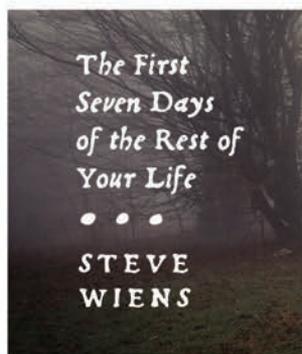




# BEGINNINGS



I've come to think of Steve Wiens as a poetic hound dog, an author who sniffs out the nuances of ancient biblical words and stories until he's dug up their practical implications for the living of our actual lives. Wiens' book, *Beginnings*, is an eloquent, earthy, and gently urgent call to say yes to the beautiful things the Creator wants to grow in the soil of you and me.

CAROLYN ARENDS

Recording artist and author

Steve Wiens has a rich repertoire of stories that have emerged from the daily concrete reality of life. He uses this fund of narratives to fill out and explicate the seven days of the creation lyric. The result of this interpretive work is that we are permitted to read both ways—from creation to daily life, and from daily life to creation. This “back-and-forth” is immensely generative, thanks to the pastoral heart that is so evident on every page of Wiens' book.

WALTER BRUEGGEMANN

Author of *The Prophetic Imagination*

This isn't a book. It's an invitation to new beginnings, new life. With a fresh perspective on Genesis 1, we are invited into God's process of becoming who we actually are. Telling stories with honesty, vulnerability, and pastoral sensitivity, Steve helps us locate our stories in the grand narrative of God's creation and re-creation story. Read this book and walk into something new.

NATE PYLE

Author of *Man Enough*

*Beginnings* is a fine work of midrash. Steve Wiens knows how Scriptures should work—indeed, how they *do* work—to breathe an expansive breath into our mean and shriveled lungs, creating space for a good universe, the fullness of creation, to come inside. *Beginnings* shows us how to take in the breath, and with the exhale, to let out a great and inspired hallelujah!

STEVE BELL

Singer/songwriter

God majestically spoke creation into being in seven days, creating the teeming world of profundity and promise in which we live. *Beginnings* beckons us to let into our lives God's formational framework, the seven days which created the world and just might change yours.

MARK SAYERS

Pastor of Red Church, Melbourne, Australia, and author of

*Facing Leviathan*

I really enjoyed reading *Beginnings* and found myself referencing Steve's writing in conversation with friends immediately. This book will both encourage and challenge. Steve doesn't leave us alone with our thoughts and struggles but expertly guides us into our own new beginnings through both the creation story and his own journey. Nice one, Steve!

STU GARRARD

Songwriter/singer, formerly of Delirious

If you love language, stories, and scholarship, Steve Wiens has prepared a feast of all three in *Beginnings*. Steve is a wise guide and wonderful storyteller, trekking deep into the rhythm of the creation and the gorgeous Hebrew language which holds it. There are a few stories in my life which have been tender to the touch and in need of a deeper interpretation than merely my own experience of them. *Beginnings* gave me a way to interpret my life, fresh, and for that I am grateful.

JAN MEYERS PROETT

Author and speaker

I read *Beginnings* during one of those in-between seasons Steve Wiens talks about. I was at the close of one adventure, with no clear sense of when the next would come, and still less certain that I would be up for the challenge when it did. I was exhausted but also restless. Rather than offering a quick escape, *Beginnings* encouraged me to embrace that tension. After all, the seeds of new life are often embedded in the vulnerable place between the “What now?” and the “What’s next?” Wise, hopeful, and beautifully written, this was the right book at the right time for me. What will it coax to life in you?

JOHN PATTISON

Coauthor of *Slow Church*

Steve Wiens is the rare pastoral soul who somehow tells the truth about ourselves and God with both truth and love. He gets it; he gets us. And yet he sees the truth of the gospel and the wonder of resurrection among the most regular moments. In an age of Facebook-self versus real-self, this book of his will help our compartmentalized church move into the prophetic work of wholeness.

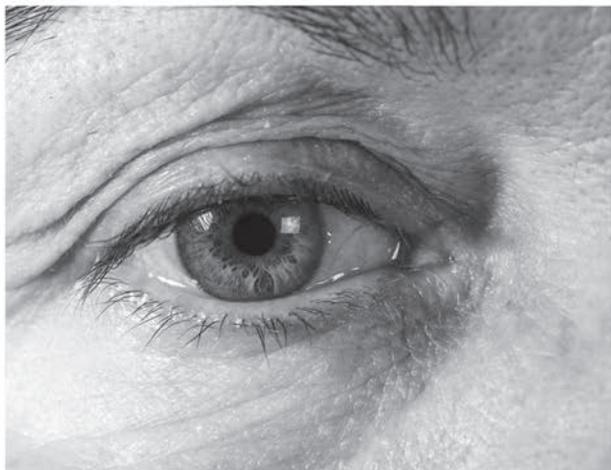
SARAH BESSEY

Author of *Jesus Feminist*

This book will encourage you. Deeply. To be and become the light God created you to be. To stop being something and someone you are not. To begin again—to be the “good” God created you to be. Read it and be blessed.

RUTH HALEY BARTON

Author of *Sacred Rhythms*



# BEGINNINGS



*The First  
Seven Days  
of the Rest of  
Your Life*



STEVE WIENS

...

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*Beginnings: The First Seven Days of the Rest of Your Life*

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## INTRODUCTION

# TOV

**THEACHE HAD** probably been creeping up on me, but I didn't notice it until that night, sitting on the deck behind my suburban house looking out onto my suburban life. Isaac was two, and the twins were six months old. I was a pastor at a large church, I had been married for fourteen years, and my twenty-year high school reunion had come and gone.

I didn't go to that reunion. I didn't have the energy for the awkwardness, the sizing up, and the plastic cups of stale beer to chase down our stale memories.

But the ache that had been whispering through my body rattled to a clumsy stop on that night, in those suburbs, on that deck.

