

There is something so attractive about new beginnings . . . and something so unattractive about New Year's resolutions. The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead said that higher organisms initiate novelty to match the novelties of the environment, which seems about right—our environment changes, and it is strangely reassuring to think that our strategy for coping with change is actually filled with possibility. We can be wiser than we realize. At this darkest time of the year it is good to know that it's not going to get any darker; the light is growing and the future is literally brighter.

But New Year's resolutions seem to turn that sense of brightness and possibility into a to-do list, and it's a to-do list that's almost doomed to failure because we all know that New Year's resolutions get broken. Health clubs count on it; they sell lots of memberships right now and then by April nobody's going any more but they still have to pay their dues. We resolve to lose weight and to spend more time with our families and all manner of good things that shouldn't be so hard, shouldn't really be *tasks*, and then we fail, and I don't know, it doesn't seem like such a good way to walk into the new year.

So let's do it differently. Let's begin the new year informed by the spirit of the preacher who wrote Ecclesiastes: "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven." Things are the way they are. We don't schedule time; we don't create the seasons. God has set in motion what is in motion, and the universe unfolds according to its own inner logic. "A time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to

keep silence, and a time to speak.” Only God knows why existence is set up the way it is; to us it is entirely inscrutable.

The Preacher continues, “What gain have the workers from their toil?” I used to think that he was being cynical, pointing out that in the end you can’t take it with you and so therefore all our efforts are meaningless and pointless. But now I think that although you can’t take it with you, for that very reason you should cherish the moment. He says, “I know that there is nothing better for [people] than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God’s gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.” Time is not a commodity, and we can’t save it or spend it. Time just passes, it just goes along. Since there are so many things over which we have no control, it is wise to be happy, to look for joy, to accept and enjoy God’s gifts, and to let what is mysterious be mysterious, what is inscrutable be inscrutable.

The Benedictine writer Joan Chittister says that we are always in God but we are unaware of it, as a fish is unaware of being in water. “The purpose of time is to alert us to ourselves so that we can become, the book of Ecclesiastes implies, with its affirmation of all the dimensions of life, the only thing it’s really worth our time to be: a totally human, a deeply spiritual human being. . . . like the mystic Mechthilde of Magdeburg, I can say, ‘I see God in all things and all things in God.’

“That’s the call of Ecclesiastes. It’s an awesome thought. If God is in this particular life struggle, and this life struggle, this painful separation, this shocking loss, this deep deep pain, this change of status, of life, of love, has something to do

with the development of the God-life in me, then it is to be dealt with reverently and lived through trustingly.

“It is not Ecclesiastes implies that God is in this awful thing treating us like mice in cages and tweaking our tails with glee. No, it is that we are living in God, no matter what life is like for us at this particular moment. . . . Real spirituality demands that we care enough about all the moments of life to live all of them well. The only thing we cannot do in life, Ecclesiastes teaches, is to ignore it.”

One of my religion students wrote a paper on an article by the Zen monk Thich Nhat Hanh in which he tries to teach mindfulness by giving examples of how you can live in the moment attentively. One of his examples is that when you eat an orange, do nothing else but eat that orange. So often we eat while we’re doing other things or thinking about other things, and the orange ends up inside us but we have no real recollection of having actually eaten it. So this student, who is extremely organized, wrote her paper a little bit early and asked me to read it and suggest improvements before she turned in her final draft. She had written thoughtfully about the hectic pace of life and the difference that mindfulness might make to her, but it was all sort of *pro forma*, like a dry lab when you don’t really do the procedure but you know how it’s supposed to come out so you write it up that way. So I said to her, why don’t you actually do what he suggests, eat an orange mindfully, and write about what that’s like?

When her final draft came in, it was still thoughtful and careful and nicely done, and she had written, “I didn’t have an orange so I ate some pomegranate seeds instead. I hope that’s okay.” And she acknowledged that mindfulness was an alien

habit, not something she could just pick up in a day, which I think is a useful thing to learn in a short paper.

Mindfulness is a practice, a spiritual discipline. It teaches us that we are living in God right now, that this moment is a holy moment. When George Harrison began to study sitar in India, he said of the people he met, "The difference over here is that their religion is every second and every minute of their lives." Well, my goodness, it should be. Someone once confessed to Henri Nouwen that people interrupting him in his office kind of annoyed him, and Nouwen said, "Those people are your job." That doesn't mean that you have to be available all the time to everyone, but that people are people first and annoyances second—each interrupter is an aspect of the same Christ that you are.

Another one of my students told me with some exasperation that he was not capable of living in the moment, but that his dog is. At least he knows what living in the moment is. And I think it's what we try to preserve for our children when we restrict their TV time and allow them to be bored; we really do know at some level that relentless activity or entertainment crowds out the still small voice of God.

Ecclesiastes tells us that God has made everything suitable for its time, but that we cannot find out God's reasoning and purposes. We should simply know that it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in our toil, and abstain from what the Buddha might call unskillful speculation. The book of Revelation adds that even though we ourselves cannot perceive purposefulness, and may in fact despair at the direction of world events or our own personal events, God does have purpose and what we *can* know about it is that even beyond time, forever and

beyond forever, the home of God is among mortals. "He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

There's a story that once upon a time some disciples asked their rabbi, "In the Book of Elijah we read: 'Everyone in Israel is duty bound to say, "When will my work approach the works of my ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?" But how are we to understand this? How could we in our time ever think that we could do what they could do?" And the rabbi explained: "Just as our ancestors invented new ways of serving - each a new service according to their own character - so each one of us in our own way must devise something new and of service to others and do what has not yet been done." What the practice of living in the moment might do—the practice of mindfulness—is help us to live authentically as who we are rather than who we ought to be, so that we **may** devise exactly that thing that is new and of service to others and has not yet been done.

A thanksgiving for life at the beginning of a new year
An offering of gratitude for blessings received
An awareness that throughout all the days that have gone
You have been present, Lord God.

In the dark of the darkest night
In the loneliness of the loneliest day
In the stumbling, searching, groping of our living
You have been present, To bring light into our darkness
To bring companionship into our solitude
To bring direction into our wanderings
And for that act of faith in us
For that belief in us through Jesus Christ
We offer today our thanksgiving. Lord God.

And in thanksgiving we offer our prayers for others
For those for whom the advent of this new year
Has brought no peace or joy. For the troubled lands
wracked by war, and the children too young to comprehend
For the fatherless and the angry; Lord God, may your peace descend slowly like a dove upon those

lands.

For those for whom there will be no new year celebrations Because of the continuing aftermath of natural disasters That flooded homes and swept away villages months ago For those still scrabbling for a pittance of food To keep body and soul together. For those who found little warmth in the doorway or the dark alley, For those addicted to their habit of drink or drugs, For all victims of domestic violence at this time, For those for whom anxiety and ill-health has blighted this stage of life.

As we have begun the year worshipping May that spirit of harmony and togetherness Typify all our relationships from this day forwards By placing you, Lord God, at the center of our lives And by placing us at the center of yours.