

New Book Recommends Embracing the Role of a Beginner

The Wired Word for the Week of January 10, 2021

In the News

In his new book, *Beginners: The Joy and Transformative Power of Lifelong Learning*, released this week, business consultant Tom Vanderbilt wrote that while many people are eager to leave "the outgoing *annus horribilis* [horrible year]" of 2020 behind, "we should carry forward and even deepen the spirit of the novice" that characterized how a lot of us dealt with the new reality of the pandemic. Vanderbilt said the challenges of the past year "turned us all into beginners."

As the saying goes, "necessity is the mother of invention." Individuals, families, churches, schools, businesses and other organizations have been forced by the public health emergency of Covid-19 to abandon the status quo as they scrambled to reinvent themselves and how they operate. Many have used the extra time they have gained when in lockdown, under quarantine, or when furloughed from their jobs, to enroll in online classes or check out DIY tutorials to pick up new skills. According to Vanderbilt, "Being a beginner is hard -- it feels better to be good at something than to be bad ... [but] though the first steps can be difficult, it's worth the effort."

Researchers at New York University's Infant Action Lab have learned that it takes the average toddler 2.6 million steps to become proficient walkers. Before that happens, they take 14,000 steps every day for six months and fall up to 30 times per hour. But because walking brings many benefits, including added speed, freeing up the hands, gaining height and vision of the wider world, toddlers put up with falling and persist in the effort to learn to walk.

And so, Vanderbilt writes, "Infants live what might be called the beginner's creed: If you don't learn to fail, you'll fail to learn." They accept the fact that "Progress is often not linear. Learning happens in fits

and starts. ... Development does not always march uniformly in one direction. ... kids (and adults) often get worse before they get better." When we watch a child who is learning to walk, we see the importance of not being afraid of failure, of taking risks, and of getting up after you fall. As Honda founder Soichiro Honda said, "Success is 99 percent failure."

Even if you don't master a new skill you are trying to learn, becoming a beginner produces rewards of sharpening your brain, giving you a sense of personal growth and renewal, and strengthening relationships of people who undertake to learn a new skill together.

Writer-editor Janet Treadway, an employee of The United Church of God home office, mother of four and grandmother of six, highlighted four attitudes children have that adults would do well to replicate in their own lives: trust, excitement, short memory and appreciation.

She writes that just as young children have to trust and rely on their parents completely, "we should have that same attitude toward God."

Children also look at every activity as "a new adventure, a new opportunity to explore, a new fun and interesting challenge," Treadway says, giving the example of her 2-year-old grandson Zayn, who saw beauty in an old car and a waterfall in dirty water his mother poured on the ground. As we age, we need to cultivate our imagination so we don't lose our capacity for wonder at the big and little miracles that surround us every day.

In addition, children have short memories, not replaying past experiences *ad infinitum* the way adults might. "They can be angry with the parent one minute, the next minute kissing them with all the love they can give," Treadway notes. As adults, we would benefit from keeping a short memory with regard to past wrongs we have been dealt, so that we can be free to move forward with hope and joy.

Finally, Treadway says we adults should emulate a child's eagerness to express affection, appreciation, and love to others, and especially to God.

Innovation consultant Shawn Parr writes that "Kids have an insatiable appetite for knowledge and an unapologetic curiosity for all things new and misunderstood. When they don't know the answer they actively seek the truth. They have a natural humility without posturing, pretense or

ego wrapped up in their questions; they fill up their knowledge bank by being open."

Over time, Parr says that children "lose that magical openness" because the need to fit in, conform, or belong may become more important than taking risks.

Entrepreneur Rachel Hentsch recommends that we do our best to circumvent what she calls "self-censorship" of the natural inquisitiveness of children by encouraging an explorative attitude and "turning the why question on its head and asking the child, 'Why do YOU think this is so?'"

Parr suggests that adults should also "embrace being the dumb one in the room," because that is how we learn.

Another word for learner, in the Christian vocabulary, is "disciple." Becoming and making disciples of Jesus, of course, is basic to our mission as followers of Christ (Matthew 28:18-20).

