

# The Art of Beginning Again

Gordon B. McKeeman

Every year just after Christmas, we indulge in the annual ritual of pretending to begin again. It's a new year. We replace the old marked and thumbed calendar, marking as it does in so inexorable a fashion the hours of the year that is passed, with a new, fresh one, eagerly awaiting the appointments of a new year. We think of the old year as an old man, tired and battered, who surrenders the domain of time to a fresh, young, unspoiled and unspotted babe, who is welcomed in suitable fashion.

The passing of a year has become the occasion for forgetting. Some find it so difficult to forget that they must engage in an alcoholic expunging of the record, which at the same time induces a kind of synthetic happiness at the prospect of a new year's advent.

This entirely arbitrary event does provide us, however, with the occasion for talking about beginning again. And surely, the occasions for beginning again are legion. Many of us move from time to time to new locations, to new jobs, to new grades. A death in the family is often the occasion for a new beginning on the part of other members of the household. Marriage is a new beginning. Divorce is also a new beginning. Children leaving home, never to return as children, occasion some new beginnings. Disease and accident that leave behind physical, mental or emotional handicaps occasion new beginnings. Failure to accomplish cherished goals prompts new beginnings. Kipling put it in poetic language:

If you can bear to watch the things you gave your life to broken,  
And stoop and build 'em up again with worn out tools.

But if failure is an occasion for a new beginning, so is success. Parenthetically, we seem to talk about failures (plural), but success seems most often to be used in the singular. "Successes" is more accurate, for success is no more permanent than failure. It is an experience that is lived through many times. So success in some endeavor is the occasion for a new beginning, for there are always new challenges to be faced, new successes to be won.

The first thing to be mastered in the art of beginning again is the understanding that we never really *begin* again. We take along with us all our previous experience. Sometimes we fantasize what it would be like to live life over again. But if we had to do it all over with the same knowledge and experience with which we faced it the first time, guess what! The result would be the same. We'd make the same mistakes and miscalculations all over again. So, when we talk about another chance, we need to understand that we are not talking about returning to status quo ante, but going on from where we are, enriched by what we have learned at whatever price our learning has been purchased. Beginning again is really *trying* once more rather than going back to the start. It is saying to ourselves, "Next time I'll know better." Listen to this passage from the writings of Marguerite Harmon Bro:

Now. ..from the place where we are. This is the only way to make a new beginning. And after all, what difference does it make how the world began, how na-

tions began, how ideas got under way unless we, too, can make a new beginning.

Another facet of making a new beginning is to understand that learning what to avoid may not always mean knowing what to preserve. Every experience is composed of many elements. Learning is a process of selecting among those elements the ones that will prove useful. Mark Twain said that we should get out of an experience only what is in it. As an example, he pointed out that a cat that has sat on a hot stove will never sit on a hot stove again. But he'll never sit on a cold one either. It is particularly true of painful experiences, after which we say "I'll never do that again," that we may avoid some positive elements in our zeal to avoid hurt, pain or disappointment. Are we never to make any close friends, because death deprives us of the physical presence of friends? Are we never to try again, because trial means risking failure? Are we never to seek noble ends, lest we fall short?

Indeed, some of the elements in even the most untoward happenings are sources of help and sustenance that may redeem the future. Do we not usually find friends and acquaintances whose comradeship is invaluable? And do we not carry with us talents and abilities, as well as convictions hard won by other experiences?

Further, if you can't really begin again, you can't really stop either, short of death. We have to continue. The only real option we have is whether to continue with zeal and enthusiasm, or just to go through the motions of living, without really living at all. Our experience is often bought at a high price; the price of pain, and sorrow, of anguish, and frustration. So precious a commodity should be used wisely. Yet, some who have much experience avoid as much of life as they can, thus wasting the learning of long, difficult years.

Beginning again means having some place to go. Sometimes this means setting new goals because the earlier goals have been achieved. Sometimes it means setting new goals because the old ones have been removed beyond hope of achievement. Sometimes it only means reaffirming long-sought goals and seeking new and better, wiser ways of achieving them. Nevertheless it is true that you can't really begin again until you have some place to go. One of the poignant expressions of our language is "all dressed up, and no place to go." Yet, some people, with a wealth of experience, of charm, grace and education, fail to set goals for themselves and thus remain "all dressed up with no place to go."

Here we find one of the important functions of a church--holding out worthy goals, personal and social, to which individuals may give themselves and contribute vitally. It is not to be expected that all will accept the same goal, or that all will even accept one that is proposed by the church. Nonetheless, no regular attendant at services here can have missed the point that there are important causes to which any of us can, and do, make important individual contributions.

