

Exploring the Beginnings Spectrum

By Jim Brown

August 6, 2023

Perhaps no word conjures up more possibilities than ‘beginning.’ After all, it’s the third word in the Bible. We are often told that life’s milestones such as graduation and retirement (voluntary or otherwise) are “not the end but the beginning.” Among beginnings are picking up the pieces after a setback or starting anew to gain a fresh perspective after discarding a particular mindset. Beginning is frequently difficult because it is the Achilles’ Heel of procrastination.

I’ll start by relating one of my life-changing beginnings. In 2004 my wife of 32 years, Barbara, passed away following a two year courtship with brain cancer. I was faced with the typical challenges of a bereaved partner. Do I want to embark on another relationship? What would the kids think if I did? Should I begin dating even though I had no idea how that works in the 21st century? Would the age old question of freedom versus commitment haunt me for the rest of my life if I lapsed into confirmed bachelorhood?

All was resolved in the spring of 2010. Three years previously through mutual friends I had met Karen Anfang and we began dating, whatever that was. Our first overseas trip together brought us to a gift shop in Vienna. I bought a necktie. Karen purchased something with a credit card. The proprietor looked at Karen’s card, then turned to me and asked: “Well then, are you Mr. End?” It turns out that “Anfang” is the German word for “beginning”, and thinking we were married, the clerk jokingly assumed I was the end. A few months later I married my “beginning.” You see, I had learned how to begin, and who knows how it will end? That’s life.

Most beginnings are thrust upon us by life’s vicissitudes, often unexpected, such as moves, new jobs, a new school, separations, couplings and sickness, to name a few. And then there are the beginnings we seek, usually associated with casting something aside, be it a habit, toxic relationship or unproductive thinking. Often times this is called “wiping the slate clean.” But

blank slates are often intimidating unless you have some plan in mind, and if you do, procrastination raises its ugly head.

Here are a few thoughts on procrastination, none of which are mine.

“Procrastination gives you something to look forward to.” — *Attributed to Joan Konner*

“Procrastination is something best put off until tomorrow.” — *Attributed to Gerald Vaughan*

“Don’t put off for tomorrow what you can do today, because if you enjoy it today, you can do it again tomorrow.” — *James A. Michener, in “The Drifters: A Novel” (1971)*

“Your mind is for having ideas, not holding them.” — *David Allen, in “Getting Things Done”*

“The follies which a man regrets most, in his life, are those which he didn’t commit when he had the opportunity.” — *Helen Rowland, in “A Guide to Men” (1922)*

“I have spent my days stringing and unstringing my instrument, while the song I came to sing remains unsung.” — *Attributed to Rabindranath Tagore*

Having successfully moved beyond the procrastination stage, the question of how or where to start crops up. Dolly Parton tells us: *“If you don’t like the road you’re walking, start paving another one.”* Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, who wrote “Frankenstein,” observed that *“The beginning is always today.”* Albert Camus was more practical when he wrote: *“All great deeds and all great thoughts have a ridiculous beginning. Great works are often born on a street corner or in a restaurant’s revolving door.”* I think that what Camus is getting at is that original thought sometimes sneaks up on the unencumbered mind, although William Inge tells us that *originality is nothing more than undetected plagiarism.* Notwithstanding, I think the secret to innovation lies in achieving an open mind. This is difficult. Mokokoma Mokhonoana observed that: *“Many of those who are advised to think outside the box do not even think inside the box.”*

Think left and think right and think low and think high. Oh the thinks you can think up if only you try. Dr. Seuss.

Sometimes the key to an open mind lies in asking a question. My first memory of lateral thinking takes me back to summers at a shore cottage on Long Island Sound in the early 1950's. Members of an extended family on my mother's side took turns renting a cousin's cottage in Clinton Connecticut, generally for periods of two or three weeks. For a kid of 10 or 11, this was heaven, and something to look forward to all year. My friend, Beecher, not related but a next door neighbor, had access to a row boat that we could use as long as we kept in sight of his mother, Mrs. Wooding. On weekends, however, Beecher and I would tag along with our dads as they motored out to a breakwater about a mile from shore, where we would angle for black fish. In the range of two to five pounds, these were fun to catch. The conventional wisdom was that these fish preferred to lurk among the large granite blocks that comprised the breakwater, almost never venturing to the sandy bottoms that floored most of the sound around Clinton.