Vanderbilt recommends that we adopt the attitude of a beginner, challenging ourselves to learn and try an assortment of new things, while giving ourselves permission to be bad at them. In a funny way, that may actually be good for us!

More on this story can be found at these links:

[For New Year's Resolutions, Never Think You're Too Old to Become a Beginner. *The Wall Street Journal*](#) Note: This article is behind a paywall, so only the opening paragraphs are available to anyone who doesn't have a subscription.

[A Childlike Attitude: Lessons I Am Learning From My 2-Year Old Grandson. *United Church of God*](#)

[How Childlike Humility and Curiosity Can Inform, Inspire, and Unlock New Ideas. *Fast Company*](#)

[7 Secrets of Childlike Learning. *Mission to Learn*](#)

[5 Ways Childlike Curiosity Can \(and Should\) Inspire the Entrepreneurial Mindset. *Entrepreneur.com*](#)

The Big Questions

1. Do you think it is true that "you can't teach an old dog new tricks"? Why or why not? What is the last new skill you attempted to learn, and how long ago did you work on it?

2. It's often been said that one of the joys of having a child in your life is seeing the world again through the eyes of a child. What does that mean? How does a child look at the world?
3. What childlike qualities, if any, would you like to retain or rekindle in your own life, and why?
4. What might prevent us from embarking on new adventures such as a young child might try without thinking twice?
5. What does our faith teach us about being a beginner and a learner?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

1 Samuel 3:9-10

Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening." (For context, read 3:1-12, 15-18.)

When young Samuel was lying down in the temple, where he served the Lord under Eli the priest's supervision, he heard God calling him three times, but didn't recognize the voice was God's. Each time, Samuel got up and went to Eli to see what his mentor wanted.

Finally, Eli realized that God was speaking to the boy directly. So Eli instructed Samuel to invite God to speak to him. When Samuel did so, God told him he was planning to punish Eli's family because his sons had blasphemed against God and Eli had done nothing to stop them. Samuel was afraid to tell Eli what God had revealed to him, but Eli encouraged the boy not to hide anything from him. When Eli heard the message of God through Samuel's lips, he accepted it.

Samuel had to be open to the Lord, but so did Eli, whose eyesight was failing him. In verse 1, we read that "The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread." Eli had to be open to the idea that God might want to speak to a child, rather than to him, and that Eli would then hear the word of the Lord through the mouth of that child. Being open to the idea that God might want to do something different from what he had done before was the only way Eli would learn what God wanted to teach him.

Questions: When, if ever, have you mistaken the voice of God for the voice of another, and failed to pay heed to it? What does the fact that God called Samuel four times before Samuel answered him tell you about God and how God interacts with people? What can you do to open your ears and your heart to hear what God has to say to you?

Luke 2:46-47, 52

After three days they found [Jesus] in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. ... And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor. (For context, read 2:41-52.)

When Jesus was 12 years old, on the cusp of his becoming an adult, according to Jewish tradition, he accompanied his parents to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, as was the family's annual custom. After the festival was over, Mary and Joseph started for home, thinking that Jesus was in the group of their fellow travelers. But Jesus had stayed behind in the temple to soak up all the wisdom he could from the teachers there. Jesus, the one his disciple John said had made God known (John 1:18), no doubt could have taught the religious teachers a great deal, yet he took the role of a humble learner, listening to them and asking questions. And even though he was coming of age, he still submitted to his human parents (v. 51), willingly learning from them through his obedience. He grew wiser even as he aged chronologically, gaining favor with God and people.

Questions: What was it about Jesus' attitude and actions that resulted in his gaining favor with God? With people? How hard is it for a person with superior intellect and deep spirituality to resist the temptation to become an instructor to everyone else, and instead to assume the role of a humble learner? What can we learn from Jesus' example?

Matthew 4:18-20

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea -- for they were fishermen. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Immediately they left their nets and followed him. (For context, read 4:18-22.)

After calling Simon Peter and Andrew to follow him, Jesus also called two other brothers, James and John, who were busy mending fishing nets with their father Zebedee. They also dropped what they were doing, bid farewell to their father, and followed Jesus.