I had been looking at pictures of my friends who went to the reunion: my old girlfriend, the guys I used to go all-night skiing with on those blisteringly cold nights in Minnesota, my soccer team. And I remembered all the beginnings.

I remembered moving from Southern California to Belgium the summer before seventh grade. I remembered the sour, un-American body odor of the team of men who moved our old furniture into our new house. That smell was the baptism of our new life in Europe.

I remembered my friend Colin who lived across the street in Waterloo in a two-story white brick house with black shutters, like they all were. I remembered the inground trampoline in his backyard, on which we spent hours and hours, jumping our way into adolescence. I remembered how his mother's unbearably loud voice boomed around their house like a grenade and made us run for cover.

I remembered falling treacherously in love with Tammi the moment I saw her coming down those stairs in the fall of my ninth grade year. She liked me back, and then she didn't like me. I was devastated. That's when I started listening to The Cure and Depeche Mode, bands that were created for teenagers like me who didn't know how to express the frightening chaos brewing beneath our skin, bubbling and boiling.

I remembered Mr. Tobin, my tenth grade English teacher. Every student should have a Mr. Tobin. He got to know each of us and selected books based on what he thought we'd like. The first book he gave me was *Trinity*, by Leon Uris. I remember staying up late into the night reading about Conor Larkin, the main character, who was everything I wanted to be but feared I wasn't: brave and passionate and rough-edged. Almost thirty years have passed since I met Mr. Tobin, and I credit my deep love for reading to his deep love for teaching.

I remembered kissing Angie under a starry summer night on that dock that jutted out into Lake Como, the thrill of that moment reflecting off the lake and making everything luminous that summer before our senior year. I can still see the picture of us at the homecoming game: She was beautiful, holding my hand under the dark October sky. I had a ridiculous acid-washed denim jacket on, with only the bottom button fastened in the chilly air. There was a grin on my face, and my eyes were sparkling. I was seventeen.

I remembered driving around in Matt's Bronco for hours, finishing off the beer that Carl's older brother bought us. We must have burned hundreds of gallons of gas on those cold winter nights; we were irresponsible, irrepressible, and immortal.

I remembered deciding to go to college in a sleepy little town in southern Minnesota instead of up north, where most of my closest friends from high school had chosen to go. I remembered trying to explain it to them, in the awkward way that high school guys do. I don't remember much of that summer before college. I only remember the familiar sensation that comes with every new beginning: the thrill of reinventing yourself running parallel with the fear of the unknown—the twin tracks that lead to everything else.

But on that night, on that deck, in those suburbs, the continual forward movement seemed to have stopped. The tracks had run out. I used to be in motion, rattling forward toward a destination that kept morphing. But on that stationary deck, I had become solid and stable and stuck.

## BEGINNINGS

There would be no new beginnings.

My life should have felt full and rich, but instead it felt empty and dark. There was only the slow work of playing out the reality of the decisions that had already come and gone. I was a pastor. I was a father. I was a husband. I didn't regret any of those things. I loved my kids and my wife and my job. But the finality of it all was a relentless crashing—wave after wave, under those stars, in those suburbs, on that night. It felt vacant, like staring into nothingness.

It was empty and full at the same time. Empty of beginnings, full of endings.

As I sat there motionless with the emptiness closing in around me, there was something else hovering above me in the darkness, but I couldn't see it.

If I could have seen it, it would have looked like a beginning.

• • •

Can you feel it, buried so deep inside of you that it feels both inaccessible and undeniable at the same time? You're reminded of it whenever those hot, unexpected tears come, or when stifling frustration erupts into anger. It's down there, lying in between the fault lines of your soul, waiting for that tremor that will shake you to the foundation. How does it feel when it stays inside of you? How does it feel when it finally comes out?

The very best work we do is when we help the good stuff come out in ourselves, in each other. And we'll do this again and again and again.

When we allow ourselves to peer into cracks and slivers where honesty can be found, we realize we are lost, even though we haven't left home. When we listen for the melody of our lives, it is drowned out by the endless drumbeat of a forced march, and we feel our exhaustion at a deep soul level.

This is a very good moment, containing a hidden gift. Most of us miss it because we are too afraid to leave the forced march. This moment of exhaustion is a beginning.

This book is about not missing those moments. This book is about leaving the forced march. This book is about finding hidden beginnings and pursuing the endless adventure of becoming.

In order to do that, we must first unpack a lie. Like most lies, it's so ingrained in us that it will feel ridiculous at first, so stay with me. Here's the lie:

The forced march is worth it because the destination is your ideal life, which exists out there as a firm and fixed point, and you can find it if you just keep marching.

When you believe in that particular lie, you are living *as if* instead of *as is*.

As if you will be happy once you finally get there. As if you will be finished once you finally reach it. As if the destination doesn't change. As if the misery of the forced march will be contrasted by the exhilaration of reaching the destination.

Your life is not firm and fixed. And you cannot find it by submitting to a forced march.

You are not a noun.

You are a verb.

You are endlessly becoming.

This book is about partnering with God in creating and becoming, using every bit of pain and promise that your actual life has included. All of the breakdowns and all of the breakthroughs are ingredients in the dynamic stew of

***You are not a noun.***

***You are a verb.***

***You are endlessly becoming.***

becoming, which is bubbling within you even as you read these words.

Yes, all of the breakdowns, too, because endings have a role to play if we are going to see and embrace beginnings. All those hopes that

stayed secret and died silent, lonely deaths. All the soaring dreams that came true, then crashed down around you, leaving you wounded and buried in the rubble. Breakdowns seem to be the necessary precursors to breakthroughs, though we shudder to admit it.

This book is, for better or for worse, about selling the farm and setting out on the dangerous and transformational journey of becoming who you actually are in the world (something that usually happens in the middle of getting hopelessly lost, or as a result of being pitted against an enemy who is far too

strong for you). Beginnings are always lurking in the shadows, though we'd prefer them to be printed on billboards.

Beginnings find us and change us, and they take us on journeys over which we have little control. The beginnings that change us contain much more mystery than mastery.

