

Beginner's Mind

Sunday, January 4, 2026

Preached by Rev. Dr. Roger Jones

Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: How Shall We Come Together (Maggie Wheeler); #1031 May I Be Filled with Loving Kindness; Life Calls Us On (J. Shelton/K. Gibbons).

Special Music (piano): Pagodes (Pagodas) from Estampes (Prints) by Claude Debussy (1862-1918), Aria from Three Pieces in Old Style (Krzysztof Pekderecki, 1933-2020), New Beginning (Luke Faulkner, b. 1991).

Readings

The first reading is a line from *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, by Shunryu Suzuki, published in 1970. Suzuki Rosshi, as he is called, was born in Japan in 1907 and became a Zen Buddhist monk. He is credited with popularizing Zen Buddhism in the United States.

He writes: "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few."

The second reading is a poem by the Polish poet Adam Zagajewski [zah-gu-YEV-ski], translated by Clare Cavanaugh. He wrote it in 2021, the year of his passing, at age 76.

Mysticism for Beginners

The day was mild, the light was generous.
The German on the café terrace
held a small book on his lap.
I caught sight of the title:
Mysticism for Beginners.
Suddenly I understood that the swallows
patrolling the streets of Montepulciano
with their shrill whistles,
and the hushed talk of timid travelers
from Eastern, so-called Central Europe,
and the white herons standing—yesterday? the day before?—
like nuns in fields of rice,
and the dusk, slow and systematic,
erasing the outlines of medieval houses,
and olive trees on little hills,
abandoned to the wind and heat,
and the head of the *Unknown Princess*
that I saw and admired in the Louvre,
and stained-glass windows like butterfly wings
sprinkled with pollen,
and the little nightingale practicing
its speech beside the highway,
and any journey, any kind of trip,
are only mysticism for beginners,
the elementary course, prelude
to a test that's been
postponed.

Sermon

When I was a high school student in the mid-1970s, my public school's English department had a combination of required and elective courses with which a student could earn all of their English credits. One elective class was Creative Writing. I avoided it. Even though I liked writing, I didn't think I could write creatively. In particular I had no confidence that I could write poetry. It seemed so remote and confusing. I had the mistaken idea that it was necessary to know how to do something *before* I could take a course in it. I didn't realize that this is how you can learn how to do it. I don't remember if an advisor or a teacher told me that, but I they did, my self-esteem was so low that I didn't listen to them.

Similar self-doubts emerged two years later when I began college. I became an English major because I was good in English. I didn't realize that much of the literature of any language is made up of poetry! A dormitory friend and classmate by the name of John arrived at college knowing he wanted to become an English professor. We are still friends and he is in fact a professor. In our first semester, John urged me to join him in taking a class entitled Introduction to Poetry. (It was not about writing it but reading and understanding it.) I said, "John, I can't take that. I don't know anything about poetry and I don't like it. I don't understand it." But he talked me into it. I think he might have said, "That's why it's called an *introduction*, you know." I took the class, and it went well.

How much help it would have been for me as a young person if I had known about the concept of beginner's mind. A Japanese Buddhist by the name of Shunryu Suzuki said this: "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's [mind] there are few." I needed some encouragement to be open to learning and needed the acceptance that it's okay not to know something. By now, of course, I have learned a lot ... in countless classrooms and at my jobs. I've learned from a variety of experiences. Thus, now I need to remember, no matter what it is that I might be faced with, that beginner's mind is always a good place to start. "I don't know" can be a good answer; it might even be the best answer.

The late Shunryu Suzuki book *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* was published in 1970, and it's become a classic. The author is also called Suzuki Rosshi, which means teacher. He is credited with popularizing Buddhist meditation in the West. For example, he founded the San Francisco Zen Center. In Monterey County, he founded the first Zen monastery outside of Asia. This book includes his teachings about breathing, posture, and other aspects of meditation as well as Buddhist concepts [like nonduality]. Yet one brief sentence from that book has touched countless people who find it to good advice for facing moments of uncertainty, complexity, or crisis. "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few."

Whether it's a personal dilemma, a challenge in your family, or a political emergency in our country, the concept of beginner's mind urges us to pause and pay attention. It invites us to surrender our certainty, keep an open mind, and consider many possibilities. As I have been taught to practice Buddhist meditation, you do it the same way every time you practice. This includes sitting down, and settling down, and watching your breath. It also can include walking, or working in a garden, and watching every move you make. It's about bringing your attention back to the present experience, again and again. It is simple, but the practice is not easy. In particular, it can be tempting to go on autopilot. The mind wanders and we stop noticing our experience. This is normal, and it's why teachers lead a meditation sitting and why there are bells to ring. The sound of the bell can bring us back to the beginning.

