose to make a new change in our lives. Beginnings that come without our choosing. Beginnings that come whether we want them to or not.

As you might imagine, I have been thinking a lot about beginnings lately. How to begin as your new minister. What happens to a family who moves 389 miles and every grocery store, gas station, street

name, and most importantly, relationship is a new beginning? Why do beginnings cause such excitement and sometimes such anxiety and fear?

All of you by virtue of being here this morning – even if this is **not** your first time – are experiencing a beginning with me today. But I suspect that having a new minister in your life and the potential for a new – at some level – experience in this religious community is not the only beginning you are facing.

Are your children or grandchildren beginning a new school, a new grade or a new phase of their development? Have you recently begun a new job or begun life without a job – by your choice or someone else's? Have you begun a new relationship with a friend, a relative or yourself? Are you starting a diet, an exercise program or a spiritual practice – or have you been telling yourself you will begin one any day? Have world events caused you to begin to a news blackout or to start doing something to make more of a difference? Or have you recently lost someone dear to you – a minister, a friend, a parent or partner – and are you beginning to learn how to live without them?

As our reading and hymns remind us, beginnings happen every day – some are wonderful and exciting while some are scary and sad. They come with life, and we would be wise to learn how we can better dance with them in all their pain and all their glory.

The Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams might have been speaking about beginnings – or life – when he said “revelation is continuous”. Our Unitarian Universalist principles and traditions encourage us to renew our spirits by staying open to the forces that create and uphold life. Every religious tradition, and some traditions that do not consider themselves religious at all, tell stories about creation and beginnings. One aspect of our tradition that I find most affirming and inspiring is that we are not only encouraged to choose the stories that best speak to us, but we are challenged to find meaning in **all** of our life experiences. Beginnings are opportunities for us to find new meaning and insight into life and the world around us. Some of us may like that and some of us may not.

Think of the feelings that beginnings bring with them. Excitement, anxiety, fear, surprise, wonder, nervousness, dread and anticipation to name just a few. Anne Foerester, in our reading this morning, tells us that some people take beginnings hard while some people look forward to them. I can tell you from our recent moving experiences that so can some cats.

In the last six years our family has had three cats. Blizzard and Blue were born eight years ago when we lived in California. Quincy was a wild cat who adopted us when we lived in Atlanta. Each one of them has had something to teach about beginnings.

Blue and Blizzard were born in our youngest son's closet. One was white and one was gray. One had blue eyes and one had green. One was friendly and curious and one was jittery and fearful. If I had not been there on the day they were born I would have sworn they came from two different mothers.

Since Blue and Blizzard were part of our family we planned on taking them with us when we moved 2,536 miles from California to Georgia five years ago. Blue, the jittery, gray cat that we nicknamed, “Scaredy Cat” ran away the day before we were going to move when the packers showed up at our house. Blizzard, on the other hand, played in the empty boxes and watched everything with a bemused look on her face. The day of our move I found Blue in the backyard and while trying to bring him home, he struggled so much I tripped and split my knee open. He ran away and I went to the doctor to get seven stitches and a knee brace which was my constant companion on our cross country trip.

Five minutes before we were ready to leave California we found Blue and loaded him in the car. Our joy at finding him soon turned to sadness as he got sick later that night in Barstow, California. Halfway across the country, two days later, in Russellville, Arkansas we had to put him to sleep.

Quincy became a part of the family about a year after we moved to Atlanta. He was a scrawny young kitten when he started showing up at our back door. He ran away whenever we came out to say hello but we started putting food out for him and after a few months he came into the house and became a member of the family. When we were ready to move to North Carolina we were determined to learn from our move five years ago. We brought both Blizzard and Quincy to a friend's house the day before the movers showed up. Blizzard explored and sniffed around while Quincy hid behind a toilet refusing to come out. But they were both around when we loaded the car for our short trip here.

Blizzard quickly settled in when we moved into our new home in Durham. Quincy, on the other hand, was virtually climbing the walls. One night when my wife Kathleen opened a window he bolted through

it as quickly as he could. We did not see him for the next ten days. We began to think our family was not meant to have two cats survive a move. But last Sunday night, to our shock and glee, Quincy cried out from across the street when he saw me walking our dog Stormy. As of this morning, at least, we are a two cat family again.

For those of you who are not cat people forgive my lengthy tale. But I am convinced that we can find a little of ourselves in Blizzard, Blue and Quincy. Each one of us remembers a beginning or change that we were curious and excited about. Like Blizzard we sniff out everything we can, looking, metaphorically, for an empty box to play in or the perfect spot to wash ourselves.

How many of us have reacted to beginning and change like Blue and Quincy did? We ran away figuratively, literally or at least emotionally, from a change in location, in our career or in a relationship. I am convinced that the stress of change and a new beginning contributed to Blue's illness. On some level I think that moving was too much for his gentle spirit to bear. Some of us may be more like Quincy. We are not happy about a new beginning, and the change it brings so we make a point of making that clear. Maybe we leave for awhile and eventually come back like he did. Or maybe we don't.

Today we begin a new ministry together. I hope you are as excited about what we will dream and do as I am. I hope you are viewing this change – this new beginning – with anticipation, a sense of renewal and hope that this community will continue to grow and thrive, that *you* will grow and thrive and that we will be able to do good things in the world together. I hope you find this beginning to be like the first flower in spring, the first star in the night sky and the first appearance of the sun on the morning horizon – in other words I hope it is as wonderful as the poets, advertisers and ministers usually paint new beginnings to be.

