



Soul Matters

Beginnings

Small Group
September 2026

Welcome to Beginnings

“The beauty of our path is that we actually don’t know where we are going.”

- Thomas Hübl

Beginning is a big word in our culture. It comes with a lot of pressure. We are expected to be a hero of sorts: Clear about where we are going and courageous enough to get there on our own.

The beautiful life, the enviable journey, is the one that is mapped out from the start and never veers off track.

Even the wise and widely-loved, [Mary Oliver](#), seems to get into this game of bold and brave beginnings. “What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?,” she asks. It’s a question that can sometimes feel more intimidating than invitational.

But what if we began our journeys differently? What if we allowed ourselves to start off with humility, not heroism? With our doubts rather than our certainty? What if it was ok for us to say out loud: “I’m not sure where I’m going? And I’m not sure I can get there on my own?”

John O’Donohue, the beloved Irish poet and philosopher, suggests one answer to that. He writes,

“Beginnings often frighten us because they seem like lonely voyages into the unknown. Yet, in truth, no beginning is empty or isolated. We seem to think that beginning is a setting out from a lonely point along some line of direction into the unknown. This is not the case. Shelter and energy come alive when a beginning is embraced... We are never as alone in our beginnings as it might seem at the time. A beginning is ultimately an invitation to open towards the gifts and growth that are stored up for us.”

In other words, if we are brave enough to own our fear and need at the start of a journey, then we make space to experience that journey as our friend.

[Another bard](#) puts it this way, “Before you begin the journey, you own the journey. Once you have begun, the journey owns you.” And by “owns you,” what is meant is that the journey *has* you. The journey suddenly becomes a companion, not a mountain to conquer. In a sense, it comes alive and offers its help. Our willingness to begin with our fear and uncertainty, enables us to hear the path say, “I will not let you fall. I will not let you go.”

This sense of being helped by the journey itself, in turn, opens space for us to imagine (or is it remember?) another possibility: that our most sacred journeys begin **with a question**, not a destination.

This is fundamentally different from our culture’s “keep your eyes on the prize” advice. This is an orientation that believes the journey is about wholeness and unfolding, not striving and winning.

It is what many have called the orientation of the soul.

It is an orientation that proclaims that the way forward is found by looking within.

It is an orientation that says the first step is not about figuring out the destination but discerning the question stirring somewhere deep. The question that somehow knows us before we know it. The question that seeks us as much as we seek it.

It is an orientation that urges us to put down the status-soaked questions of: How can I get ahead? How do I stay on top? How can I prove my worth?

Instead it invites us to listen for spirit-filled questions such as: What is home? How can I be safe? How can I find me again? Who is my most important audience? Is the voice I've been listening to really my own? Where does my [deep gladness](#) intersect with the deep needs of the world?

Your question will, of course, be unique to you.

And if you listen for it, and begin with it, there is no way you can go off course.

Spiritual Exercises

It's one thing to analyze a theme; it's quite another to experience it. By pulling us out of the space of *thinking* and into the space of *doing*, our spiritual exercises invite us to figure out not just what we have to say about life, but also what life has to say *to us*!

With that in mind, pick and complete the one exercise below that speaks to you the most. **Come to your group ready to share why you picked the exercise you did, how it surprised you and what gift it gave you.**

Option A *Beginning with Covenant*

For [UUUs](#), all journeys begin [in covenant](#). And most often that covenantal work focuses on the *people* we are traveling with. We ask: How will we be together as a religious community? What relational promises should we make with our family, our spouse, our children, our ancestors?

But what if we expand our covenantal work to include *processes*, not just *people*? Specifically, the processes that make up our spiritual lives?

That's what this exercise invites us to do. To help us on our way, we turn to a particular framing of the spiritual life, inspired by the [Sacred Design Lab](#). This frame views the spiritual life as made up of three processes and accompanying questions:

- Belonging – To whom or what do I belong?
- Becoming – Who am I becoming?
- Beyond – What is beyond me?

With this in mind, spend some time this month figuring out **one** covenantal promise you want to make *for this coming year* with **each** of these processes/dimensions of your spiritual life:

- What single commitment do you want to make to your **belonging**?
- What single promise do you want to make to your **becoming**?
- What single vow do you want to make with your relationship to what is **beyond** you and **transcendent**?