This is not a book about being whatever you want to be. That's an indulgent pursuit, resulting in jockeying for position in a race that isn't yours. There is something deep inside of you so good that you're most likely suppressing it because you can't believe that bringing it to life might help to heal the world.

You need to bring it out—over and over again.

• • •

My friend Alan is a rabbi who gathers with a few of us to study the Scriptures because he believes we have something good in us that needs to come out. I can't describe the life that pulsates through that living room when we study, but I can describe him, this rabbi who has taught me so much about *the* beginning, about all beginnings, and about what is really good.

His bright eyes sparkle with light. He slowly takes time to gaze at each person and then asks one of us to bless our study together. These blessings are short and sweet because he's like a six-year-old on Christmas morning who can't wait to open his presents.

Once the blessing is done, he smiles and says, "Let's go."

Alan's knowledge of the nuances of the Hebrew language is matched only by his love for those who study with him.

## BEGINNINGS

We've talked for hours and hours about Genesis, life in the garden, and particularly this word that is translated as "good." It's used over and over in Genesis, the story of the beginning of all things. At the end of each day of creating, God pauses and notices that what has been made is *good*.

In Hebrew, the word for good is *tov*. Alan has reimagined *tov* to mean

the actualization of the potential for life, embedded in the earth by God, when creation brings it forth, with the seeds of future life in it.

Read that a few times until you can taste it.

Alan gets his description from Genesis 1:11-12:

God spoke: "Earth, green up! Grow all varieties  
of seed-bearing plants,

Every sort of fruit-bearing tree."

And there it was.

Earth produced green seed-bearing plants,  
all varieties,

And fruit-bearing trees of all sorts.

God saw that it was good.

God speaks, and the earth responds by producing a kind of life that *contains even more life* inside of it.

What does it mean that God has embedded *even more life* inside of you and me? And how does creation call it forth?

Do you remember when the Boston Marathon was

transformed into a horrific nightmare at the finish line on that bright day? Hundreds of people were injured, and several were killed. Just moments after the explosion, runners came up to that finish line, waves lapping up against a shore that was no longer there. Many of them kept running all the way to the nearest hospital to give blood to those who were injured. In the midst of unspeakable tragedy, seeds of life containing the potential for future life sprout up.

That is *tov*.

My friend Jenny was born with cerebral palsy. She walks with a limp, she has a severe startle reflex, and she tires easily. She is routinely asked what is wrong with her. Jenny is an elementary school librarian who cares about getting great stories into the hands of her kids; she cares even more about helping kids embrace their own stories, especially kids with disabilities. She tells her story to her students; she speaks out loud about the pain and the joy of her actual life. The kids with disabilities all eventually sidle up to her to tell her *their* stories. Because of Jenny, they feel like they have something beautiful to offer the world. Jenny calls it out of them, with every word and with every limp.<sup>1</sup> That is *tov*.

When we have the courage to walk with a limp that is ours, or to keep on running after the race is supposed to be over, we are answering creation's call to bring forth *even more life* into the world. Creation speaks. We respond. And we leave a trail of seeds behind us—most of the time without even knowing it—that will blossom into even more life when we are long gone.

You have seeds of *even more life* embedded within you by God, and they will be left behind when you have the courage to give what only you can give.

But we need a guide that will help us cross through the thresholds of our lives—something that can bring us from here to there. We need some glue that will hold the whole story together. We need a process that will help us understand how our lives are unfolding.

The creation story itself, all seven days, will serve as that guide.

• • •

Was it seven literal days, this story we read in the beginning of our Bibles, or was it a process that unfolded over many years? Is Genesis 1 a scientific document or a beautiful poem?

***You have seeds  
of even more life  
embedded within  
you by God.***

I'm not interested in those arguments. Let other books and other people engage in them.

I am interested in something far more satisfying and mysterious, something that is much more than a moment in time.

When I read the creation story, I taste something rich and velvety, layered with beauty and bursting with life.

I see in the seven days a pattern that will shape the endlessly unfolding creation of *our actual lives*, from birth to death, and all of the messy, sacred, and sinister moments in between. Each day is a stream that connects a broad theme of God and life and me and you, and if we can see them, we can find each new beginning as it winds its way toward us.

On Day One, when it's empty and dark, we assume life has stopped and we are stuck. But there in the chaos, God is hovering over the waters, poised to speak and act. On Day One, God brings the light of hope, coming to rescue us, bringing us out of darkness and into spacious places where we can begin again.

On Day Two, an expanse is created between the waters above and the waters below. This is where dry land will appear, where air can be breathed, and where human beings will dwell. This expanse is created so that it can be *filled with life*. For any beginning to take shape and go somewhere, we will need to be expanded so we can hold new life. This is often risky and painful, but it's necessary.

On Day Three, we'll discover the seeds that have been embedded in us by God. We'll name them and call them forth, watching them grow and become beautiful right before our eyes. When we think of our favorite teachers, coaches, and mentors, we love them because what they *gave to us* emerged from somewhere *deep inside of them* and caused something deep inside of us to spring to life. Most of us stop short of giving away what's really true about us because we're afraid of something that potent. What if no one sees it as good? What if I'm not the real deal? We need to name and honor what is truest about us—and then give it away.

On Day Four, we'll embrace the different seasons of life—waiting, hope, abundance, and loss—that will anchor us to a story bigger than our own. Without seasons to help us remember who we are, we are set adrift, anchorless at sea. We'll learn the seasons that help us remember who we are,

practical ways to celebrate those seasons with our loved ones, and how to tell what time it is in our lives.

On Day Five, we'll face our monsters, which threaten to strike down every new beginning that could bring new life. We'll learn to name the armor that we've worn our whole lives, which has been helpful for where we've been—but not for where we're headed. We'll learn to stand into the tension points of our lives, naked and vulnerable, trusting in God's life-saving help as our only hope.

On Day Six, we'll talk about us, this beautiful word that describes who we are and where we're from, because we can't get where we're going unless we know where we're from. And it turns out we're from a generative, expansive, and fertile reality that both pulls us toward the future *and* heals our past. How we see ourselves, and others, will be transformed so we can do the work we were created to do.

