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I was followed only by the clouds, drifting across glass windowpanes, as I passed my regular landmarks—the coffee shop with live music, the endless roadblocks of construction, the redbrick campus then pink with cherry blossoms. While life is now beginning anew, there were many months in the dark slumber of the pandemic when my walk to the hospital was quieter; no current of musical notes amidst the scent of coffee beans, vivacious chatter amongst orange hard-hatted workers, or clamoring bicycle bells of students racing by. The clouds often my sole companions, I would look up to greet them, met with the reminder of an old Tibetan saying, “The only things familiar to us were the sky and the earth.”

Sometimes I wonder when we learned to assume the world is ours. A physician-in-training, I have become increasingly aware of life’s fickleness, patients and providers alike grappling with the feelings of uncertainty, unpredictability, and impotence often inherent to illness—sentiments that have become more public and universal in the shadow of the pandemic and heightened in the deep trenches of discrimination. A once foreign feeling now frequently waxes within, that our

world is transformed, a tinge apocalyptic. Or perhaps, it is the discomfort of decaying roots exposed, a painful awareness that we have been dying all along.

A physician-trainee, I have been reminded the world can end in many ways—in the loss of a child, an incurable diagnosis, or memories robbed by degenerative disease. None of us are immune from this suffering or its uncertainty, yet it can take tremendous upheaval to learn this. That our existence is fragile. That we are mere children of nature—the only things familiar to us, the sky and the earth.

In times like now, questions of loss, uncertainty, and suffering are at the forefront; but so is the opportunity to reflect on courage, hope, and faith. Ill-equipped in silo, I frequently take comfort in literature. It is there I am reminded that like suffering, reconstitution is also a given—people finding new ways to imbue their lives with meaning even after the most titan of blows. It is there I remember that in uncertainty can lie the provenance of optimism.

In his essay “The Optimism of Uncertainty,” historian Howard Zinn writes, “I am totally confident not that the world will get better, but that we should not give up the game before all the cards have been played...if we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something... And if we do act... we don’t have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.”<sup>1</sup>

In dire times, we may not feel we have much physical agency, which is why we must embrace the power *and* privilege of choice: in our thoughts, dreams, actions, and hopes. In this present moment, we can choose to believe life can be beautiful, and moreover, that beauty can be created in our minds. There is a quote from Hermann Hesse’s *Siddhartha* I return to often: “Within you, there is a stillness and a sanctuary to which you can retreat at any time and be yourself...how beautiful the world was when one looked at it without searching, just looked, simply and innocently.”<sup>2</sup> When peace feels elusive, why not embrace the security of our own minds, and have the courage to dream of a better future? Why not breed perspective, recognizing the small but bountiful privileges of living?

We are often quick to judge, labeling situations or people as good or bad when in reality, nothing ever has to be entirely either. In “A Great Wagon,” Rumi gracefully touches upon this:

*Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,  
there is a field. I'll meet you there.*

*When the soul lies down in that grass,  
the world is too full to talk about.  
Ideas, language, even the phrase each other  
doesn't make any sense.*

*The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you.  
Don't go back to sleep.  
You must ask for what you really want.  
Don't go back to sleep.  
People are going back and forth across the doorsill  
where the two worlds touch.  
The door is round and open.  
Don't go back to sleep.<sup>3</sup>*

In Rumi's field, duality ceases to exist, suffering can be impermanent, and "good and bad" is inadequate. Like Siddhartha, he reminds us beauty can always be found—one beyond divisions and "the other." Like Zinn, he embraces the power of optimism and effort to transform even the greatest adversities into growth and strength. In the mirror he raises, we can see that ultimately we are the same, connected by the shared coexistence of pain, joy, fear, courage, despair, and hope within us all. Perhaps, this is where faith arises—the choice to cross the doorsill, aware and wide awake.

So while I do not know what will come, I choose to believe reconstitution is possible, because uncertainty is when optimism is required most. From Rumi to Hesse to Zinn, many great thinkers have illuminated the importance of dreaming of the world as it should be, whether that be in our minds, like Siddhartha; in the recognition that life can renew itself; or in the effort put forth to witness a more vibrant dawn. While my walk to work is no longer quiet, the world stirring, I hope it is awakening on the side of promise. For across the doorsill, *I can no longer go back to sleep.*

**Cover Image:** Rumi by Hossein Behzad, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

## References

1. Zinn, Howard. "The Optimism of Uncertainty." *The Impossible Will Take a Little While: A Citizen's Guide to Hope in a Time of Fear*, edited by Paul Rogat Loeb, Basic Books, 2004, p. 63-72.
2. Hesse, Herman. *Siddhartha*. Dover Publications, 1999.
3. Rumi, Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad. "A Great Wagon." *The Essential Rumi*, translated by Coleman Barks, Castle Books, 1997, p. 35-37.