No matter how familiar and practiced you may be with any aspect of life, beginner's mind says that every time you start is a new start. In life outside the meditation room, going on autopilot means being caught up in our certainty, in our expert's mind. This might look like

having certainty that we are right about what we think. Or it could mean having no confidence, being certain that we are not capable of growth or change. The attitude of certainty can close off alternatives; it can give up the power to act.

In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few.

Whatever you're dealing with, even if you know a lot about it already, beginner's mind is an openness to learning or something more, or something different. It's an openness to learning from others. At the workplace, for example, the voice of authority or expertise may have determined a course of action, but it might have been useful to consider other possibilities before deciding. No matter what our accomplishments or expertise may be, beginner's mind means we will remain beginners. And that's always a good place to start.

In Adam Zagajewski's [zah-gu-YEV-ski's], the poet watches a person at a café table in a plaza/ reading a book entitled *Mysticism for Beginners*. The poet says, "Suddenly I understood." As he looks around the plaza, he notices

the swallows/

patrolling the streets of Montepulciano/ with their shrill whistles,/

...

[He tells about the gift of noticing so many things. He understands that] stained-glass windows like butterfly wings/ sprinkled with pollen, the little nightingale practicing/ its speech beside the highway,/ and any journey, any kind of trip,/ are only mysticism for beginners, the elementary course, prelude to a test that's been postponed.

In other words, the poet is telling us there is no final exam. There is only the practice for it. There is no advanced mysticism to aim for; there is only this moment here. We always have the opportunity to pay attention. We always have the challenge to learn something.

Beginner's mind is the antidote to the attitude that we already know all that we're going to know about ourselves and what we are capable of. This attitude gets in the way of new insights and growth.

In the last forty years of my life, I am pleased to say, I have learned how to do things I didn't know how to do. For example, two years ago I signed up for a class on improvisational comedy at a Sacramento comedy club. While I had learned some of the principles of improv previously, I had done little of it. Nor had the other 15 students in the class, most of whom were younger adults. Our teacher was enthusiastic and affirming. She provided clear, step-by-step instructions, made us try it out, and gave encouraging feedback. I would say that she promoted a beginner's mind for improv.

Actually, improv depends on beginner's mind. For example, when you are in a scene with another actor, you don't judge what your acting partner says or does. No matter how odd it may be, you take it and build on it. You say *yes* to what you receive. Then you choose one of the many possibilities that you didn't know were waiting in your mind, and you speak it or you act it out, or both. Our class was a bunch of amateurs, a bunch of beginners. And as beginners, we gained a feeling of connection and affection as we trusted one another as improvisers and as performers. From pushing ourselves beyond our comfort zones, we achieved a sense of satisfaction.

Speaking of comfort zones, there are demonstrated health benefits from adopting a beginner's mind for yourself by intentionally choosing things that make you uncomfortable. My friend Nan was my housemate for three years while she worked on medical research on

Alzheimer's disease and other causes of dementia. Before she got her Ph.D. in neuroscience, Nan had worked as a physical therapist. So while she stayed with me I got some good advice for free.

For example, she suggested some brain exercises which involve suspending routines, doing things that are unfamiliar or even awkward. When driving to familiar destinations, like work or shopping, do not follow the same route every time. Instead, use a different way. This will force your brain to figure out how to get there, she said. The mental challenge of navigating in an unfamiliar way can rewire the brain. It's called building neuroplasticity, if you'd like an expert's term: neuroplasticity. Another helpful practice is to visit an unfamiliar grocery store to look for items on your shopping list, as if you are going on a treasure hunt! Nan sent me links to a few online medical sources about these kinds of exercises. One of the articles advised not even taking a shopping list into the grocery store.

Exercises like this are ways to build new pathways and connections in our brain. Other options include studying a new language or learning a skill such as painting, cooking, or playing an instrument. Even chatting with people is helpful, especially with people you don't know very well. A common recommendation for changing routines is to switch to using your left hand if you are right-handed or to use your right hand if your left hand is the dominant one. My housemate Nan moved to another state in April, but we stay in touch. Sometimes I get reminders from her by text, but she's not telling me to drive to church by a different route; she's reminding me to water the houseplants.