Finally, on Day Seven, we'll talk about our need to stop. We'll find rhythms in our lives to shut down productivity, enjoy relationships, and nurture trust, because this is an essential part of becoming who we really are. We'll explore rich, meaningful ways to laugh, eat, and enjoy the life that has been given to us, and to receive what only God can give.

• • •

I need to point out three characteristics about this book that will help you to discover and then embrace the new beginnings of your actual life.

*This is a book of stories.* My hope is that in telling the expansive stories of the Scriptures, the stories of my own life,

and the stories of the lives of others, an intersection will be created where you will be able to find your place within the bigger Story of God. Hidden in between the words and paragraphs of these stories, I hope you will find yourself, I hope you will find God, and I hope you will find the courage to leave your own deck of disappointment. Because it is a book of stories, it will not answer every question that you have. Instead, if it does its work, it will create questions that lead you on journeys of discovery, beauty, and adventure.

The stories you will read about familiar characters in the Scriptures are told less to inform you about what happened and more to help you see things you haven't seen and feel things you haven't felt. You will notice that I take great delight in wondering *what might have happened* between the lines and words of these stories. I do that because I believe the Scriptures are a river, and when we interact with them, we are taken somewhere that we haven't been before. This, I hope you will discover, is a way to *enter* the Scriptures rather than simply be instructed by them. When we only read Scripture as a wooden and inflexible document designed to keep us anchored in one place, we will most likely remain unchanged. A river, on the other hand, is alive and active and surprising, no matter how many times you enter it. And that's the thing of it, isn't it? When you *enter* a river, it's different every time. We need to *enter* the Scriptures. We need to see where they take us, even if it means being thrown overboard from time to time.

*This book is a midwife.* When our first child was born, we hired midwives to help catch his beautiful body into this

world, and to help us know what to do once he got here. Midwives are more available than doctors (all due respect to the good doctors reading this). They're more like us than

***The Scriptures  
are a river, and  
when we interact  
with them, we are  
taken somewhere  
that we haven't  
been before.***

doctors are, and they tend to give very practical advice and help. Maybe it's too big of a dream, but I hope this book helps to give birth to what needs to emerge from deep within you. I hope it's accessible and available, and I hope it accompanies you through major thresholds in your life.

*This book offers a process for becoming.*

The seven days of creation offer a picture of how you can enter and move through the beginnings that inevitably come into your life, whether they come crashing like waves or wafting in like the cool breeze that refreshes you at the end of a long day. This process is not meant to be linear, however. As you read through the seven days of creation as a process for your own growing and becoming, my hope is that more and more you'll notice the events in your life and say, "Oh! I'm right in the middle of Day Two! I'm being expanded so that I can hold new life." Or, "Wow, this is a Day Seven moment—an opportunity to practice the life-saving discipline of stopping."

My hope is that this book offers a unique way of seeing the process of your own becoming so that you find help in those in between times when you don't know where you are or what you are supposed to do. I offer open-ended questions for you (or a group of you) to wrestle with as you find yourself in the story. I also offer a spiritual practice at the end

of each chapter that I hope will help you to move toward the concepts presented on each day of creation so that you can walk fully into and through each new beginning that comes your way.

• • •

Have you ever seen an artist at work? It is a sacred act to watch something in the process of being created. It is stunning when a piece of art is finished, especially when the artist has poured her energy and heart and soul into the piece. We love gazing at the finished product.

But you aren't finished.

You are partnering in the ongoing creation of your actual life, which is endlessly unfolding, artfully constructed, and filled with hidden beginnings that sometimes flow out of unexpected endings.

In *the* beginning, there was a process that would shape all beginnings that follow.

And that process began with darkness and chaos.

Let's go.

DAY ONE

# LIGHT

*First this: God created the Heavens and Earth—all you see, all you don't see. Earth was a soup of nothingness, a bottomless emptiness, an inky blackness. God's Spirit brooded like a bird above the watery abyss.*

*God spoke: "Light!"*

*And light appeared.*

*God saw that light was good*

*and separated light from dark.*

*God named the light Day,*

*he named the dark Night.*

*It was evening, it was morning—*

*Day One.*

GENESIS 1:1-5



**MY SISTER LISA IS** my oldest friend, and one of my greatest confidants. But there was a time when we almost lost her.

Lisa is two years older than I am, and she has watched over me during all of the seasons of my life. One of the enduring memories of my high school years is walking into her room at the end of the long hallway in our white house in Waterloo. I always found a safe place to land at the end of that hallway. I would just show up and start talking: about the girlfriend who had just broken up with me, about my struggles in school, about the anger inside of me that I didn't understand. I don't remember her ever telling me she didn't have time for these late night conversations. She has helped me through many difficult decisions, and she is one of the few people on the planet who knows me and loves me thoroughly, even recklessly.

Lisa was the commencement speaker at her high school graduation *and* her college graduation. She's a rare kind of brilliant: Her expansive intellect is eclipsed only by her oversized heart.

Her brilliance made it all the more surprising, all the more tragic, as we watched her enter into and get lost in an abusive relationship a few years after graduating from college. She lived in Memphis, and on those rare occasions when we saw her, we hardly recognized her. She was gaunt, and she

## BEGINNINGS

was devoid of the sparkling light that usually characterized her bright smile and dazzling eyes. Normally irrepressible, she became morose, secretive, swallowed up by a darkness we could see and feel. I remember the time she first told me about the relationship. It was late at night, and as we shivered under our coats, our eyes never met. She just stared off into the distance, and I didn't know how far she'd gone or how we'd ever get her back.

During those years, she came home a few times, but she didn't really want to be with our family. I suppose it was because she was afraid that if we really knew what she was doing, we'd start hoping she wouldn't come home. Maybe she was right.

One night, when the darkness became too dark, she called my parents and simply said, "Please come and get me." When it gets so dark you can't see anymore, it's time for someone to do something.