But I caution you to remember Blue, Quincy and these words from one of my favorite quotes of all time from someone named Roy Blitzer: “The only person who likes change...is a wet baby.”

I have come to discover that no matter how wonderful a beginning might be, no matter how much we may be looking forward to something new, no matter how much we yearn to begin again, that once the newness and excitement wears away, we are forced to live what happens between beginnings and endings – change. Even if you are someone like me who swears to love change, change – and life – is never quite what we think it is going to be.

In the life of this fellowship, our new beginning will be followed by change. Depending on how you look at things, I am either the third Lead Minister at ERUUF in the last two and a half years or the third in the last twenty-three years. Both statements are of course true but they invite a different perspective on how much change this new beginning might bring.

Eno River is the fourth new ministry I have begun since 1999. Each of them has been different. I was an intern minister, I was an interim minister in a congregation with several ministers, I was a called minister in a solo role and now I am a called Lead Minister sharing the ministry with a wise ministerial colleague and competent and caring staff of professionals. I have been getting lots of experience at saying hello and goodbye recently but I still pulled out my old books this summer to read how best to begin a new ministry. Their sage counsel, as I soon remembered, was all over the map.

Some authors advise ministers **not** to make any changes their first year so that they can really get to know the culture and practices of a congregation and not scare people away. Others say that a new minister should start making changes the day he walks into the congregation because that is what most people want from a new minister.

Gil Rendle in his book Leading Change in the Congregation sums the advice up best when he wrote that congregations basically fear two things: experiencing too much change and experiencing too little change.

I do not know what changes await us here at Eno River but I do know that changes **will** happen and I know that some people will like them and some people may not. All of us will feel some of the excitement and some of the discomfort that change brings. The spiritual question our new beginning invites us to ponder is this - how do we not only survive change but how do we grow while we are in its midst? This question not only applies to the beginnings and the changes we will experience here at Eno River, but applies even more importantly to all the changes we are choosing...or life is choosing for us.

One of the best ways I know to survive and thrive in the midst of change and new beginnings is something we do on Sunday mornings when we offer our joys and concerns: sharing our beginnings with others. Being able to share, and share deeply with other people, is one of the best tools for living with the uncertainty that change and life brings. When we share with others – here on Sunday morning, in a covenant group on Friday night, at a committee meeting on Tuesday, over lunch with a friend or during a pastoral session with a minister or lay listener, we not only practice community we also invite others to share their journeys with us.

Transition and change can be hard – no matter if that change is considered good or not so good. If we have people to share our excitement and concerns with, people who have gone through the same beginnings and changes that we are experiencing, chances are that we will act a lot more like Blizzard and a lot less like Blue and Quincy. One of my hopes for ERUUF is that we always are a community where everyone – whether they are introverted or extroverted, happy or sad has people they can celebrate their joys and share their sorrows with at a deep level.

Sharing with people is one way to deal with the stresses and challenges that beginnings and change give us but how can we learn to thrive, to even enjoy change?

Nature provides us many lessons. If we pay attention we can see that new beginnings happen every moment of every day. The cycles of the seasons remind us that there is a time and place for beginnings and endings. Birth and death two are different types of beginnings. Life is renewed by both every day – and we can be too. Go to a hospital and visit a nursery. Go to a cemetery and visit a grave. Go to a garden and watch a flower change and grow. Wake up early and watch a sunrise. Take a break from your busy day and watch a sunset.

Of all the metaphors for new beginnings my favorite is a sunrise. Every morning, whether I pay attention or not, the sun rises again. Watching a sunrise is one of the most inspirational things I can do - if I remember to pay attention (and wake up early enough). A sunrise brings new hope that this day we can get it right, this day we can learn how to live in peace, this day we can celebrate and rejoice in the life that we have been given – with all its beginnings and endings.

The sunrise invites us to become beginners again. To look at the world with a new set of eyes – eyes filled with the possibility, curiosity - and hope that beginnings bring. Because hope is what beginnings – and maybe even religious traditions and communities – are all about.

My hope for each one of you is that coming to ERUUF and being part of this community and Unitarian Universalism reminds you of a sunrise – the promise of a new day, a new opportunity to make the world a better place and your place in it a little more joyful. I hope we can learn how to live as beginners every day – our eyes ablaze with wonder and our hearts ablaze with love.

One of my most treasured books is Zen Mind, Beginners Mind by Shunryu Suzuki. The book is a series of talks Suzuki gave on Zen meditation and practice. I turn to it often to be reminded of how to meditate and how to live. Suzuki stresses the concept of “beginners mind” as one of the main goals of meditation practice. Beginners mind is a mind empty of clutter and full of possibility. His wise words tell us why beginnings are so important to our spirits and our lives. He writes, “The goal of practice: - I like to substitute life here – “is always to keep our beginner’s mind. In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, in the experts mind there are few. This is the secret...always be a beginner.”

So...let us begin. Let us begin to shine more brightly in a world that needs more light. Let us begin to love more deeply, more gently and more often. Let us begin to embrace each other more tightly while we hold our resentments more lightly. Let us begin to laugh with more gusto and cry with more peace. Let us begin to change and change again. Let us begin and begin and begin...together. May it be so.

Amen.