Then make a covenant with yourself to revisit these promises every 2-3 months this year, continually reprioritizing and reshaping what it will take to keep your three sacred promises.

Option B *Which Companion Piece Speaks to You?*

Sometimes we come across a quote, song, article or movie and it perfectly captures what's going on for us right now or allows us to view our current circumstances in a new light.

With this in mind, spend some time this month going through the Companion Pieces section below to find the one piece **that speaks most powerfully to you**. (Or **"[shimmers](#)" most strongly for you**.)

Come to your group ready to share the piece you picked, why it called to you and what insight, memory, or message of comfort or challenge it offered you.

Option C

Visio Divina & Beginnings

Visio Divina (spiritual seeing) is [an ancient religious practice](#) where one lets images become doorways through which the divine, our inner wisdom or life itself speaks to us. In its more straight-forward form, it involves spending time with an image until it offers you a message of comfort or challenge, or reconnects you to an important memory. This is akin to how our Soul Matters groups engage the “Your Question” section of each packet.

For this exercise, you’re invited to spend some time with a selection of “[beginnings photos](#)” to see what message one of those photos might have for you. Here are the steps for you to follow:

- Pull up the document with the selection of “beginning photos”:
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1SwHikfyjJpV40mL-xj83uXc38IY5oWxOvcPN6Z4n4U0/edit?usp=sharing>
- Take your time being present with each image. Explore each photo’s details and stick with it long enough to discern if that photo has an emotional gravitational pull for you.
- Once you’ve identified the photo you most connect with, spend some time reflecting on how that image might be offering you a gift. It often helps to ask yourself, “How is this image trying to speak to my life *today* by connecting me to a past memory or by offering me a message of comfort or challenge?”

Come to your group ready to share the highlights of this exercise and what your main take away was.

Option D

The Story that Isn’t Done with Us Yet

A core focus of Soul Matters is inviting us to reconnect with parts of ourselves by reconnecting with memories and stories from our lives. When we return to these stories, we often notice some new aspect of it or find ourselves viewing it through a new lens. Or to put it another way, quite often our stories are not done with us yet. They have something to say to us.

So, **choose one** of the prompts below to revisit a story from your past. Then come to your group ready to tell it, along with how you encountered it anew and how that left you with a message of comfort or challenge.

Revisit a personal story about...

- A [small step](#) that made a big difference.
- Trying to invent a new life when everyone around you was pressuring you, directly or indirectly, to recover your old life and allow things to “go back to normal.”
- [Missing the boat](#): a time when you wished you would have taken a path [but didn’t](#).
- A difficult ending that turned out to be a beautiful beginning.

Option E

Black Out Poetry & Beginnings

Often what gets in the way of beginnings is our inability to see through the static. For instance, after a setback or loss, life can feel like a blur, as we are overwhelmed with a cacophony of feelings and messages. Other times, we may be clear on the new journey we want to take but the complexity of leaving our old life is just too blinding.

And yet, we make our way. Slowly. Tiny step by tiny step. With the static and fog clearing up tiny bit by tiny bit.

Making our way forward bit by bit is what this creative exercise is all about.

Using the how-to videos below, give the practice of black out poetry a try. You will recognize right away how this practice invites you into the mindset of beginning slowly with bit-by-bit steps.

As you created your black out poem, be sure it articulates something important about a beginning you are currently wrestling with or have it capture what life has taught you about beginnings in general.

Here are those two videos to guide you on your way:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vF6nzqx9RoU>
- https://www.tiktok.com/@art_therapy_irl/video/7143338423909158149

Option F

Ask Them About Beginnings

One of the best ways to explore our monthly themes is to have conversations about them with people who are close to you. It's also a great way to deepen our relationships! Below is a list of questions to guide your conversation. Be sure to let your conversation partner know in advance that this won't be a typical conversation.

Remember to also answer the questions yourself as they are meant to support a conversation, not just be a time of quizzing them.

Come to your group ready to share what surprised you about the conversation and what gift or insight it gave you.