And so my parents rented a U-Haul truck the next morning, drove down to Memphis, and got her out of there. They didn't hesitate or ask clarifying questions. They knew what they needed to do, and they did it. Immediately. My parents are not perfect, but in these moments, they shine. They became the gift that helped Lisa to walk into a new beginning.

In addition to still watching over me, Lisa now spends many hours a week listening to the stories of heartbreak and pain that characterize the homeless, invisible teenagers of downtown Minneapolis. She is a new beginning herself, and new beginnings are being generated all around her.

When I'm lost and in need of a new beginning, I don't put a lot of hope in being found on my own. When I think about what God is like, I think about that U-Haul truck and those desperate parents, racing from Minneapolis to Memphis. I'm betting everything on the hope that it is God who rents a U-Haul truck to get to me. When I am in the cracks and crevices of disappointment and failure, God finds me, stoops down to grab me, and whispers good news in my ragged ear:

*There you are! It's time to go.*

At the dawn of a new beginning, you will need someone to show you the way. Because it starts in the dark, you will need to hear and see something that leads you into it. You'll need to see that the light is stronger than the shadow.

• • •

*Let there be light.* These are the words that ushered in Day One. But before there was light, there was darkness and chaos. "The earth lacked shape and was totally empty, and a dark fog draped over the deep" (Genesis 1:2, *The Voice*).

The Hebrew phrase used to describe that which lacked shape and was totally empty, before anything was created, is *tohu va-vohu*. Listen to the consonants in that word, how they swirl around, looking for a place to land. I love this phrase. It crashes around on your tongue, chaotic and unpredictable. *Tohu va-vohu* describes the empty places in your life where you can't see, you can't hear, and you don't know.

## BEGINNINGS

*Tohu va-vohu* is the drive home after you've just been laid off unexpectedly, the day after you found out you need a new water heater.

*Tohu va-vohu* is hearing the doctor say the word *cancer* out loud, when it's still bouncing off the walls and hasn't had a chance to land yet.

*Tohu va-vohu* is what washes over you seconds after you wake up, as you remember the betrayal, and reflect on what was destroyed.

*Tohu va-vohu* is finally becoming CEO, and instead of savoring the sweet taste of celebration, there are only ashes in your mouth as you look down onto the full world from your empty corner office.

*Tohu va-vohu* is a burgeoning bank account, an empty nest, and a journal full of regret.

*Tohu va-vohu* is sitting on a deck late at night wondering if you're just sliding downhill. It's emptiness when you want fullness.

*Tohu va-vohu* is living a gaunt, empty life in Memphis, right before you pick up the phone.

*Tohu va-vohu* is dark, empty fog, and we hate it so badly that we will try anything to escape it.

As it turns out, we cannot escape the emptiness. But there is something else that exists, hovering over the *tohu va-vohu*, vibrating and waiting to bring creative energy and life.

Earth was a soup of nothingness, a bottomless emptiness, an inky blackness. God's Spirit brooded like a bird above the watery abyss.

GENESIS 1:2

## LIGHT

The word for “spirit” in Hebrew is *ruach*, which means “wind” or “breath.” It also describes the creative energy of God, which both generates life and holds it together. It’s full of life, energizing and animating all the emptiness, everywhere. Whatever else it means, it is used to describe something living and moving, compared with something rigid and calcified.<sup>1</sup>

It is the *Ruach* that initiates new beginnings, and without it, we stall out, sitting on decks late at night overlooking our past, seeing nothing but endings. The psalmist wrote,

If you turned your back,  
they’d die in a minute—  
Take back your Spirit and they die,  
revert to original mud;  
Send out your Spirit and they spring to life—  
the whole countryside in bloom and blossom.

PSALM 104:29-30

*Ruach* is the word for “Spirit” in those verses above. It’s used in some form more than 380 times in the Scriptures. When the generative life force of God is not present, we will remain lost in the *tohu va-vohu*.

The God who hovered over the waters of chaos in the beginning of all things is still hovering, always inviting us into something beautiful and new. God is an artist, painting portraits of you and me on canvas in the attic, shadow and color and sparkle fusing into reality and potential. God is a farmer who still gets up early to scatter seed in the spring and

to gather the harvest in the fall. God is a parent who delights in measuring your height with hastily scribbled pencil marks on the kitchen wall.

God wants to usher all of us into new beginnings, no matter our motives and no matter how blurry our picture of God. God isn't finished creating and recreating, and it's precisely because God is continually generative that we keep getting invited to grow and change and become, despite the fact that

we keep landing ourselves in the same old garbage heap that we found ourselves in last year, and the year before that.

*The God who  
hovered over the  
waters of chaos  
in the beginning  
of all things is  
still hovering,  
always inviting  
us into something  
beautiful and new.*

God is the one who speaks a word into the darkness of our lives, when *tohu va-vohu* seems to be winning.

*Let there be light.*

And then the light is separated from the darkness.

When we think of light, we automatically think of the sun. But according to the creation story, the sun is not created until *Day Four*. So what is the light of Day One? What is it that showed the way into that first beginning?

In the beginning of the Scriptures, if you want to find the right thread that will help you understand a mysterious phrase like "Let there be light," you need to look for where this word is used *elsewhere* in Scripture.

## LIGHT

• • •

Genesis tells the story of the beginning of the children of Israel, how they became a people, and then how they almost died out because of a famine. When they were rescued, they found a home in Egypt, where they lived for many years as honored guests. But as the book of Exodus begins, the children of Israel are slaves in Egypt. It was a *tohu va-vohu* time for them, and while they cried out to be rescued, they were answered only by emptiness and nothingness for four hundred long years. If God was hovering over that *tohu va-vohu*, it must have felt like a million miles away.

And then a baby was born.

Now a man from the house of Levi went and took as his wife a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son, and when she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him three months.

EXODUS 2:1-2, ESV

What mother doesn't think that her baby is a *fine child*? I actually don't trust this mother. There are *a few* genuinely beautiful babies, but most of them are really just small, wrinkly old men wearing onesies with pictures of ridiculous dogs flying airplanes.

