Aging Lifestyles: New Year's resolutions still hold promise

by Joe_Volz

There seems to be a backlash this year against making those traditional New Year's resolutions that newspaper reporters like to write about every year. Our daily, the Frederick (Md.) News-Post, polled its readers and discovered that 30 percent were opposed to making resolutions. And a local radio gabber, Frank Miller, announced that he has given up on resolutions, too.

Other writers around the nation are also disenchanted.

"Annual vows don't really make sense," Sasha Cagen writes in the San Francisco Chronicle. "Who can keep a promise to do yoga or read more books for a whole year? Who hasn't known the despair of promising the same thing, year after year? Such a feeling of fatalism surrounds resolutions. If something is a resolution, I, a priori, will be doomed."

Jeff Young, a Texas quality assurance manager at a drug company, has a slightly different take. Writing in the Dallas Morning News, he says he made resolutions for "other people" last year, not for himself.

"To my surprise, it was a hit," he says. His next-door neighbor read his column "about his lunatic habit of leaving his trash bags in my yard, and, sure enough, I didn't have to throw all those bags on his roof like I promised. It was a success."

Well, we seniors are supposed to have a bit more judgment and wisdom than some of those impatient juniors out there.

At the risk of sounding like an old fogy, I am all for New Year's resolutions, but like every other tradition in life, practice them in moderation. I don't make a million. I succeed at some and don't at others. But nobody's perfect. Why not make an annual assessment of our goals in life?

My friend, Ben O'Shea, of Kingston, N.Y., a semanticist, has another name for New Year's resolutions. He calls them "themes." He likes to develop themes for living a sweeter, more rewarding life. That doesn't just mean basic changes in lifestyle, like eating less and exercising more, but looking at how to practice some of the basic tenets of kindness and compassion, of treating friends and strangers with decency.

And what is wrong with that?

The New Year is as good a time as any to reappraise our lives. Some do it at Christmas, others at Easter.

I started my self-examinations on a New Year's Eve 50 years ago when I was home from college for the holidays and everyone was occupied with other activities that evening. So I went to a coffee shop in downtown Newark, N.J., then a thriving city, by myself, and as I watched the passing crowd at Broad and Market, I tried to figure out what I wanted to do differently in my life.

It was the night I decided to head off to the South Pacific, rather than corporate America, when I graduated. I ushered in the following New Year's at a warm outdoor party in Auckland, New Zealand. And the resolutions over the intervening years helped me to decide what I wanted to do with my life. And how I wanted to live my life.

So, I am all for resolutions.

Have I kept all of the handful of resolutions I make each year - even half of them?

Certainly not. But a poet once said that it is better to try and fail, rather than not try at all.

I have succeeded in some fundamental lifestyle resolutions. I gave up smoking for good 30 years ago after relapsing two years before. I stopped drinking completely 20 years ago after another New Year's.

My resolve to exercise more has been pretty much kept over the last 20 years, with a few relapses, but my annual resolutions to eat less have not lasted more than a month or two each year. So, this year, as I make that resolution again, I am attempting to implement new strategies to be more successful.

I won't give you another diet lecture today. No doubt, by now, you have received plenty. But I will say this: I don't believe in the concept that because I have failed in the past, I shouldn't waste my time trying again.

What I have learned in the last half-century of making resolutions is that they do work, if you work at them.

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