

STARTING TO WALK
A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
September 23, 2012

The gospel lesson for todayⁱ speaks of welcome, and I want to add my welcome to those freshman and transfer students worshipping with us today who have newly joined the Stanford family this week. I hope we in the Office for Religious Life and the Memorial Church community will see a lot of you over the years, in and out of services here in the church.

Jesus, as you just heard, criticizes his disciples for arguing with one another about who is the greatest. He insists that, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” He speaks of others welcoming him, and God beyond, as one would a little child. The Buddhist teacher Suzuki Roshi, founder of the Zen Center in San Francisco fifty years ago this year, wrote a book called *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind* in 1970. In it he stated, “In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert’s there are few.”ⁱⁱ He went on to explain that no one, including himself, should ever say, “I have attained enlightenment.” Instead, “Always be a beginner... It is the secret of Zen practice.” So, perhaps all of us here today, can strive to be like those of you who are just entering Stanford and beginning your higher education careers. As I said at the opening convocation out here on the main quad on Tuesday, “Former high school students and transfer students begin [today] to become scholars in this community of scholars. [And as a result,] Professors re-envision what they teach and the research they pursue in dialogue with fresh thinkers.”

More than twelve years ago, just before I was appointed the Dean for Religious Life at Stanford and when I was the University Chaplain at Tufts, HarperSanFrancisco published a book of mine called *Finding Your Religion: When the Faith You Grew Up With Has Lost Its Meaning*.

In it I explained that “For many people the faith they grew up with loses its meaning during adolescence. Others who never had any faith in childhood begin exploring religion for the first time in adolescence or young adulthood.”ⁱⁱⁱ But even if you feel at some point in your adult life that you’ve truly found your religion, it’s my experience as a minister for almost 40 years now, and a university chaplain for almost 30, that religious faith isn’t an “on-off” button. It naturally changes over time as we go through different stages of spiritual development. The feeling of having arrived or of being sure almost never lasts, no matter how old we get. So we truly are perpetual beginners, and the process of finding our religion or our spirituality is a dynamic process that ebbs and flows throughout the seasons of our lives.

In my book I presumed to help people in the process of perpetual beginning on their spiritual journeys. I pointed to a number of starting points, or access points to the spiritual life: intellectual and emotional, through meditation and prayer, through suffering and rejoicing, through community service and social justice work, by joining in a particular religious community and by learning from those in other traditions. There are chapters on each of these. I used the metaphor throughout of climbing the spiritual mountain, with all of its different flora and fauna, altitudes, and trails. I alluded to checking guidebooks at home on your couch, seeing the mountain in the distance, camping at its base and gazing up at different times of day, sometimes through the clouds and sometimes more clearly. But at some point you have to get up and start walking. You can’t just contemplate the mountain from afar. You have to get onto it and into it. That’s what I want to talk with you about this morning: starting to walk.

For even if it turns out not to be the right way later on, you won’t get anywhere spiritually without starting. Spiritual life of necessity requires exertion and effort. It withers on the couch and in the armchair. I know a lot of people who are spiritually paralyzed inside of

their heads. They read and talk about religion, but they're incapable of acting, of experiencing, of letting go and taking part. "It's hard to choose," they say. They somehow want to be sure about the results before they start. My response is just to start walking anywhere that looks interesting, like a little child would. Act. Do. Make some mistakes and get knocked down. Pull yourself up and start again. Real progress requires interplay between action and reflection, between head and heart.

A student I interviewed for the book described the difficulty for him in deciding how to pick a trail or a path to begin climbing the spiritual mountain: "The idea of just choosing a path and going with it is very appealing, but difficult. For me, in order to choose a path I must believe it. Or is that exactly the choice I have to make? To believe it? I can't see how I could follow a path without believing it. Since at this point I don't really believe in any of them, I must make myself believe one first. Maybe this can be done while experimenting with the path, or maybe it's a prerequisite. The goal is to find a religion that I can believe, so I can't demand myself to believe in something before I do it. So, it seems the only option I have is to go with a path, whatever grabs me, I guess. But how can I fully follow a path if I am in constant doubt?"