As I was reading articles about this the other night, I thought: I am right-handed, so I'll try brushing my teeth with my left hand. And while eating I'll hold my fork in my left hand, instead of my right. But when I brushed my teeth before bed, I totally forgot. The same thing happened when I sat down at the kitchen table. I forgot. By Saturday morning, however, I was ready. I had posted a note to myself on the mirror in the bathroom. Too bad I didn't think to write it with my other hand. Anyway, brushing my teeth with my other hand was messy. I didn't risk trying this out with my shaving razor. But when I ate a meal with a fork in my left hand, I kept my right hand occupied by holding a spoon in it, to resist temptation.

The beginner's mind is open to more possibilities, but many of them can be awkward. But that is the point of them. Uncertainty is uncomfortable. Beginner's mind isn't paradise, but it can be a place of possibilities.

Of course, talking about these voluntary kinds of discomfort is overshadowed right now by the state of this country. I know I am not alone in my distress about current events and my fear about the future. Following weeks of U.S. missile strikes on Venezuelan non-military vessels and the murder of non-combatant survivors of those boat attacks, yesterday's capture of the Venezuelan president and his wife in their capital city was yet another violation of our Constitution by the current presidential administration. It's all sickening. Moreover, for a year in this country we have seen the violent and recognizable attributes of authoritarian power grabs. These tactics include fueling resentments, targeting the most vulnerable among us, like immigrants and transgender people, and assaulting basic American freedoms. These are intentional tactics to scare people, divide us, demoralize us, and make us think we are powerless to change it.

It's ugly and scary. Yet I think the wisdom of that sentence by Suzuki Roshhi might apply here. In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's [mind] there are few. What I mean, dear friends, is this: let us not become experts in despair. Surrendering our certainty doesn't mean giving up on our values. Indeed, so many Americans are defending

our common values. On one Saturday in October, for example, we saw the largest series of peaceful demonstrations in this country's history, and it took place in every state of the country.

Millions of us are demonstrating for democracy, protesting corruption and cruelty, and appealing for human decency. We are providing support and friendship to neighbors who are at risk. We are supporting civic institutions. We are running for office, giving to campaigns, and volunteering in them. We are building community. It's reassuring to me that so many people have begun looking for places to belong and places to make a difference. So many more people are joining with others who share their values. We are defending the values of compassion, freedom, integrity, decency, and hospitality.

Of course, we don't know if this will be enough. We can't be sure it will work. Yet we are willing to try, to make mistakes, and to learn. In working for the common good, having a beginner's mind means acting on faith. Indeed, as we scan the history of struggles for justice, equity, and liberty in this country, we can remember that those who came before us did not know if they would succeed. The privilege of history *for us* is that we know how things turned out. Those who came before us could not be sure. But they acted on faith, acted on their values. That is beginner's mind.

Here are a couple of examples from other countries. First, let's look at the violence of racial apartheid in the Republic of South Africa. It was an official policy that lasted for 46 years. Many well-informed experts on the situation doubted that it would ever change without the bloodshed of armed struggle. That was a possible outcome, but there were more possibilities, many more. And South Africa made a peaceful path to democracy and freedom. Another example is communism in Eastern and Central Europe. For more than four decades, people who lived under one-party dictatorships in Europe didn't know if things would ever change. Some fell victim to despair. Yet many people resisted their despair by taking action. These included students, artists, writers, musicians, labor union members, religious leaders, mothers and fathers. They built community, helped one another, and waged protests, largely nonviolent protests. And in the late 1980s, in the face of all that resistance, Communist governments began to fall. Poland had free and fair elections. East Germans tore down the Berlin Wall, and East German guards didn't stop them. Beginner's mind says: no matter how bad things are, let's keep an open mind, remember our values, and put them into action in our lives and our communities. In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities of peaceful resistance.

How much political courage could we generate and share with one another if we were to make a practice of saying, "We can't be sure this will work, but we know it's worth our best efforts?" How much personal peace and serenity could we cultivate in our lives by making a practice of pausing to say, "I don't know?" Rather than settling on one single answer, let's imagine the many possibilities.

As we heard earlier from the poet, the test for the course of life has been postponed. In truth, there is no final test, there is only the practice for it.

For whatever we must face, beginner's mind is an invitation us to a new start: every year, every day, and every moment. For our own lives, for our communities, for this country, and for this world we share, may there always be a fresh beginning. May we keep faith in the many possibilities within us, among us, and before us. Amen.