Questions about Beginnings:

- What "really good thing" in your life began with a small, uncertain step?
- What has your most joyful and most painful beginning taught you about yourself?
- Tell me about when you first experienced the beginning of the "real you"?
- What is your best "ending that turned out to be a beautiful beginning" story?
- What movie or song encapsulates the beginnings you've experienced in your life?
- Much of who we are is a result of a seed that was planted and nurtured by our younger selves. Our beginnings took root in their choices. So, if you could talk to your younger self, which of their choices would you most thank them for?
- The psychiatrist [Carl Jung wrote](#), "The greatest burden a child must bear is the unlived life of their parents." In what ways might your life choices and paths have begun in the unlived life of your parent?

Finding Your Question

This list of questions is an aid for [deep reflection](#). How you answer them is often less important than the journey they take you on.

So, read through the list of questions 2-3 times until **one question** sticks out for you and captures your attention, or as some faith traditions say, until one of the questions “[shimmers](#).” Or as we like to say, “Read over them until one of the questions **picks you**.”

Then reflect on that question using one or all of these questions:

- What is going on in my life right now that makes this question so pronounced for me?
- What might my inner wisdom be trying to [say to me](#) through this question?
- How might this question be trying to wake me up or get me to realize something through this question?
- How might Life or my inner wisdom be trying to offer me a word of comfort or challenge through this question?



1. What has your most joyful and most painful beginning taught you about yourself?
2. Many say there is the seed of a new beginning in every ending. How has that widespread idea helped or complicated your endings?
3. We live in a culture that declares: “Winners never quit and quitters never win!” Could this cultural message be in the way of you beginning your next stage of becoming? What needs to happen for you to feel free to quit and begin anew?
4. Are you somebody who wants everything to be just right before you begin something new or somebody who is fine with “jumping in” and figuring things out as you go? Either way, have you figured out what made you that way?
5. Much of who we are is a result of a seed that was planted and nurtured by our younger selves. Our beginnings took root in their choices. So, if you could talk to your younger self, which of their choices would you most thank them for?
6. The psychiatrist [Carl Jung wrote](#), “The greatest burden a child must bear is the unlived life of the parents.” In what ways might your life choices and paths have begun in the unlived life of your parent?
7. What old story is preventing your new beginning?
8. Aging is often seen as a series of endings. But it doesn’t have to be that way. How is aging asking you to see it as a series of beginnings?
9. What question wants to shape the next stage of your becoming?
10. **What’s your question?** Your question may not be listed above. As always, if the above questions don't include what life is asking from you, spend the month listening to your days to find it.

Companion Pieces

Recommended Resources for Personal Exploration & Reflection

The following resources are not required reading. Nor are they intended to be analyzed in your group. Instead, they are here to companion you on your personal journey this month, get you thinking and open you up to new ways of embodying this month's theme in your living and loving.

Wise Words

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting their bad advice...
little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own.

[Mary Oliver](#)

Too much of life is wasted trying to build and control the "right" circumstance for making a change. Instead, acting on what matters in this finite life is better started today, imperfectly, than on any someday... in every moment of life, as finite humans, all we are doing is choosing one set of problems over another... The question isn't how to avoid any bad consequences or what's the perfect decision; it's what is the price you're willing to pay.

[Oliver Burkeman](#)

One can waste years this way, systematically postponing precisely the things one cares about the most.

[Oliver Burkeman](#)

There is something deep in us that conspires with what wants to remain within safe boundaries and stay the same.

John O'Donohue

There is nothing more pathetic than caution, when headlong might save a life, even, possibly, your own.

[Mary Oliver](#)

Another world is not only possible, she's on her way. Maybe many of us won't be here to greet her, but on a quiet day, if I listen very carefully, I can hear her breathing.

[Arundhati Roy](#)

You don't have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step.

Martin Luther King Jr

We seem to think that beginning is setting out from a lonely point along some line of direction into the unknown. This is not the case. Shelter and energy come alive when a beginning is embraced... We are never as alone in our beginnings as it might seem at the time. A beginning is ultimately an invitation to open toward the gifts and growth that are stored up for us.

[John O'Donohue](#)

Beginners are alive in beautiful ways. They notice more. They ask better questions. They remain open to what is emerging rather than getting sidelined by what they "already know." There is humility in being a beginner. And there is freedom.