Well, "Welcome to the fullness of the spiritual life," is my response. Doubts never go away, in my experience, nor should they. Doubts help us keep inquiring and learning and growing and experiencing transformation. The confusion this student describes between committing to a belief when more than one is compelling and they're not easily reconcilable is also a confusion that never goes away, in my experience. Living in paradox and ambiguity is also part of mature spiritual life.

Our reading from Psalms today^{iv} declares, "Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread... for the Lord watches over the way of the

righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.” So, is mine the advice of the wicked – to just start walking on any path that looks interesting, without trying to be sure ahead of time whether that’s the way of the righteous or a path that sinners tread? I hope not. For I really don’t think you can make any progress sitting on your rear end, just imagining what the path will be like. There will be plenty of opportunities for mid-course corrections as you get moving. And we need to try to maintain a beginner’s mind always. Jesus told us that we welcome him and the one who sent him, God, when we welcome the curious little child in us.

I’ve been teaching a course in Sophomore College for the last three weeks that’s humbly entitled, “The Meaning of Life: Moral and Spiritual Inquiry Through Literature.” One of the novels we read is Herman Hesse’s *Siddhartha*.^v Its main character provides a model for starting to walk with a beginner’s mind. Let me review some of its content with you, for Siddhartha has the courage to pick a path and start walking. And then pick another path and keep walking. And then do it again, until he finally reaches the top of the mountain. It was first published in 1922 by a Swiss author who later won the Nobel Prize for literature. Hesse’s parents were Christian missionaries who both spent a number of years in India. The novel is set in India in the era of the historical Buddha, around 500 B.C. Although he shares the same given name, this Siddhartha is not the Buddha. In fact, when he meets the Buddha during the story, he chooses not to become a disciple.

Hesse's Siddhartha was born the son of a Hindu priest, a Brahmin, and practiced the art of meditation growing up, along with the rituals of his faith. He was handsome and intelligent, a delight to both his mother and his father, to all of his friends, and indeed to everyone who met him. As a teenager, though, he became unhappy. He came to feel that all the love he felt from family and friends was not enough. The religious teachings and practices he had learned were

not enough. He wanted to reach the depths of his own soul, called Atman in the Hindu tradition. The priests he knew, including his father, didn't seem to have stretched all the way down, and couldn't help him to do so.

One day some wandering ascetics, called Samanas, passed through Siddhartha's town. Siddhartha looked at his life of relative ease and knew that he could grow up to be a respected and learned man, a prince among Brahmins, but that something would always be missing on a deeper level. Or he could decide to give up everything except a loincloth and cloak and follow the Samanas. He didn't know where their path would lead, but at least he would be actively engaged in his search, rather than just sitting in comfort, wondering and wishing.

Siddhartha chose to follow the Samanas. He inspired his best friend, Govinda, to come along. Their new discipline included fasting and other forms of self-denial. They also learned to practice yoga and to meditate in such a way that the mind was emptied of all images. They lived outside and begged food from villagers in order to eat. Progressively they were able to conquer pain and become less attached to things.

As time went on, though, Siddhartha began asking questions of this friend, Govinda: "Are we on the right road? Are we gaining knowledge? Are we approaching salvation? Or are we perhaps going in circles?" Siddhartha pointed out that their oldest and most venerated teacher had not yet attained Nirvana -- final emancipation from the suffering of the world and union with God.

After three years with the Samanas, Siddhartha and Govinda began to hear of the Buddha -- one who was reported to have attained Nirvana and truly conquered the sorrows of the world. He modeled a "middle way" between the asceticism of the Samanas and materialistic living in the world. Govinda and Siddhartha travelled to the town where the Buddha was staying.

