

A Letter to Someone Who Has Been Forced to Start Over

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This morning, I'd like to share a letter I wrote to a young person who has been forced to start over.

Beloved;

You have just turned 21 years old,
and your world has ended.
You could be any age, though,
when you are left standing in the rubble
of what you once knew as your life
but now feels like a foreign land.

First of all, let me just say:

I am *so* sorry.

I'm sorry and I know you don't like hearing those words.

Excuse me for being so direct,

and I hope this does not come off as presumptuous, but I do know you quite well.

Perhaps better than anyone.

And I know that you hate hearing "I'm sorry",

as though it's anyone's fault,

as though those words could take it all back when they can't,

and it won't ever be undone.

But years later, you will say these same words to other people

Who are going through hard or terrible things,

and you'll mean them. But it's okay if you can't hear that now.

My dear, I know your world came crashing down around you when another car
crashed in to the one you were in,

killing your best friend,

who was driving across the country with you

on the way back from our Unitarian Universalist General Assembly

and happened to be in the driver's seat at that moment,

leaving you, Beloved, with broken bones in your back,

the base of your skull cracked, bruises and cuts all over.

You, still alive, left with a broken body and a broken heart.

Everything you thought you knew:

about your self, about faith, about the world, about life itself—

none of it makes sense any more.

You have been forced to start over.
It was not a choice, and it was not anyone's fault.
It was an accident.
But Katie, who has been your closest friend through college so far,
Who goes on long walks with you and watches bad TV with you and goes camping
and cross country road tripping with you and teases you and annoys you and makes
you laugh so hard,
Katie is dead, Beloved, and you are in a neck brace and have just gotten out of the
hospital, your study abroad trip has been canceled, and this can never be undone.

This letter does not mean to fix anything.
It cannot fix anything.
It is simply a prayer for you—
what I hope you might come to know in time,
from someone who cares about you very much, and wants to see you through this.
I can only walk with you as you begin the long and painful journey of healing,
of starting over, of rebuilding.

So, Beloved, if you are in a place to hear this,
take it with love and take from it what you need.
Some of it will help you now, some of it will help later.
Some of it might not help.
Return to it as you need to.

Beloved, there are times in every life when that life is divided in to the
Before and the After.
This will be that moment for you.
In the after, you will have to find a new normal.
You will have to not only grieve the loss of your dear friend, of your body's ability,
but also the loss of your life from Before.
So here are some things I hope you remember,
as you have been forced to start over, forced to live in the After.
The building blocks of redemption, perhaps, in your case:

First: you are so very loved.
The love you find yourself surrounded by is a testament to the love you have created
in your life in the Before.
Let that love surround you now. Let people in.

Second, though related: Don't seal off your heart.
Be open to the love that is offered to you.
Loving is *always* a miracle, and never something to regret.
And continue to love others without reservation.
It is our most sacred gift. It is a blessing.

Third: In this process of healing there will be some places you must go alone. But there are a few precious people in your life—and you will quickly learn who they are—who will go with you as far as they possibly can, and hold your hand in spirit the rest of the way.

Fourth: Healing is painful. It is a lot of work to re-grow cells and re-grow trust in this world.

There will be days when you can't decide if the physical or emotional pain is worse. It's not a competition.

Fifth: Talk about your feelings.

This will be one of the hardest things for you to do, Beloved, because you will want to be strong for everyone else. Your asking for help is a sign of your strength.

On a related note is number six: You have strength that you did not know about. You can rely on yourself to know what you need.

I already know you are incredibly resilient, all people can be, and we often don't see it until it's tested.

Sadness may linger behind your eyes, but you will see joy again.

I promise.

There will be days to come when you will be so grateful for this life, and for the chance to still be on this beautiful earth.

Beautiful things can grow in dark places.

Life will be worth living again.

I promise, a million times over.

Don't ever give up.

Seventh: Please remember—this was given to you, not by anyone's choice, or by divine intervention, it was merely random chance, an accident.

This is not your fault.

You did not do anything to deserve this, this is not a punishment, and the only choice you have now is what to do next.

The next moment, the next day.

For a while, you will only be able to put one foot in front of the other.

That feeling won't last forever.

Eighth: You will go to depths of pain and sorrow and emptiness that you did not know could exist in the human soul.

But at the bottom of that depth of sorrow, you will find a hidden gem in the rubble: you will see the depth of human kindness and compassion.

This will be the redemption in this starting over.

There is no redemption in what happened. There is only redemption in love.

Beloved, remember that, most of all. There is no redemption in what happened.
There is only redemption in love.

Sometimes people talk about starting over as if it's a uniquely good thing,
as if it's always a choice.
As if everything can be fixed by a fresh start.
As if anything can be restored to goodness, can be redeemed, by our choice to start
over.
And sometimes starting over is a choice, but this time it's not.

Beloved, I want to tell you a story about my experience with redemption, because
who doesn't love a good story?
Last summer I was leading a group of twelve-year-old campers on a hike to the
Southeast lookout,
one of my favorite places in all of Western Mass,
about 2 miles up in to the Berkshires, where you can see the whole valley.
The reward is an incredible view at the top,
which we tend to reach right around the time that twelve-year-old legs and patience
wear out.

This time, though, we accidentally took a wrong turn,
and I, at the front, begin to hear yelling just behind me, followed by an ominous
buzzing.
Laura starts screaming, shrieking really, and I realize that we've just disrupted a
nest of hornets.
Only four of the twenty people we were with were stung, but the worst of all was
Laura.
Laura didn't particularly mind the outdoors,
but she had never been stung before, and she was stung many times,
all down her legs.
After assessing that she wasn't having any allergic reactions,
just terribly scared and terribly hurt,
we started to walk slowly—painfully—half walking, half carrying, down the
mountain.
We had been so close to the top.
One and a half miles down with painful bee stings
and a young girl who wanted nothing more than to be out of the woods.

