

...Before We Begin Again

Life is a wheel, and it always comes back around to where it started.

STEPHEN KING

Several years ago, we took down the Christmas tree. Again. The year before, the ritual had been depressing to me. Not because the holiday season was over, but because we'd done it before. Many times. It felt like, somehow, after a year of striving and scrambling and doing and accomplishing, we were right back where we started. Square one. We hadn't *progressed*; we'd *returned*.

It turns out, life isn't a straight line. It's a circle. If you can't accept that, it can be pretty depressing. At least, that's what an African immigrant had told me. Right before he fired me.

At the time, I had been completing my post-doctoral residency—moving forward and rushing ahead—and he had just arrived in the States to continue his own education. In the course of the initial interview, I asked him where he hoped to be in five years. He looked confused. I asked him why.

He told me.

In the United States, he said, we expect progress all the time. We're always trying to get somewhere else. We think life is a straight line. But where he came from, they were farmers. Seasons mattered. And the seasons came and went and returned again. They knew life was a circle. Everything comes and goes and returns again. Everything. Our sadness. Our joy. The things we love and the things we don't. I only saw him once. He never came back.

Now I know why.

I couldn't help him, because I was in denial about how life really works. I couldn't accept life is about circularity and rhythm and returning. I couldn't accept that all of existence is in orbit, everything from massive planets to microscopic cells are moving in a circle. I couldn't accept that, as Stephen King says, life is a wheel and always returns to where it started.

Why do we forget this?

Because we suffer from the dis-ease of the straight line. We've been taught to believe life is only meaningful if we're getting from here to there—doing a lot, becoming more important, accruing more stuff, feeling safer, and increasing our comfort. Even the good work of redeeming the world can become its own straight line, as we single-handedly try to move the world from Point A to Point B. We pretend life is what it's not. We need to get real about how this whole thing works.

We need to bend our lives back into the circle they already are.

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The Year of Listening, Loving, and Living has now walked with you through an entire voyage around the sun. Which means, regardless of what time of year it is, today is New Year's Day for you. Which also means, whether it's January, May, or August, it's time to make a New Year's resolution.

When it's time for New Year's resolutions, we get flooded by articles about change and transformation, why most of us will fail, and how to become the exception. Most of these articles are written by well-meaning individuals trying to convince us of their formula for progressing along the straight line they prefer. They, unfortunately, spread the straight-line dis-ease. They don't help us understand how to live within the circular reality of all things.

No wonder our resolutions fail.

So, as we conclude this particular leg—lap—of our journey, I'm not going to invite you onto my straight line. I'm going to invite you to get off of yours. With one twenty-minute resolution that will take you back to where you began. For twenty minutes a day, just *breathe*. Breathe in. Breathe out. For twenty minutes, get off your straight line and experience the circular rhythm that keeps you *alive*. Don't try to breathe better. Don't try to do *anything*.

Just *notice*.

Each breath—while seemingly the same as the one before it—is different, unique, new. Begin to witness the endless variety within the circular rhythm of your breathing. One breath at a time, break your addiction to the straight line by experiencing how every time you return to something old, it is the first time—indeed, the *only* time. When you forget for a day or two or ten, begin again when you remember.

Forgetting and remembering is a circular rhythm, too.

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The following year we took down the Christmas tree. Again. The year before it had been depressing, but this time it was joyful, because at the moment of returning to the familiar, I let go of my straight line just a little bit more. I embraced the rhythm of my life. I paid attention until I became aware of this: like most of life, it is the same thing as always, for the first time ever.

The *only* time ever.

The previous year, my daughter hadn't been old enough to handle the delicate ornaments. The previous year, my boys hadn't been dancing to "Uptown Funk" by Bruno Mars and my daughter hadn't been lip syncing Taylor Swift. The previous year, the sun wasn't sending pale rays onto the living room floor and that vanilla candle wasn't burning and this particular moment wasn't *happening*. The previous year, I hadn't been breathing my way into the rhythm of it. It was the same, yet new. Maybe better, maybe not. But definitely *new*.

Life isn't a line. It's a circle. Resolve to breathe it in and breathe it out. Fall into the rhythm of the way the world spins and the way this life unfolds. It might just change everything, while changing nothing at all. It might just make everything new.

And if you are so inclined, you might just return to the start of this book and begin again. If you do, I think you'll find you are beginning it for the first time as well, because it will be a new *you* beginning it. Much will have changed during your year of intentionality: you will have embraced yourself a little more, deepened your circles of belonging, and risked coming fully alive in the things you do. With the loveable identity you've embraced, you will return once again to the beginning, and you will discover there that the voice of grace is still whispering.

Still delighting in you.

Still waiting to show you new depths to your worthiness.

Still inviting you to write the next chapter in a story only you can tell.