

CENTER OF GRAVITY

A sermon by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
January 6, 2019

Reading:

Kindness

Naomi Shihab Nye, b. 1952

Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.
What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.
How you ride and ride
thinking the bus will never stop,
the passengers eating maize and chicken
will stare out the window forever.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho
lies dead by the side of the road.
You must see how this could be you,
how he too was someone
who journeyed through the night with plans
and the simple breath that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.
Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day to gaze at bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
It is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you everywhere
like a shadow or a friend.

Sermon:

The journalist Rosie Spinks is a London-based lifestyle reporter for *Quartz*. She has also written for *The Guardian*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and *NPR*, among others. I find that her articles often have a “spiritual but not religious” perspective, which invariably piques my interest. Sometimes, as with her recent article about goals and New Year’s resolutions, I find her writing deeply insightful.

Spinks observes that Americans tend to be ambitious, which is why New Year’s resolutions abound on these shores. We have weight to lose, marathons to run, gardens to grow, closets to clean, retirement accounts to fund, and so on. We brag about how many hours we work and admire Tesla founder Elon Musk’s 120-hour work week as a paragon of virtue.

“While ambition is a perfectly reasonable quality,” she goes on to say, “all these outcome-oriented tendencies translate to one simple thing: More things to do. And each day you don’t do them is a day that you’re failing. This, in my experience, feels bad. That’s why, a few years ago, I gave up on New Year’s resolutions. And in 2018, I went even further and tried to give up on goals altogether.”

Spinks describes herself as a maniacal overachiever who burned out in her mid-twenties and needed to reboot her life. She eventually realized that she needed a better way to make decisions. She needed to give up the outward appearance of perfection and instead adopt a guiding philosophy to govern her decisions and choices. She calls her guiding philosophy a life thesis.

When choosing a life thesis, she says, “Try to banish thoughts of goals and outcomes, and focus instead on process and feeling. Forget for a moment where you want to be. Instead ask yourself, how do you want to feel getting there?”

She says, “Chances are, if you craft a thesis that truly honors what you want your life to look like, your daily habits and actions will align to create that life, too. It’ll feel less like a moving target, and more like finding your center of gravity.”

Spinks’ comment about center of gravity reminded me of a poem titled, “The Center of Gravity” by the contemporary American poet Ron Padgett. He writes, in part:

The military Jeep was said
to have had a high center
of gravity, therefore
subject to tipping:
if you took a curve too fast
you might turn over.
A person with very short legs
has a low center of gravity
and will not tip over easily.
The ottoman likewise...

People too have gravity —
of manner, of morals, and of body.
It is good to have gravity
but not too much of it:
like a bag of cement,
you might not be able to move
around or make ethical distinctions.
But with too little of it
you are flighty, your feet
hardly touch the ground.
Though cement and flightiness
have their charms,
it's better to find
your center of gravity
and have it be the place
you radiate out from.

In physical terms, an object's center of gravity is the point where all the weight of the object can be considered to be concentrated — the point of perfect equilibrium. If the object encounters an external force, the center of gravity is the point from which its response can be calculated to occur.

Carl Von Clausewitz, the legendary 19th-century Prussian military theorist, used this concept in his book titled *On War*. He described the center of gravity as “the source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act.” When soldiers face internal challenges or external threats, he said, their center of gravity is whatever provides their “source of strength.”

For my part, while I think a life thesis is a fine thing to have, I prefer where Spinks ends up — with the idea of the center of gravity. It doesn't sound like something you need to go on retreat for a month to figure out. It seems more immediately relevant to the push and pull of daily life. It sounds like something that will help you avoid getting tipped over by tribulations or temptations.

Here at the outset of the new year, my question to you is this: what is your center of gravity? What is your source of strength that enables you to respond to the challenges and changes you face each day?

In spiritual terms, your center of gravity is the place where you most fully embody your deepest values, your highest ideals, and your most fundamental commitments. In whatever situation you find yourself, your goal should be to respond in a way that will move you toward your center of gravity. Do whatever will help you most fully embody your values, ideals, and commitments.

For her part, Spinks decided she wanted to end up feeling good about her decisions and her accomplishments. So, she decided that would be her life thesis: do what feels good.

At first glance, this appears to be a risky choice. After all, she could be talking about feeling good in the James Brown sense. There's nothing wrong with feeling good in this sense, of course, as long as feeling good in the moment doesn't leave you feeling terrible later on — after dinner, say, or in the morning. But Spinks is thinking more along the lines of the Book of James than James Brown.

In the Christian New Testament, the Book of James speaks of a good life as being characterized by wisdom, humility, kindness, and compassion. The Book of Philippians echoes this view of a good life, saying, “Whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy — think on these things.”

For Spinks, her center of gravity is a commitment to do what will leave her feeling deeply good — good about herself, good about her decisions, and good about her life.

Her colleague Cassie, she says, chose a different center of gravity: “Be confident.” When work opportunities or personal conflicts arise in her life, Cassie uses this center of gravity to remind herself that she always wants to respond with confidence. The origin of the word confidence is the Latin word for trust, which gets to the heart of Cassie's goal. She wants to trust herself to address conflicts and other difficult circumstances openly and honestly. She wants to trust herself to say the right thing and do the right thing. My guess is that if Cassie goes into situations of conflict with this intention, she will end up feeling that her confidence was well-placed.

The Palestinian-American poet Naomi Shihab Nye presents yet another center of gravity in her poem “Kindness,” which served as our reading this morning. “Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness,” Nye says, you must learn to know loss, and desolation, and most of all sorrow. Then, she continues:

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day to gaze at bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
It is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you everywhere
like a shadow or a friend.

Like other centers of gravity, kindness can go with us everywhere, like a shadow or a friend. The point of the center of gravity, after all, is to keep us balanced and strong, able to endure the trials and temptations of life. We want to end up feeling, well, good!

But let's return to the Spinks charge that our ambitions as Americans are often wrongly directed. Lynne Twist, a global activist and well-known speaker and author, agrees. In her book titled, *The Soul of Money*, Twist writes about the ceaseless tug-of-war between the American culture of acquisition and consumption on the one hand, and the calling of our souls on the other. Though Twist puts it in somewhat different terms, she insists that our center of gravity should be our souls and not our pocketbooks. She writes:

When we're in the domain of soul, we act with integrity... We recognize the value of love and friendship. We admire a small thing well done. We experience moments of awe in the presence of nature and its unrefined beauty. We are open, vulnerable, and heartfelt. We have the capacity to be moved, and generosity is natural. We are trustworthy and trusting of others, and our self-expression flourishes. We feel at peace with ourselves and confident that we are an integral part of a larger, more universal experience, something greater than ourselves.

It's the beginning of January — a brand-new year. It may be true that you have weight to lose, marathons to run, gardens to grow, closets to clean, and retirement accounts to fund. But you also need to decide how you want to feel about your life as you go about doing those things.

With the wrong center of gravity, you could end up feeling terrible about your life even if you accomplish all of the tasks on your to-do list. With the right center of gravity, you can end up feeling good about your life even if you accomplish none of them.

Your goal, this year and every year, should be to find your point of equilibrium, your source of greatest strength, your center of gravity. If you take it with you everywhere, this will be a good year indeed.