Laura was scared to be at camp after that,
she wouldn't go into the woods or the field because she saw things buzzing around,
the memory of pain still so raw.
"They aren't bees, they are flies",
the other kids kept telling her, with only mildly concealed eye-roll, nearing
exasperation,
"you'll be *fine!*".

I turned to her and looked her right in the eyes and said,
“Laura, I can’t promise that you won’t get stung again, and I know that’s scary.
And even though I think you *probably* won’t get stung again,
all I can promise you is this: If you do get stung, the adults around you will do
everything we can to take care of you and be with you,
just like we did last time.”
She still stayed out of the field,
choosing to stay indoors as much as possible at this camp in the woods.

A few days later I led a hike back up to the lookout.
I called it a “Redemption Hike”, for those who had been disappointed that we had to
turn around
So close to the spectacular lookout.
To my great surprise, just as we were ready to leave,
Laura showed up with her water bottle and her hiking shoes on.
“Are you *sure* you want to come?” I asked.
“Yes.” She said. She was determined, resolute, so I didn’t question her. “*Well, if we
have to go back down, we have to go back down*”, I thought.
Arriving at the lookout was probably the best moment of camp that summer.
When we made it to the lookout, the joy on Laura’s face in particular was palpable. “I
did it!” she whispered to me. “*I’m so proud of myself*”.

Beloved, here is the thing.
Even in this story, the redemption in the Redemption Hike came not from her
suffering,
but from what Laura did with the suffering.
For her, that meant choosing to stay at camp, and climbing the mountain again.
Redemption came not from getting stung, but from not closing down to the beauty
life has to offer.
Redemption came not from fear of living life, but from the knowledge that when
something bad happened, people would surround her to care for her and love her.

There are small accidents, like stepping on a hornets’ nest,
and big accidents, like what happened to you, Beloved.
Sometimes life forces you to go down the mountain and start over there,
and sometimes the starting over is far bigger, far scarier, far more work.
Sometimes we lose a whole lot more.

So in this starting over, I pray that you find redemption,
not in the suffering, not in what happened, but in what happens next.
I pray that you find redemption in the people who will surround you in those first
days and hours,
the people who care for your family while your family cares for you,
the people who bring food and send cards and give rides and sit with you as you cry.

I trust that you will find this redemption, and I hope this is not too presumptuous, but because I know you well, allow me to say:
There will be redemption for you in finding God,
that God that offers us presence but not protection,
that God whose heart was the first to break as Katie died.
You will find that God because in the moments of deep suffering,
you will also find a sacred, holy, tender compassion in other people, in your community of faith.

There will be redemption in the healing that your body will find.
Your bones will heal, though slowly, and though your body will always carry the marks of this,
years later people will be surprised to learn that you once broke your back.
Most of all, you will find redemption in taking risks with your body,
trusting it to be strong again, trusting it to catch you the way you once trusted it as a child,
doing backbends and cartwheels and back handsprings.
But let us not romanticize this healing, because healing is one of the most painful things a body or a heart can do.

And, finally, Beloved, there is redemption in your faith.
You will soon be angry with this Unitarian Universalist faith you were raised in, because you need something it isn't giving you right now.
You need a community of faith to help you make meaning of this, which is, in part, why I am writing this to you now.
You will find yourself adrift in this religion that too often told you as a child growing up that you could believe whatever you want, which is a falsehood,
But in your darkest times, when you already feel so alone, the last thing you want to or can do is make meaning out of this by yourself.
You need ancient traditions, a community of faith to hold you, to tell you that there is some bigger meaning or purpose to this, or that there isn't.
Your call to the ministry, which is already there inside you, and you know that,
Your call will be strengthened by this longing for meaning-making and rituals with others, and with this tradition that you love.

So let me tell you in the meantime, this faith of ours does offer us some handholds.
In rituals of grieving and remembering Katie,
In the Spirit that offers us presence and not protection,
In knowing that suffering is a part of life, not punishment for a way of living.
In the ancestors and present-day kin that surround us to tell us that we are not alone,
In the moments when others share their stories of how they have been forced to start over, and how they made it through,

Though you don't know it yet, Beloved, you have joined the quiet kinship of the bereaved,

the wide circle of people who have loved and lost as you now have.
You will learn those fellow members by those who show up,
give you knowing hugs with tears in their own eyes.
And years later, you will hold a friend, who will have just gotten a call that her father
died of a heart attack, 50 years old.
And you hold her as she sobs, and you will say “tell me about your dad” and you
don’t try to tell her that it will be okay,
because you know it won’t be, you know there is no redemption in this.
And even though your own father’s heart, the exact same age, is very much still
beating 50 miles away,
you know this moment, when her world has come crashing down around her,
and all you can do is hold her as she crosses into the fold of the untold numbers of
the bereaved,
and all you can do in that moment is pray that your presence is enough.

You see, Beloved, I tell you these things now because this all happened to me when I
was just turning 21. I was the person in that car, and my world came crashing down
around me in that moment.
And so, my dear younger self who has been forced to start over, and to all those who
are forced to start over, I pray you find the strength that you need to weather this
starting over.
And, Beloved, because I am standing here today, I know that you will, but you don’t
know this yet, you will only come to know this in time.
And so, in the days to come, remember:

There is no redemption in this starting over.
There is only redemption in love.

Amen.