Questions: In your opinion, were the actions of Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John what one might reasonably expect from most responsible adults? Why or why not? What, if anything, in the way they responded to Jesus might you characterize as "childlike"?

How did Jesus disciple people? How did the disciples learn from Jesus? How did they spend their time together? What can we apply from their experience to ourselves as we seek to learn from Jesus?

Matthew 18:2-4

[Jesus] called a child, whom he put among them, and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. (For context, read 18:1-5.)

John 1:12

But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God ... (For context, read 1:10-13.)

1 John 3:1

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. (For context, read 3:1-3.)

The disciples of Jesus seemed to have an obsession with greatness. They were ambitious to a person, and at least two of them even had their mother seeking high positions in his kingdom for them. But Jesus taught and demonstrated that the path to greatness is through humble service and self-sacrifice (Matthew 20:20-28).

In Matthew 18, Jesus addressed the subject of greatness by lifting up a child as a model of the kind of humility that is needed to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Questions: In what way did Jesus' disciples need to change? How could they become like children when they were already grown men? What is the relationship of humility to greatness in the kingdom of heaven? What does it mean to you to be a child of God? What evidence is there to demonstrate that you are, in fact, one of God's children?

For Further Discussion

1. Clowns and actors like to improvise as a way of expanding the options available to them as they develop their craft. Try it yourself! Place several common items on a table: a straw, a piece of paper, a pan, a frisbee, a scarf, a blanket, and the like. Have each person pick an item and use it in an unconventional way. Then pass the item to another member of the group, who repeats the exercise. See how many unusual functions you can come up with for each item.

2. TWW team member John Coulson wrote: "One of the highlights of 2020 was learning a new skill. When the lockdown happened in March, our church's online video content was nothing. Our pastor started posting videos with his phone.

"I was less than thrilled with quality so I took it as a mission to improve the quality and capabilities of our church. This has led to a nine-month learning curve that included investigating best/economical ways to produce a worship service online that someone would actually want to watch. I have taught myself how to mix and edit videos.

"We have purchased the video equipment and created a booth in the back of the sanctuary where we can now record and live-stream services. We are now posting online almost every event that occurs in the church for those who are unable to attend. Viewership of our services ranks in the top three for churches in the UM Central PA conference.

"Beyond our own members, we see this as a new outreach ministry. We see the online community as our new neighborhood to tell the story of Jesus and his love."

How does your experience during 2020 compare and contrast with Coulson's?

3. Jeff Cobb, author and advocate of lifelong learning, recommends reading as a key way to open yourself up to new experiences and ideas. "Try different genres," he writes. "Ask people what their favorite books are and read them -- not only will you gain more knowledge from the books, but you will learn more about those around you by understanding the books they like. Study famous and influential people and events in history. Read both fiction and nonfiction. Do some research on the life of the author. Find out what world and local events were taking place at the time the book was written."

Share in your group your latest favorite book, or the name of a book or author that has piqued your interest recently. Make notes so you can check out some of your friends' recommended reads.

4. Innovation consultant, Shawn Parr, came up with this set of questions to challenge convention and existing solutions to problems in the workplace. He suggests that asking questions like these can help you gain knowledge and understanding that can open new possibilities for your business.

- What are your objectives?
- Why not?
- Why did you ask me to do this?
- Why are we doing it like this?
- Why are we talking about this?
- Why don't we think of a better way?
- Why don't we step back and ask for input?
- Why didn't I get the promotion?
- Why do people love this?
- Why should I care?
- Why is no one listening to us?

We might add:

- Why aren't we talking about this?
- Why don't people love this?

How could you adapt this set of questions for use among your congregants and church leaders to increase the effectiveness of your ministry?

Responding to the News

Consider joining a book club or enrolling in an online continuing education course, on any topic that interests you, with one or more members of your group or family, and make time to share what you are learning during or after each session.

Prayer

O God, help us to embrace our identity as your children, so that we might recapture the wonder of discovering your love for us and the thrill of loving you and all that you have given us to enjoy. Amen.

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