Once in his presence, both Govinda and Siddhartha sensed the elevation of the Buddha. He was quiet and unassuming, begging his own daily food and dressing in saffron-colored robes just like his monks. He seemed to be smiling gently, inwardly, and he walked as if he sought nothing and imitated nothing. He reflected an aura of utter peacefulness. They heard him preach about the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, lessons about overcoming the suffering caused by ego-attachment that were destined to become the centerpiece of a new religion called Buddhism.

This time, though, Siddhartha took a different path from his friend, Govinda, who became a lifelong disciple of the Buddha. Siddhartha had a private audience with him and explained how much he admired the Buddha's teachings. But ironically Siddhartha took from them a message that no one can find salvation through another's teachings. Each must achieve enlightenment through personal experience.

But then the newly independent Siddhartha stumbles, and soon becomes caught in dependent relationships with a prostitute, a gambler, and a troubled businessman. Later in the novel he overcomes his acquisitiveness to work selflessly alongside a ferryman and begins to listen to all river passengers without praise or blame. He develops a capacity for love he never had -- one which allows him paradoxically to appreciate other people as much in their pride and vanity as in their moral courage and humility, as much in their war making as their peacemaking. He finds truth in the flowing river, which "was not just water, but the voice of life, the voice of Being, of perpetual Becoming." In the last couple of chapters, it is clear that Siddhartha has reached the final stage of spiritual development, marked by continuous consciousness of the unity of all life. He becomes a Buddha in his own right.

Siddhartha never would have gotten anywhere spiritually if he hadn't picked a path and started walking. For those of us living in a very different world more than two and a half millennia after Siddhartha and the historical Buddha, the spiritual task remains the same. To preserve a beginner's mind, like a little child, but to pick a path within a religious or philosophical tradition and start walking. My personal path has been Christian, and Memorial Church was founded as a Christian Church, albeit one open to the religions of the world. You can find around you in these stained glass windows the story of Jesus' spiritual journey on earth: From his birth and escape into Egypt with his parents, through his childhood experiences of carpentry and sitting with the rabbis in the Temple in Jerusalem, through his baptism, preaching and healing and social justice work, to his arrest and crucifixion and resurrection. Yet, Jane Stanford, among the many sayings she had carved in these sandstone walls, significantly added these words over there in the east transept: "Religion is intended as a comfort, a solace, a necessity to the soul's welfare; and whichever form of religion furnishes the greatest comfort, the greatest solace, it is the form which should be adopted, be its name what it will."

Starting to walk on a spiritual path as a beginner, whatever our age, will also help us move beyond a concern just for our own soul's welfare to a recognition that we're part of all that is, within the flowing river of life. Then, we'll be able to join in common labor with our neighbors of all nations to help promote the abundant life of which Jesus spoke.^{vi} For as Jane Stanford had written in the east transept, "It is not love for God, but love for the neighbor, good will toward man, universal kindness and gentleness, that make saints on earth." AMEN.

BENEDICTION

May the light around us guide our footsteps,
And hold us fast to the best and most righteous that we seek.
May the darkness around us nurture our dreams,
And give us rest so that we may give ourselves to the work of our world.
Let us seek to remember the wholeness of our lives, the weaving
of light and shadow in this great and astonishing dance in which we move.

Kathleen McTigue

NOTES

ⁱ Mark 9:30-37.

ⁱⁱ Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* (New York: Weatherhill, 1970), p. 21.

ⁱⁱⁱ Scotty McLennan, *Finding Your Religion: When the Faith You Grew Up With Has Lost Its Meaning* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), p. 2. (Please note that much of this sermon, whether directly quoted or not, comes from pp. 2-5 and 67-74 of this book).

^{iv} Psalm 1

^v The edition I use is Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha*, translated by Hilda Rosner (New York: New Directions, 1951).

^{vi} Ruth Duck, "We Cannot Own the Sunlit Sky," (Hymn copyrighted by G.I.A. Publications, 1983).