On week days, when our fathers commuted to jobs inland, Beecher and I were relegated to fishing the sand flats in front of our cottages, occasionally hooking small flounders, skates and the despised cunner, what we called a "trash fish" because it was too small to clean and tasted like cotton and needles, anyway. We longed to fish the breakwater on our own, but of course this was entirely out of bounds because it was too far away for Mrs. Wooding to keep an eye on us.

About 100 yards down the beach, still in range of the eagle-eyed Mrs. Wooding, a pile of rocks called Kelsey Point jutted into the Sound. Actually it was more like a corner than a point, but that's beside the point (pun intended). Some of these rocks, having been dropped from a retreating glacier thousands of years ago, approached boulder size with a few approaching the proportions of breakwater components. I suggested to Beecher that we try bottom fishing there, just a few yards from shore.

You can guess the outcome. We netted a couple of black fish in the 2-3 pound range. We eagerly awaited our dads' return from work so that we could share our discovery. Did this change their fishing habits? Of course not. As in the case of many breakthroughs, ours was an orphan.

According to author Girish Amrital Shah, lateral thinking is most effective at the beginning, at the perceptual stage when we look at a problem. It is inevitable that in hindsight, after a solution has been found, anyone can claim that the same solution could have been obtained easily with conventional logical thinking. Here's an example from Aesop:

A thirsty crow was struggling for water at the bottom of a pitcher. Focusing on the key word REACH, she thinks about lengthening her beak. She gets a straw and uses it as an extension of her beak. This does not work because the crow hasn't learned how to create a vacuum.

The crow then focuses on who reaches whom. She was trying to reach the water. How about water reaching her? How can water be made to reach her? By making it rise up. How? By adding something that doesn't dissolve into water. She gets pebbles and drops them into water. Voila! The water comes to her.

Shah describes an example of lateral thinking from personal experience.

At a bank, he presented a check payable to himself in the amount 20,000 Rupees. It was issued by a person who owed him money and he had been trying to get him to pay up for about 6 months. This was the closest he ever got to receiving outstanding money. However, the bank officer declined to pay citing 'insufficient funds' in the debtor's account!

The problem was far from being solved. Shah thought he would ask the debtor to fund the account adequately so the check could be honored. But then thought it wasn't going to work because the debtor had been evading the issue all the time by not being accessible on phone or at his workplace. He didn't intend to pay.

Shah was thinking. The train of thought proceeded like this:

“ How can I get him to fund the account? No that's not going to work... Let me check my assumptions here...the account must have adequate funds if the check is to be honored...Yes adequate funds...but whose funds? Can they be someone else's funds?...ridiculous!...why would someone fund the account of another person?...no way.... . All of a sudden, a thought flashed across Shah's mind. “What if I fund his account?...only to the extent that the check can be honored?” Shah went up to the bank officer and found out that the account needed to be

funded with 4,000 Rupees. He deposited the required amount immediately, presented the check and got paid 20,000 Rupees, having netted 16,000.

Here's a real life example of Unitarian problem solving. In the 1980's I served on the Board of the Golders Green Unitarian Church in north London. The building dated back to the 1920's. At the rear of the church perched a small balcony, used for storage rather than seating in the years when I attended. Painted on the back wall, visible only from the front of the church, were several life-sized angels, which owing to the ravages of time, were quietly fading. The question of what to do was perennial. The obvious solutions were either to restore the figures or paint them over. The general consensus was to paint them over because angels no longer comported with late 20th century English Unitarian theology. But there was a problem. The faces of the angels had been painted in the likeness of individuals who had contributed money to building the church. Covering them with a coat of whitewash hardly seemed fair. After lengthy discussions, I suggested that we do nothing and let nature take its course. I haven't been back to Golders Green in 27 years. As far as I know, the benefactors are still fading away with dignity.

To wipe the slate clean and come up with a solution is always intimidating because it's tough to know where to begin. A few of you might remember an assignment given to us by our dear Mary Lou Morrison whenever she spoke at church on the importance of art in our lives. She gave each of us a piece of paper and told us to draw something. I'm reminded of a quote by Pablo Picasso who observed that: "*Every child is an artist. The problem is staying an artist when you grow up.*" Mary Lou believed wholeheartedly that all of us harbored a talent that only needed opportunity and encouragement in order to bloom. At the conclusion of the exercise, no matter how inept we might consider our efforts, Mary Lou would break into a triumphant smile and exclaim: "You see, you are all artists!" Rest in peace, Mary Lou. She knew that we only needed to begin.

Amen

I've allowed time for feedback, something that you all are very good at. I'd like you to think of problems you may have solved or opportunities you have opened up simply by casting aside an assumption or two and beginning to look at things differently.