But the word in Hebrew that is translated as "fine" is *tov*, that expansive word that means good but also refers to the actualization of the potential for life, embedded in the earth

by God when creation brings it forth with the seeds of future life in it.

You'll remember that *tov* is first mentioned all the way back in Genesis 1, used to describe everything that God makes.

That's kind of like PUTTING SOMETHING IN ALL CAPS: Pay attention to this one, the writer seems to be suggesting. *This* beginning—this fine baby—has something to do with *the* beginning. Into the *tohu va-vohu* of slavery, something new is about to be created—much more than a baby.

But first, more *tohu va-vohu*.

After noticing how fast the Hebrew people were reproducing, Pharaoh (the Egyptian king), in an attempt to drown out their population growth, ordered that all Hebrew baby boys be killed. He commanded the Hebrew midwives to carry out this order.

Instead of killing the baby boys, two Hebrew midwives named Shiphrah and Puah allowed these boys to live. They told Pharaoh that the Hebrew women, who were much harder than Egyptian women, gave birth before the midwives even arrived. Cheeky midwives, it turns out, are the very best kind of midwives.

So this fine child was saved. But you can't hide a growing boy forever. After three months, this brave mother put him in a small ark, laid it in the Nile River, and watched him float away in order that he might live.

Can you imagine doing that?

The fine child was strategically placed at a spot on the

river where women bathed—rich Egyptian women. One of them noticed this Hebrew boy and snatched him up to raise as her very own. It was Pharaoh's daughter, who named him Moses, which means "drawn out."

Can you feel the ache of the Hebrew people, longing to be drawn out of Egypt, out of slavery?

*There you are! It's time to go.*

So Moses was raised as a prince in Egypt—the wealthiest, most resourced place on planet Earth at the time. He eventually saw the Hebrew people—his people—enslaved and mistreated, and one day, something in him snapped: He murdered an Egyptian slave driver who was beating a Hebrew slave. Moses buried that slave driver in the hot, unforgiving sand that day. The prince became a revolutionary in that moment, and in the next moment, a fugitive.

Moses ran away to the wilderness, where he remained for forty years. He spent most of those years as a lonely shepherd, roaming the hills and valleys of his lost and lonely soul. For forty years, one of history's greatest leaders experienced an ocean of emptiness. For forty years, Moses tasted the gritty sand of the wilderness, a *tohu va-vohu* that must have confused and scared him. He had murdered the Egyptian inside of him, burying it in the sand of memory, but he hadn't found his identity as a Hebrew yet.

And so the camera cuts back to Egypt, where the cries of God's people, which have continued to ring out in the darkness, are finally heard.

Many years later the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery and cried out. Their cries for relief from their hard labor ascended to God:

God listened to their groanings.

God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob.

EXODUS 2:23-24

*There you are! It's time to go.*

It was then that Moses' life took an unexpected turn, bending and twisting like the river into which he was placed as a baby. Moses encountered something he had never seen before, so he *turned aside* to see what it was.

The light of Day One, it turns out, is shining all around us, but only those of us who turn aside get to see it.

Burning bushes are a common occurrence in the hot, dry desert. Plants are tinder in the wilderness, and when lightning strikes, they burn. This is how they reseed. Normally the bushes burn quickly, and the smoking remains are all that's

***The light of Day One, it turns out, is shining all around us, but only those of us who turn aside get to see it.***

left. As a shepherd, Moses had probably seen it happen hundreds of times. But on this day, years into his emptiness, he saw a bush that burned but was *not consumed*.

Out of the burning but not consuming *light*, after forty years, God spoke. That is how you know you're in Day One: The emptiness is suddenly filled with presence.

## LIGHT

The God who has been absent is suddenly and unexpectedly there. The U-Haul truck shows up.

GOD said, “I’ve taken a good, long look at the affliction of my people in Egypt. I’ve heard their cries for deliverance from their slave masters; I know all about their pain. And now I have come down to help them, pry them loose from the grip of Egypt, get them out of that country and bring them to a good land with wide-open spaces, a land lush with milk and honey, the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Perizzite, the Hivite, and the Jebusite.

The Israelite cry for help has come to me, and I’ve seen for myself how cruelly they’re being treated by the Egyptians. It’s time for you to go back: I’m sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the People of Israel, out of Egypt.”

EXODUS 3:7-10

*It’s time for you to go back.* Those were the words that branded Moses’ soul and changed his identity. These were the words that ushered him into a new beginning.

*There you are! It’s time to go.*

But Moses ran into a buzz saw named Pharaoh, the king in Egypt who did not want to let them go. You can’t really blame him; the children of Israel were his slave labor force, and without them, the economy would likely collapse.

So God sent ten plagues to change Pharaoh’s mind. First

we see blood in the Nile (#1). Then frogs crawl out of the Nile and cover everything (#2), and after that gnats appear everywhere (#3). Then flies cover every crack and crevice of Egypt, filling mouths and covering food (#4). Next all the Egyptian livestock die (#5).

Then it starts to get personal. The Egyptian people are covered in painful boils (#6). Hail destroys all their crops (#7). Locusts swarm and eat the rest of the vegetation not destroyed by hail (#8).

The next plague is darkness (#9), and it is especially delicious in helping us to understand what the light of Day One is. The scene opens with God speaking to Moses.

GOD said to Moses: “Stretch your hand to the skies. Let darkness descend on the land of Egypt—a darkness so dark you can touch it.”

Moses stretched out his hand to the skies. Thick darkness descended on the land of Egypt for three days. Nobody could see anybody. For three days no one could so much as move. Except for the Israelites: they had light where they were living.

EXODUS 10:21-23

This kind of darkness is oppressive. It was a terrifying darkness, and it covered *all* of Egypt, every square inch. It was so dark that people could not even see one another. They must have been blind with fear.

But even in the midst of total darkness, we read at the

end of verse 23, the people of Israel *had light where they were living*. What?

