

Quarterly Yoke Letter

Volume XLVII

December, 2004

Number 4

Renewing The Spirit...Renewing The Mind...

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Dear Friends,

New Beginnings...This is what the Season is all about. Celebrating the birth of Jesus and the beginning of a New Year is replete with imagery of new beginnings. It is a time of spiritual evaluation when we are reminded that with all of our human failings and with all of the ways we have come up short in our good intentions, we are forgiven, and we can begin anew.

Each of us is in need of forgiveness and each of us longs for newness in our lives. Sadly, there are many things that keep us from experiencing such forgiveness and newness. We can understand these concepts intellectually, but because of the spiritually depleting cargo that each of us carries, we have difficulty believing or accepting them experientially. Just what are those things that deter us in our spiritual quest...that keep us from accepting the good news of God's forgiveness and the possibility of new beginnings?

Is it the baggage of fear? The longer I live the more I am convinced that fear is the greatest hindrance to spiritual growth. Every time that God enters the human condition, *fear* is the first response. "***Be not afraid***; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." (Luke 2:10-11) Time after time we read in Scripture, "Fear not," and "Be not afraid." In fact, the two words used most frequently together in the Bible are "Fear not." Fear keeps us trapped in deadening life patterns which we repeat over and over again, hoping against hope that *this time* the intended result will materialize. This, of course, is one definition of insanity.

In her book, *Journey of the Heart*, Melody Beattie writes: "Fear can be like a brick wall on our path. We may say we want to move forward...we want to feel better, do something new, live differently, go to the next place on our journey...but if we have unrecognized fears about that, we may feel like we've hit a wall. We don't know we're afraid; the fear is tucked and hidden away. All we can see is that, for some unknown reason, we can't seem to move forward in our life...Or we may be conscious of our fear, but be refusing to deal with it..."

We fear change...we fear disruption of the well-patterned lives we have made for ourselves...we fear loss of job...loss of marriage...loss of family...loss of all of those things which keep us feeling secure, content and comfortable. And into this mind and heart set of fear, God speaks to us, "Do not be afraid." Again, Melody Beattie writes, "Gently face your fears one at a time as they arise, then release its energy; let it dissipate into thin air. Don't be afraid of what you'll find; *the feeling is only fear.*"

What else keeps us from accepting the good news of God's new beginnings? ***Is it the baggage of power and control?*** Those who do not know how to love will fill the vacuum in their lives with power and control. Unless we deal with our issues of power and control...and we *all* have them...any form of spiritual growth will be very difficult. Jesus spent forty days in the Wilderness working through his own issues of power and control. Today it takes a life time of therapy! I shall never forget the words of our dear friend, Mary Cosby, from the Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C. Speaking at a Yokefellow Conference she said, essentially, "The temptations of our Lord had to do with decisions on what kind of power he would use...If Jesus had not worked in depth with the nature of power, and if he had not resisted the temptation to be ascending, he would have been successful and influential and powerful. *And*, you and I would never have been to Calvary where we meet the real God of history." The illusion of power and control in our lives and in the lives of others is a huge obstacle

to intimacy, relationship and spiritual growth. Whatever our own contemporary forty day expression of Wilderness is, we need to work through our issues of power and control, through which and after which we are free to live into the new beginnings that God sets before us.

Is the baggage of living in the history of what if's and if only's keeping us trapped spiritually? A few weeks ago I read a new definition of the forgiveness of oneself: *True forgiveness of oneself is finally giving up all hope of having a different past.* How many of us waste days and even years unable to forgive ourselves or our families, paying homage to the god of regret?

In his book, *How Good Do We Have To Be*, Rabbi Harold Kushner tells how Carl Rogers, the famous psychologist, would approach a therapeutic encounter. "There is something I do before I start a session. I let myself know that I am enough. Not perfect. Perfect would not be enough. But that I am human, and that is enough. There is nothing this patient can do or feel that I can't feel in myself. I can be with him, I am enough." Knowing that we are not perfect is the beginning of true healing...*We are enough.*

Jesus made forgiveness a basic tenet in his teaching. Responding to a question from Peter, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven." (Matthew 18:21-22) In other words, no one can forgive four hundred and ninety times without it becoming a part of his or her very being. Jesus offers us a new ethic of love and forgiveness, and helps us to understand that there are no more meaningful words in human language than, "I am sorry... You are forgiven."

What else keeps us from accepting the new beginnings that God offers us? *Is it the baggage of guilt?* How many lives have been short-circuited because of the feelings of guilt that are embedded within each of us? And it is one thing to recognize guilt, and another thing to do something about it! Again, Rabbi Kushner is helpful as we try to understand the intentions behind religious faith and the actions of our parents—intentions and actions that we have often taken as guilt inducing: "Religion sets high standards for us and urges us to grow morally in our efforts to meet those standards. Religion tells us, 'You could have done better; you can do better.' But listen closely to that message. Those are words of encouragement, not condemnation. They are a compliment to our ability to grow, not a criticism of our tendency to make mistakes. We misunderstand the message of religion if we hear it as a message of criticism, even as we misunderstand our parents, thinking they were disappointed in us when what they were trying to do, however awkwardly and maybe unrealistically, was prevent our one day looking back and being disappointed in ourselves for not having done our best. Religion condemns wrongdoing. It takes us to task for lying and hurting people. But religion also tries to wash us clean of disappointment in ourselves, with the liberating message that God finds us worthy of God's love."

We all know people...friends, parents, spouses, ministers and priests etc...who are gifted at inducing a spiritually destructive guilt into our lives. Such guilt keeps us from experiencing the liberation of God's love and new beginnings. May we learn not only to recognize our feelings of guilt which keep us spiritually and emotionally trapped, but find a way to move beyond them and into the light of good mental and spiritual health.

And so what else prevents you from experiencing the new beginnings that God offers us? This is my short list...*Fear, Power and Control, the What If's and If Only's and Guilt.* As we celebrate the new beginning that the birth of our Lord brought to humanity, and as we prepare to enter a New Year, may we also do some difficult spiritual work within ourselves. It is the kind of work that will make it possible for each of us to experience the Season as God would have us experience the Season. We do, indeed, worship a God of new beginnings, and of these new beginnings there is no end.

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year,

James R. Newby

