

January 1, 2017

“Resolutions and the Good Life”

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Today is the first Sunday of the year and it followed our first night that is the holiday that the Scots call Hogmanay. In Scotland, the children would process the streets and ask for Bread and cheese and would recite:

**Get up, good wife and shake your feathers,
And dinna think that we are beggars;
Fir we are bairns come out to play'
Get up and gie's our hogmanay.**

The adults celebrated it with a Scot enthusiasm that went on for many days. Unmarried servants would hurry to finish all their work before the ringing of the midnight church bells of the New Year lest they lower their chances of marriage in the New Year. Another Scottish custom was to return anything borrowed because on the New Year Day one wished not be dependent on anyone else. A further Scottish rite was not to take anything from the household even the sweeping of dust before the New Year or you risk losing one of the family or some possessions.

The day after, New Year's Day has become a legal holiday largely due to the efforts of our Scottish friends never showing up for work on the 1st so our English ancestors were forced to make the Day a legal day off. We celebrate New Year's Day for the same sort of non-reasons. The day is quite arbitrary, except for its numerology, and doesn't seem to correspond to anything religious or non-religious.

As a youth living near Frenchtown, New Jersey I celebrated with a few of my friends the holiday in Times Square watching the Ball descend. Now this was when I was much younger and much more foolish. I was actually celebrating the fact that the legal drinking age in New Jersey where I lived was 21 and it was 18 in New York. At the time, it seemed as good a reason as any.

Last night I married Joe Everett and Kara Dokas, a young couple in the congregation, now that was a good reason for celebrating. I once did a wedding as a surprise for the guests on New Year's Eve.

Now for resolutions, it always seemed that the idea of making resolutions on New Year's Day came from waking up with some vague memory and feeling very bad and saying that "I'll never do that again."

**The poet Tennyson wrote;
"Ring out the old, ring in the new,
Ring happy bells, across the snow,
The year is going, let him go;
Ring out the false, ring in the true.**

This experience is true in the general celebration of the New Year in the Northern Hemisphere with January marking the start of our calendar. January is named for the Roman god Janus who was pictured as having a head with two faces, one facing back and one facing forward. Our own image is as the New Year being as a baby and the old year as an old man. All these views of the New Year emphasize the idea of change that resolutions bring.

Throughout Europe a similar thread runs. In the Mediterranean countries of Italy, Spain and Portugal, families go to church and make their New Year's vows there. In Greece, you might take a heavy stone to the neighbor's house to wish the next season's crops success. Any sand or moss attached to the stone would increase its weight and the bearer would say, "may the purse of the master grow heavy as this stone." In some European countries, there is the custom of the first footing. This means that the first person to enter a house in the New Year will influence the household for the coming year. In early England one could hire a dark-haired man to enter the house rather than risk a light-haired man entering and bringing bad luck.

In Germany, the house is thoroughly cleaned and in some towns the night watchman will recite:

**In the name of the Lord
The old year goes out the door.
This is our wish for each of you:
Praise to God, our Lord.**

The Town of Oberammergau has a procession led by a lighted star on a long pole. The person carrying the star is the star-singer who sings about the events of the old year.

It was also customary to give gifts that would bring luck. In Sweden, the rice pudding would contain one almond as good luck for the finder. In England during the era of Henry the Eighth metal pins were considered good luck and our phrase “pin money” came from this customary gift.

In Ecuador, children will dance around a man made of straw in front of the family house. The family adults write his will and give away the family faults. At midnight, the will is read and the straw man is lit and burnt and the faults of the family are sent away, like my burning bowl, and sort of like the scapegoat concept of atonement practiced in Yom Kipper.

The idea of changing ourselves or rebirth has been part of all cultures. Our making of resolutions is but one example. I believe that the desire to make a change in ourselves is basic to who we are as humans. It recognizes that if we are truly in charge of anything, it is ourselves that we can control.

This idea is best summed up in what has been called the serenity prayer that is a mantra for the 12 step programs; *Grant us the power to change what can be changed, and accept what cannot and the ability to do see the difference.*

This is the basis of our practice of resolutions. This annual ritual is one of the basic tenets of our humanity. As humans, we recognize that we don't have to perfect, in fact our system of life is basically self-correcting. We learn from our mistakes. I've often thought that there is nothing wrong with making many mistakes, what I feel is not as excusable is making the same mistake many times. Many of the resolutions we make associated with New Year is of these kinds, like losing weight or curbing one of our addictions. Meaningful resolutions are an attempt to change some of the more troublesome aspects of ourselves. To help us live a better life, the good life if you will.

One of those more meaningful exercises concerning resolutions which I asked you to join me in is trying to think of some resolution that will actually contribute to a better life for you and your family. These would be some event or happening that would allow you to be more relational with people. The first night was one such event. This is celebrated in many large towns like Boston, but in small towns it is often organized by the churches to make New Year's Eve a more family event. The churches would sponsor different music venues and sell passes for the event and people would travel between churches seeing the different venues. Churches would sell different foods and it was alcohol free. I saw families of three generations together enjoying each other's company.

At the beginning of the service I asked you to write that down on the flash Paper some way to change that would make you or your family life better and you contributed it to our common cauldron like our children did.

If you remember the story of Morrie Schwartz from the book "Tuesday's with Morrie" and his lessons on living the good life, Morrie's story can lead to good resolutions which in turn can lead to a simpler life and maybe a more meaningful life. Resolutions aren't just about tasks to do but about paying attention to what is important. In a year where we have all been filled with the media images of terrorist attacks, and the race issues surrounding deaths of black men by police and deaths of police that fills us with horrific images that have been on our minds for the whole of 2016, we have images of the good life gone askew. Against this backdrop, simplicity is good.

Morrie said "people haven't found meaning in their lives, so they're running all the time looking for it. They think the next car, the next home, the next job. Then they find those things are empty, too, and they keep running." To keep our boredom down to minimum we fill our lives with many and varied activities, so many so we begin to think of the activities as our lives. What is wrong with just being, rather than doing? What is so scary about just being? What is wrong with life being a little simpler? Everything we own really owns you—how many of you own a boat? Isn't that true?

Our children I feel have it even worst. In how many extracurricular activities do they engage? I get the college thing, but isn't it better if our children do just a few things well and enjoy them? This would also simplify life for you parents.

Part of finding the good life is finding a way to see the world through a media lens that doesn't emphasize the worst of human life.

Fact-2016 had less child hunger than any previous year. The same can be said for many of the horrific images we see on the media. The plague of Ebola in 2014 produced some of these images, but it also produced images of the world especially the medical world reaching out to help and so as not to produce the death toll attributed to 1918 flu epidemic that killed 50 to 100 million or the AIDS tragedy which contributed to 30 million deaths. While Syrian crisis especially in Aleppo were examples of an aggression, it is nothing compared to what happened in Kuwait in the 1990. Our images of the good life can be shattered quickly and completely by the horrific images.

The twin towers or Oklahoma City symbolized many of the ways that our culture defines the good life...Successful jobs leading to beautiful homes, beautiful schools, beautiful futures. Then we see that this is just the shadow of the good life. Now we've heard this year in the media and from some of our politicians obsessing on the threat of terrorism in this country, but it's reality is that we are really very safe from terrorism here. Orlando was significant with 49 deaths, but we have not obsessed about our real threats, like Opioid overdoses which accounted for about 100,000 deaths in this country this year or gun violence which accounted for about 35,000 fatalities. One resolution I would like to make is to put my fear for the future in perspective rather than allowing the media to set my priority.

Let us resolve to change that which can be changed so that we can find the good life in the present.

In an ever-evolving and never-ending world. Amen