What does it mean that the children of Israel had light where they lived? Remember, the darkness was total and complete, so if it was a light that came from candles, or fire, or any other natural substance, then the Egyptians could have had it too (or would have come to steal it).

The writer of Exodus is giving a delicious hint by using the words *light* and *darkness* when describing the ninth plague. When we read that the children of Israel experienced light when everything else was shrouded in darkness, the writer is exposing a thread for us to pull so we'll see what's about to happen next. That thread goes all the way back to Day One of creation. In Genesis 1:4, we read,

God saw that light was good  
and separated light from dark.

The word used for “darkness” (*choshek*) in Exodus 10:22 is the same word used in Genesis 1:4. And the word for “light” used in Exodus 10:23 (*or*) is the same word used in Genesis 1:4.

Do you see the threads? Can you taste the hints? Can you see what's happening? The light is about to be separated from the darkness.

Four chapters later, Moses will lead the children of Israel out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, and toward the Promised Land. The ninth plague anticipates a new Day One for Israel. Many times, beginnings really do lurk in the shadows.

## BEGINNINGS

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Have you ever found yourself in need of a new beginning, but you didn't know where to start, or how to get past whatever darkness stood in the way?

*Let there be light*, God smiles to the single mother, buried under piles of laundry and also piles of hopelessness.

*Let there be light*, God announces to the doctor who has cheated on her husband, and also on herself.

*Let there be light*, God thunders to the pastor, lost in depression, who cannot imagine climbing those steps and giving one more sermon.

*Let there be light*, God calls out to the bored restaurant server, mired in a dead-end job with more bills than bank.

*Let there be light*, God beckons to the suburban alcoholic mother, as she wakes up under the cover of regret and shame that threatens to unmake her.

Let there be a new Day One in your life. A new beginning.

On Day One, God brings light and makes a way for you to be separated from the darkness in which you are lost and alone. On Day One, God whispers, "*There you are! It's time to go.*"

If you are going to learn to embrace all the beginnings in your actual life, one of the biggest lies you have to unlearn is the one that insists the hovering God will only descend after you've gotten your chaotic life back on track. "God helps those who help themselves," you are told, and so you are convinced you need some forward progress before God grudgingly intervenes.

This kind of thinking only keeps desperate people lonely

and hardworking people tired. This kind of thinking keeps us in the dark.

Day One is about being rescued. Day One is about creation bursting forth right in the middle of the inky blackness. It's on Day One that we recognize our inability to escape the darkness. It's on Day One that we are rescued out of our own powerlessness. This unexpected light comes just as we realize our impotence, and it is dazzling when we finally see it.

• • •

When I was thirty-two years old, having been married for seven years, my wife, Mary, and I moved back into my parents' basement, which is what you do when you're killing it at life. But let me back up so I can describe that descent in delicious detail.

A year before we made the humiliating drive that concluded in my parents' driveway, we left a really great church where I had been a youth pastor for about five years. I remember telling Mary about nine months before we left, "I'm sick of being a big fish in a small pond here. I'm ready to be a small fish in a big pond."

That statement turned out to be only half-true. I actually wanted to be a *big* fish in a big pond, but of course you don't say *that*. You say, "I feel God is calling me somewhere else." This is the trap many of us fall into: We feel like we can't do what we want to do, so we find a way to say that it's what

***On Day One,  
God makes a  
way for you to be  
separated from  
the darkness in  
which you are  
lost and alone.***

God wants us to do so nobody can argue with us. And then when it doesn't work out the way we thought it would, we can get angry with God. It's sort of pathetic and hilarious and convenient all at the same time.

Well, I did get a call. It was a *phone call* from a very big pond: a church in Newport Beach, California, where there is no darkness, ever. They wanted to know if I would be interested in swimming out there.

I was immediately excited, but Mary felt slightly different. Her exact words were, "Next to you dying, moving to California would be the *absolute worst thing* that could ever happen to me."

~~But I pressured her until she finally gave in~~ we talked and talked about it, and after several long phone interviews, we flew out for a weekend to interview in person. It was just two weeks after 9/11 when we went, and I remember the eerie feeling of being on an empty plane and walking through deserted airports. The air was still thick with fear of flying and terrorism, but all I could think about was how much I was going to love this new job.

I did well in the interviews. We met interesting people and found a great little Thai restaurant near the beach. We began to dream about our new life there as we breathed in the clean, salty air. Right before we left, the person in charge of the search team pulled me aside and said, "It looks like it's going to be you. You and Mary should really talk about whether or not you're serious about this. We'll call you Tuesday!" He said that on a Sunday. It felt right, and we decided on the flight home that if they offered the job to me, I'd take it.

When we got home, my whole life became a chapter titled “Waiting for Tuesday.” And then the call came, and they told us that we’d need to wait one more week because they couldn’t decide between me and the other candidate. The same thing happened the following week. And the following week. *Tohu va-vohu*.

On the fourth Tuesday after we had returned from the place where there is no darkness, the phone rang in my little office at my small-pond church, and before they told me, I knew I hadn’t gotten the job. They said lots of nice things about me, and I thanked them. I remember asking them if I could have done anything differently, but I don’t remember what they said. I do remember them saying they had a flight to catch—to Hawaii. *Of course you do*, I thought as I hung up on that conversation and woke up to the reality that I wasn’t flying anywhere.

I left the office and drove home, and after telling Mary what happened, I remember sitting on our green ottoman and yelling at God. My exact (and desperately tragic) words were, “Okay, God, the ball is in *your court* now. The ball is in *your court!*”

Apparently we were playing tennis?

I still don’t really know what I meant, but I felt angry, ripped off, and misled. It was a very dark day, and there were no burning bushes telling me what was happening next.

A few months later, I ended up taking a job at a very large-pond church in Detroit, Michigan, because Detroit is exactly like Newport Beach. I was the singles director at

the church in Detroit, and I met some wonderful people there who became good friends almost immediately. But I never wanted to be the singles director. I didn't know it at the time, but the only reason I took the singles director position was that I was convinced it would take mere weeks for this church to promote me to a much more important position that would highlight my obvious and extraordinary gifts. I knew I was a big fish, and it was only a matter of time before they'd find out.

