

Make a Resolution . . . Go Ahead . . . It's Okay

By
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I have always been ambivalent about making resolutions for New Year's Day. I have rarely kept any of the number of resolutions I have made over the years beyond March. Apparently, that is also the case for millions of others who make resolutions. This time of year, magazines and newspapers feature articles listing the most popular New Year's resolutions gleaned from person-on-the-street interviews and mockingly reporting how quickly and how often the respondents abandon their resolutions. The failure to keep the resolutions I have made has often left me feeling guilty and undisciplined so I decided to stop making them a few years ago to avoid that feeling of failure. But recently, I have been rethinking the practice of making the New Year's resolution. I have concluded that making resolutions isn't necessarily a bad or ill-advised act. On the contrary, this popular, conventional practice in today's culture is actually a positive indication that there remains a profound human desire for personal growth and improvement. In effect, the New Year's resolution serves as an intentional gut-check about how we are actually living our lives and what we need to do to make them better.

Behind every resolution is an honest, critical look at one's life, a means of ascertaining the habits, failures, and shortcomings that if changed will make a big difference in one's life. It is recognition of the need to address some issues in our social, personal, or spiritual lives that we've ignored, denied, or forgotten. The beginning of the New Year is one of those rare times in which the mass of us overcome for a brief moment our self-deception and frankly admit that we have fallen short of being our best selves. It seems to be the only time where we feel free to admit without shame or fear of judgment that we drink, eat, or smoke too much or that we need to make some positive changes in our attitudes, relationships, and activities. Through resolutions, we find the courage to name those areas of our lives that we know can stand to change.

I began to reconsider the practice of making resolutions when a pastor friend of mine suggested some possible resolutions that the members of his congregation should consider making. He encouraged his congregants to resolve to be more positive, to complain less, and be more generous. Another pastor suggested that his congregants resolve to take more opportunities to pay homage to God rather than to their own wisdom or their material abundance. These particular suggestions for resolutions invite a more spiritual focus than the typical, more popular resolutions to eat better or work out more or lose weight. As I thought about them more deeply, it occurred to me that if we take these resolutions seriously, they also invite us to hone the disciplines of prayer, contemplation, and confession, spiritual disciplines that have become harder to practice in such a wired and busy world.

For people of faith, resolutions facilitate an opportunity to make new commitments to God, to others, and to ourselves. For instance, in Psalm 119, the longest psalm in the Bible, the psalmist sprinkles throughout this song of praise resolutions that call him or her to deeper service to God, promising to keep and meditate on God's law continually and speak of God before the powers that be. The commitments are real and lofty; the question remains if the psalmist can do it all. And that is the question that we face.

The truth is that resolutions are an essential feature of any walk of faith or journey toward wholeness and liberation. The call of God and the promptings of the Spirit echo in our hearts and mind, and we know that we have to do more, open up to some change, welcome the stranger, or embark on some loftier purpose beyond the material. Yes, in our daily walk we cannot help but resolve to do our best in our attempt to live authentically faithful and prophetic lives. And yet, we are also aware that we fall short.

Maybe the reason so many of us fail is because we often think that *making* the resolution is enough to make things happen. Unfortunately, it isn't. The things we resolve to do, from losing weight or eating better to learning something new or volunteering more, do not come easy. It is hard work. The self-analysis and introspection that occur at the beginning of the year and encourage one to resolve to do better become less influential and inspiring over time. While it is honesty and self-awareness that leads us to resolve to make some kind of change, many of us do not contemplate that actual steps and sacrifice involved in making real change. There is nothing romantic about setting goals, evaluating our progress, possibly relapsing, and starting over again.

However, I have come to believe that resolutions are worth making even if we find it difficult to maintain a commitment to keep them. Perhaps we should take them even more seriously, writing them down, setting goals to achieve them, and planning set times to review the progress we've made. Perhaps we should make explicit plans to make resolutions throughout the year rather than just at the beginning, giving ourselves an opportunity to think periodically about other issues in our personal and spiritual lives that need addressing. Further, we should let the grace of God cover this journey for us—we need it to know that relapse is likely, that it is okay to fail, that healing takes time and effort.

Go ahead and make the commitments that you are prompted to make, remember them, and set out to achieve them as best you can. Don't be weary in your efforts to do better or to make change; just remember that the commitments you made arose from a place of truth and honesty about your life and journey and may be worth the effort to achieve.