Additionally, this religious fellowship performs another vital function for its members: it expects them to be their best. This is a community in which we believe in one another. We do not demand a single goal or a single method in approaching a goal, but we do expect of one another the best. The power of expectation can work many wonders in individual lives, but it can only work if we allow it to do so. In a real sense, you are only a member of this fellowship if you're willing to allow the other members to expect the best of you. If you will subject yourself to this expecta-

tion, you will begin to discover its power. But you can't feel that power until you allow yourself to be expected to give your best. Some complain that the church expects too much and is always wanting too much. Such people don't really allow the fellowship to expect of them their best. So, they cut themselves off from its most effective work.

Let me give you a couple of examples from history. General George Washington, Commander-in-Chief of the Revolutionary Army, was once called upon to review a regiment of Connecticut Volunteers. Washington knew that the fate of the infant nation might well rest in the hands of such as these. Yet, as he reviewed them, how his hopes must have fallen. Their uniforms were ragged and mismatched. Their weapons were makeshift and unreliable. At the conclusion of the review, he was to say something to the men. They, too, must have felt inadequate to the momentous occasion they were called to serve. So what did he say? Simply this: "I have every confidence in the men of Connecticut." Who among that ragged band would have given less than his best, when he had been made subject of so great an expectation? Likewise, Lord Nelson, on the eve of a great naval engagement, addressed the men of his command with these simple words, "England expects every man to do his duty." Not "England desires" or "England wishes" or even "England hopes." No, "England expects ...".

Let me interject a personal comment here. This idea of expecting the best from others ties in with Jeffery's talk last week in terms of Martin Luther King's leadership style. It seems to me that great leaders inspire us by setting high expectations. It's through the process of trying to meet those expectations that we make progress toward worthy goals. John Kennedy said it best: "Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country."

Knowing there are others who depend upon you may enable you to make a new beginning when it would be very difficult otherwise. Being a parent, for example, is often a challenging task because children expect their parents to be all-knowing, omnipotent, full of patience and with an inexhaustible supply of money. Yet such expectations make parents work harder at the job than they otherwise might. And that extra measure of effort elicited by expectation often makes a new beginning possible. You will never make a new beginning unless you have someplace to go.

What does beginning again really mean? It means seeing some new possibilities. It is said that Thomas Edison, in the course of working on one of his innumerable inventions, spent many months without any apparent positive results. One day an exasperated assistant said to him, "Mr. Edison, we don't know any more now than we did when we started!" To which Mr. Edison replied, "Oh yes we do! We know four hundred and ninety things that won't work." What Edison was really saying to his assistant was that there were still other things to be tried, other possibilities that had not been exhausted. I had a friend once who was a school principal. He described one of his teachers to me one day as one who said she had had twenty years' experience, but who really had had one year's experience twenty times. There were many possibilities she had not even begun to try.

We sometimes say that we have reached a "dead end." The image is of one going down an alley that has no outlet. It doesn't go anywhere. There are no possibilities at its end. It is a dead end, offering no future to be seen or believed. I say seen or believed, because sometimes it is more a

matter of believing than of seeing. Some possibilities are not visible, but they are there to be believed. On some occasions the expression "Seeing is believing" might better be turned about to read "Believing is seeing." Possibilities are created by believing. But this is another sermon for another day. Suffice it to say here that while we cannot always see justice and peace and love, our belief in their possibility helps us to make them real. William Faulkner illustrated this point in his Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech. He said:

I decline to accept the end of man. It is easy enough to say that man is immortal simply because he will endure; that when the last ding-dong of doom has clanged and faded from the last worthless rock and hanging tideless in the last red and dying evening, that even then there will still be one more sound: that of his puny, inexhaustible voice, still talking. I refuse to accept this. I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance.

It is much easier, however, to see or believe in possibilities if we have cultivated within ourselves latitude as well as longitude. Possibilities may lie in many directions. If we have become acquainted with many fields, we are more likely to believe in possibilities or see them.

The occasion for beginning again may be the beginning of a new year. But it may be at any moment, for every moment contains the possibility of beginning again. Any hour, any day, any month may be the time for you to begin again. Surely it is not wise to wait until some catastrophe catches us out of practice and comfortably settled into a rut, because then we shall have to begin again without much experience.

Indeed, why not now? Is there one among us who has reached the limits of his capacities, under whatever handicap he may struggle? Then let him then congratulate himself on being the first human ever to do so. And let him resign himself to boredom henceforth. For the rest of us, still on the way, let us rejoice in the possibilities, seen or believed, that lie before us, waiting only for that moment in our circle of days when we say; "Now I shall make a new beginning." May many such moments be yours in the days that lie ahead.