[Julie Bauch](#)

Each friend represents a world in us, a world possibly not born until they arrive, and it is only by this meeting that a new world is born.

[Anais Nin](#)

For a long time it had seemed to me that life was about to begin -- real life. But there was always some obstacle in the way, something to be gotten through first, some unfinished business, time still to be served, or a debt to be paid. Then life would begin. At last it dawned on me that these obstacles were my life.

Alfred D. Souza

Our fears around starting something new are genuine... I also know that if there is one thing more daunting than writing a song, it's not writing one... A job left undone is its own torment, a dream unrealized, its own kind of hell.

[Nick Cave](#)

It is never too late to be what you might have been.
Adelaide Anne Procter

Let every moment be a reminder that you are more than the sum of your mistakes. A sunrise is still beautiful no matter how bad a day is. It's allowed to start over. And so are you.

[Rudy Francisco](#)

The first step towards getting somewhere is to decide you're not going to stay where you are.

John Pierpont "J.P." Morgan

All endings are also beginnings. We just don't know it at the time.

Mitch Albom

I love thinking about beginnings. Like that story my aunt used to tell in the back garden: When the Creator finished his creation of the world...he shook the remaining clumps of clay from his hands and they fell to the sea and formed this island.

[Christy Lefteri](#)

We can never be born enough.

E. E. Cummings

It may be that when we no longer know what to do, we have come to our real work;
and that when we no longer know which way to go, we have begun our real journey.

The mind that is not baffled is not employed.

The impeded stream is the one that sings.

Wendell Berry

There will come a time when you believe everything is finished. That will be the beginning.

[Louis L'Amour](#)

Videos & Podcasts

It's Never Too Late (to begin anew)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M9KAhDGAajY>

Beloved is Where We Begin by Jan Richardson

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=357081115018896>

For a New Beginning by John O'Donohue

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8teiKdWu-AQ>

Alan Watts Says Our Lives Never Really Begin Because We Get Lost in Preparing for It

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DI6aDvjWvnA>

Begin Now! Don't Wait to Eat the Marshmallow

<https://www.youtube.com/shorts/k2PrQwIM0EY>

Later Becomes Never

<https://www.instagram.com/reels/DY06tiVvsYf/>

On Choosing to Quit & the Gift of Beginning Again

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1QBrX3IkMfo>

On the Hidden Parts of Our Country's Beginnings

<https://www.pushkin.fm/podcasts/first-america/merciless-indian-savages-episode-1>

List to the entire series [HERE](#)

250 Years Later: Still Fighting About Our Founding

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q0a17SHCjSo>

A Reminder that We Have Only Just Begun

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lp_tlbm2xVw

For Those Who Appreciate the Silly but Spiritual

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DVjOCq5DbB1/>

Articles

This Is Not a Dress Rehearsal

<https://www.inneratlasttherapy.com/blog-posts/not-a-dress-rehearsal>

A Spell Against Stagnation: John O'Donohue on Beginnings

<https://www.themarginalian.org/2023/12/30/john-odonohue-blessings-beginnings/>

Books

[The Beginning Comes After the End](#)

Rebecca Solnit

[On Repentance and Repair](#): Making Amends in an Unapologetic World *(On beginning again)*

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg

[Beginners](#): The Joy and Transformative Power of Lifelong Learning

Tom Vanderbilt

Movies

[Drive My Car](#)

[Columbus](#)

[Beginners](#)

[The Station Agent](#)

[Once](#)

[Minari](#)

[There Will Be Blood](#) (more [here](#))

Music

Our thematic playlists - on [Spotify](#) and [YouTube](#) - are organized as a journey, so consider listening from beginning to end and using them as a personal musical meditation.

Click [here](#) for the **Spotify playlist** on Beginnings

Click [here](#) for the **YouTube playlist** on Beginnings

More Monthly Inspiration from Soul Matters!

Our Facebook Inspiration Page: <https://www.facebook.com/soulmatterssharingcircle/>

Our Instagram Page: Find us as "soul_matters_circle"

Packet Introduction Credit Note: Unless explicitly noted otherwise, the introductions of these packets are written by our Team Lead, Rev. Scott Tayler. Rev. Scott gives permission for his pieces to be used in any way that is helpful, including in newsletters, worship and online service/recordings.



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