I think you see where this was going, but I didn't.

They didn't promote me (there was no reason to), and I became a fish out of water there. I didn't fit in the culture, and I sank into a dark depression. I quit that job, and we left Detroit thirteen months after we had arrived. We made the fourteen-hour drive to Minneapolis, eventually pulling into my parents' driveway, our new home for an undetermined amount of time. It was August 2003. I had no job (I had applied for two and was rejected twice). I had jumped out of the pond completely. I could barely breathe.

I ended up getting a job working with high school students at a Presbyterian church in Edina. On my first day, I had to move a bunch of speakers from one end of the building to another. I stacked them up impossibly high on a very rickety cart—which was probably built for punch bowls, not speakers—and I headed for the storage closet. Halfway there, the cart lurched after hitting an unseen bump, and one of the speakers crashed to the floor, cracking its casing. I hastily stacked it back up on top of the pile, made it to the

closet, and stowed the whole pile away. I would have climbed in there and hid myself if I didn't have a huge list of other extremely menial things to do (all of which I felt were far beneath my *many* years of ministry success). The next day, one of the janitors asked me if I knew what had happened to the speaker. I actually considered for a minute telling him I'd never seen that speaker before, but I think "not lying" might have been somewhat high on that church's values list. So I told him about the lurching cart and the unfortunate crash. I don't know what I was expecting, but his laugh told me I would live another day.

I had gone from being a big fish in a small pond to a fish that hadn't found his voice in a very big pond to a nameless guy who broke speakers and almost lied about it.

Have you ever noticed yourself in free fall? What was it that woke you up? There was something about the speaker incident that stirred something up inside of me. Maybe hitting the darkness of rock bottom is what needs to happen so that you are able to see the light.

It happened as I was walking into the offices at the north entrance of the building, and I'll never forget it. The light broke through, bright and clear. As I was lamenting my job description and lack of importance and treading in those shame-infested waters, the *Ruach* said,

*Do your regular job description well, but I'm also going to give you a new job description. Ready? It's simply to love people.*

## BEGINNINGS

I can't explain how revolutionary it was for me to lay down my need to be important and raise up the need to love others well. It seemed so simple, so powerful, and so very personal. It was a burning bush, and I turned aside to see what was happening. Doing this led me slowly out of self-importance and into a story that would shape the rest of my life.

I started by listening to people, by stopping what I was doing when I came into contact with anyone at that church (especially the janitors). Suddenly, my little orange office became ground zero for all spiritual conversations. I made friends with a custodian whom most everybody else avoided because they thought he complained too much (he did). But I got to know him. I heard about his family, about his struggle with a debilitating illness, and about his love for classic cars. I heard his political views, and I heard about his marriage. He was cranky. But he was also lonely, and we became friends.

After this burning bush moment, I became less concerned with ponds and fish, and I became more aware of what was happening around me moment by moment. I have learned that this is what *real* fish do, no matter where they swim.

*There you are! It's time to go.*

• • •

What new beginning is dawning in your life these days? What darkness is blinding you? Can you see it and name it? Can you hear the *Ruach* whispering into your ear, calling you into a new beginning?

Welcome to Day One. Let there be light.

## Practice

The daily *examen* was developed centuries ago by Ignatius Loyola. It's an approach to noticing God's presence and discerning God's direction by praying through and reflecting on the events of your day. It's a way to see the burning bushes in your life so you can walk into new beginnings.

At its most basic level, the *examen* is designed to help you determine which direction your life is taking, moment by moment. Ignatius wrote about two orientations—*consolation* (that which draws you toward God) and *desolation* (that which takes you away from God).

*Consolation* lifts our hearts so that we can see outside and beyond ourselves. It generates new inspiration and ideas. It shows us where God is active in our lives and where God is leading us. It releases new energy in us. It bonds us more closely to our human community.

*Desolation* turns us in toward ourselves. It drives us down the spiral deeper and deeper into our own negative feelings. It makes us want to give up on things that used to be important to us. It takes over and drowns out our ability to see and hear anything new and good. It drains us of our energy.<sup>2</sup>

Here's how to do a daily *examen*: At the end of each day, take ten minutes to stop and review the day's events, becoming aware of God's presence all through it. Some people find it helpful to pull out their calendars as a way to remember all of their meetings and tasks. Do whatever it takes to help you remember the events of the day.

Then, ask two simple questions:

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- > When was I most alive today? (This question gets at our experiences of consolation.)
- > When was I most drained today? (This question gets at our experiences of desolation.)

You can use lots of different questions for the *examen*, such as

- > When did I experience contentment today? When did I experience the sense of missing out?
- > When did I give love today? When did I withhold love?
- > When was I most myself today? When did I cover up who I really am?
- > When was I kind to myself today? When was I harsh with myself?
- > When did I show compassion today? When did I show judgment?
- > Where did I sense God's love for me today? When did I fear God's absence?

Some people find it helpful to journal their answers; others find it helpful to just pray through them. Still others find it helpful to actually talk this through with a friend or spouse.

The benefit of writing your answers down is that after thirty days or so, you can begin to see the patterns in your life that bring consolation, and also the patterns that bring desolation. When you see the patterns, you can begin to make sense of where God is shining the bright light of Day One and inviting you into a new beginning.

### **For Reflection and Discussion**

- > Can you think of a time when you had a burning bush experience, where God showed up in order to lead you into a new beginning? What happened? How did you respond?
- > Describe an experience when someone noticed where you needed saving and raced toward you to get you out of there. What happened? How did you respond?
- > What do you most long to hear from God these days? What message are you afraid God is saying to you?
- > Where do you tend to sense God's presence most? What does it sound like, feel like, or look like for you when God shows up in your life?
- > Do you feel like you're entering into a new beginning these days, or do you feel stuck? Why?