

On Starting Over

By William Eaton

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1 Driving a friend’s car, turn on the radio, NPR, I think. An actress is talking up a play she is in. Once a big name in Hollywood, now she is doing Brecht at a regional theater. She’s knows the talk, though, the promotional talk. She says that now, having gotten older and wiser, she is only interested in roles she could fail in. If success is guaranteed, she says, there’s no learning. (I remember once talking with someone who studied child development in Africa. One of his principal messages was that stress was crucial to learning. In the absence of stress you don’t learn.)

I think of “my” journal, *Zeteo*; this seems often a project that might fail, at which I might fail, and I can imagine that this is indeed part of what makes it a good project. Perhaps not so much for the challenge of beating back failure as because life, too, is tenuous, and thus tenuousness can make one feel alive.

2 In Paris for several weeks, I have my annual dinner with a childhood friend, an American who came to Paris to live with her boyfriend. In fits and starts, over the course of half a dozen years , my friend has come to feel more and more at home in Paris, though she still has a ways to go and indeed spends several months each year back in the United States. I ask her what steps one would take, as an American, to make a life for oneself in Paris.

Before she has a chance to answer, I note my family’s standard approach: do research, make a list, every week try to do a few things in order to meet people, find one’s society. That’s what I should have done, my friend said, but I didn’t. She likes to go hiking,

but it took her three years to look up the French word for hiking in a dictionary, with an idea of finding people to go hiking with. For much of the first years she was simply lonely and uncomfortable, planning her trips back to the United States.

3 I recall a story told to me a year or so ago. It concerned a woman in her sixties whose husband had died somewhat recently. After some stretch of grieving, she was cleaning out the suburban house in which she and her husband had lived and raised a family. She was going to move to the big city. Although this city was not far from her suburban home, in my mind the widow knew no one in this city. She was starting again. The person who told me the story connected the move with a decision to live. If, nearing old age, her husband and children gone, this woman was not simply going to fade away, she had to start again.

4 In two years I will be retired from my paying job, no longer have an office I have to go to, hours I have to work. Two years after that my son will start college. I have thought of moving to Paris, or to Lisbon, or to any number of cities in southern Europe or in Central or South America. Writing in a half-empty café in a not charming part of Paris, a large, nondescript building across the street covered in scaffolding and plastic, being renovated, I am thinking of how hard (like rock, breaking rock) such a move would be. Not so much the work of trying to find a place for myself in some corner of Parisian society, nor the challenge of the dark, wet-cold winters, nor the challenge of packing up, dispensing with almost forty years of New York life. I am thinking of years of loneliness and of feeling that I did not quite belong. And it seems as if this struggle would be the principal reason to make the move.



5 I have heard that the pianist Vladimir Horowitz used to take his grand piano with him from international concert hall to international concert hall. Of course we can see advantages—the familiarity, the likelihood that this was a wonderful piano. And Horowitz has been considered a great pianist. Another person, however, would have appreciated the challenges, the fun even, of confronting different instruments, producing different sounds from night to night. I can even imagine finding something in wrestling with a broken down piano, seeing what kinds of music you might together make.

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