

Begin Again by Erin Dunigan March 5th, 2020



I love the idea of ‘beginner’s mind’ – this idea that we should be open to the new, willing to be a learner, accepting of not knowing. The idea of Beginners mind, to me, is one of possibility – who knows where the path may lead? Who knows what new journey might be just around the corner?

I love the idea of beginners mind...in theory. In theory not knowing and being open and being willing to be a learner all sound like great ideas.

Until that is, you wind up in a leotard and tights as a grown adult in a children’s production of the Nutcracker.

Not long ago I decided that I wanted to take up a new hobby, a new practice in order to learn something new, get out of the comfort zone of my normal routine. They say the brain actually rewires itself when you learn something new. Rewiring my brain? Why not?

So, I decided to take up tap dancing when I found out a neighbor was teaching a class at the church in Santa Anita. In the beginning it seemed a bit less like brain rewiring and more like blowing a fuse, but I kept at it. I like the combination of hearing the sound that the tap shoes make as they contact the floor, as well as the movement that goes along with the sound. Slowly, week after week, my body and my brain began to get the hang of the steps, the movements, and remembering how they all go together. In fact, one day I found that instead of remembering the dance we were learning with my brain, it was actually my body that remembered. Success!! Beginners mind, conquered. I was ecstatic. I had learned something new!

And then came the real test – this new dance that had moved from my head to my body was to be performed. In public. As part of a children’s program of the Nutcracker in which ours was the only dance being performed entirely by adults. Immediately, the brain kicked back in. “It is one thing for children to look cute in a production of the Nutcracker and who cares if they forget the steps or aren’t in rhythm? And it is one thing for professionals to perform the production for a paying audience. But me, in a leotard and tights (a leotard with tassels and sequins no less!), hoping that both my brain and my body would remember the steps and not wind up falling on my face in front of the crowd...? Well, that’s an entirely different level of ‘being willing to be a learner.’

As the recital day neared, I began to think of any possible excuses I could use to get out of showing up. But, the thing is, there was also part of me that wanted to embrace the challenge of stepping so far out of my comfort zone, being willing to risk looking like I didn’t know what I was doing, and to lean into the ‘new thing.’ So, on performance day, decked out in leotard, tights, and a skirt that wasn’t quite a tutu but close enough, stage makeup resembling a clown up close, I stood up on stage with my tap dance classmates as we performed a tap dance rendition of the Spanish Dance. It lasted all of about two minutes. For all my angst, it was over quickly. And you know what? It wasn’t necessarily perfect. Or the best Spanish Dance anyone had ever seen. But it was fun in spite of it all.

As the new year enters, and a new decade, I wonder, what is the ‘new thing’ that might be calling?