

SERMON “DO WE NEED TO RESOLVE MORE THAN JUST KEEPING ON?” 1/1/23

Bertrand Russell’s “What I Have Lived For”(this is the highest expression I know of what it means to be human. It’s a bit chauvinistic, a British Lord/Earl of the early last century, philosopher, mathematician, pacifist, agnostic, so way pre-woke, and still way, way brilliant)

Let’s just live our lives. ISN’T THAT ENOUGH? I don’t want to hear the big events of 2022. We know we dodged more than one bullet. And I don’t want to hear predictions of 2023. But we know we live in between memory and hope, roots and wings, the past and the future. So we live at least in two directions, looking back and looking ahead. I have an idea of the strength of our pasts and that’s who we are. I enjoyed Hugh Missildine’s YOUR INNER CHILD OF THE PAST, but it wasn’t exactly NEWS. I’ve been told “You’re just like your mother.” **It wasn’t meant as a compliment.**

I also used to hear “You’re the spitting image of your father.” That wasn’t flung with mean intent, it was only an observation of surface similarity. He was gone when I was one but since I knew he was associated, too intimately acquainted with alcohol and jail, I didn’t hear it as an observation of surface similarity. My brain is like a rolodex of quotes for all seasons. I can’t remember the author but I found it in Barnes and Noble’s self-help shelves: “In maturity you’re going to know you’re a lot more like the parent you didn’t want to be like, you swore you’d never be like, but you are and **that’s really a good thing.**”

But when I am offered the ten best stories about 2022, or what not to forget about the passing year, I want to shout, PLEASE DON’T MAKE ME RELIVE IT. I won’t forget it even if I want to forget it. It was painful enough the first time, just living through it. Between the pandemic and politics we did well to escape with our battered wits and our battered country’s battered democratic traditions. So keep the takeaways from 22 and the predictions for 23. LET’S JUST LIVE OUR LIVES. We survived so now let’s just go on living. But is that enough?

January 1 invites NEW YEAR’S RESOLUTIONS. I made no resolutions. Like my trying to play golf, resolutions are one more thing I’m not good at. One of my doctors must have got tired of hearing my resolves about weight control so he told me, just **accept your weight is you.** Note to self, don’t bring that up again. Do resolutions happen by the calendar? Not for me.

So when I read this in the Friday NYTimes electronic edition, I felt it was written just for me, and of course for you:

ONE RESOLUTION YOU MIGHT KEEP

By Garret Keizer

Mr. Keizer is an author and a contributing editor of Harper's Magazine and Virginia Quarterly Review.

If resolution makers wanted a patron saint, they could do worse than Samuel Johnson (1709 to 1784), a lifelong resolver and by his own admission a lifelong failure at keeping his resolutions. Reading his diaries, we may sigh in recognition as time after time — at the New Year, at Easter and on his birthday — Johnson renews his intentions to rise early, to be more studious, to be more moderate in his intake of food and drink, and laments his neglect of those same intentions in the year past.

“I have now spent 55 years in resolving,” he wrote on his birthday in 1764, “having from the earliest time almost that I can remember been forming schemes of a better life. I have done nothing; the need of doing therefore is pressing, since the time of doing is short.”

I have these words in mind as I greet a New Year that will mark my 70th birthday by yet again resolving, as Johnson did, to rise earlier, resist hurtful thoughts and keep a journal. I'll also resolve to check my email less compulsively and my blood pressure more often. To reduce the amount of sodium in my diet. To be a more faithful friend and a more attentive parent and spouse. To listen more than I talk. (BOB HERE, THAT SMARTS!)

Over the years Johnson made readjustments to his program, especially to his rising time, a perennial challenge for someone prone to indolence, chronic depression and late hours. “I have, all my life long, been lying till noon,” he remarked to a dinner host, “yet I tell all young men, and tell them with great sincerity, that nobody who does not rise early will ever do any good.”

Those young men (and women too, several of whom he helped toward publication) must have laughed among themselves at all that their habitually late-sleeping mentor had managed to accomplish in spite of his own advice. They would have cited his elegant Rambler essays, his groundbreaking edition of Shakespeare's plays and his monumental “A Dictionary of the English Language,” remnants of which survive in any dictionary you're likely to pick up today. It's now commonplace in English literature courses to speak of the mid- to late 18th century as the age of Johnson. His contemporaries would not have been surprised.

For Johnson, however, the critical question was not whether he'd accomplished great things but whether he'd accomplished them in proportion to his talents and his limited time. He was hyperconscious of mortality — on his watch was engraved “The night cometh, when no man can work” — and painfully frustrated by his seeming inability to keep the simplest promise to himself. Like almost everyone I know, he felt he should be accomplishing much more than he did.

After so many failed attempts, why even bother? Is there a person who hasn't faced another year, another birthday, by asking the same thing? Johnson put the question to himself in 1775, when he was 65 years old:

(SJ)When I look back upon resolutions of improvement and amendments, which have year after year been made and broken, either by negligence, forgetfulness, vicious idleness, casual interruption, or morbid infirmity, when I find that so much of my life has stolen unprofitably away, and that I can descry by retrospection scarcely a few single days properly and vigorously employed, why do I yet try to resolve again? I try because **Reformation is necessary and despair is criminal**. I try in humble hope of the help of God.

Johnson's personal struggle is worth remembering not only as we form private resolutions to be better people but also as we ponder those collective resolutions repeatedly broken, and in some cases yet to be made, to confront such evils as environmental destruction and systemic racism. Johnson himself called us out on the latter when he notoriously responded to the nascent American Revolution by asking: “How is it that we hear the loudest *yelps* for liberty among the drivers of Negroes?”

SAMUEL JOHNSON AND GARRET KEISER

(So I resolve to read Boswell's LIFE OF JOHNSON as soon as I can get to it). After that treasure I shared, I can't resist this aside. WHY IS IT NEGATIVES WE'VE READ OR HEARD HAVE A LONGER SHELF LIFE IN OUR CEREBRAL STACKS THAN PRAISE AND ENCOURAGEMENT ALONG OUR JOURNEYS? Boswell had the ogre and/or the blessing of the PROTESTANT WORK ETHIC, “Work for the night is coming” etched on his watch, reminding him he hadn't done enough.

A number of you, like me, did time and training in Christian and Jewish scripture. Is there a line you'd like to shake? As a teen I committed a lot of Paul's writings to memory. One that I'd like to uncommit, “By now you should be a teacher.” I guess I am but that's not how I have heard it. It must be human insecurity, certainly not human sinfulness that gives negatives their undeserved lifespan.

Do we need to resolve more than keep going, keep on? Yes and no.

Lives like Russell and Johnson haunt us with keep going, keep doing what you feel called and able to do. Sometimes that's just encourage others to see the good in themselves and not dwell on the lacking. ***We can all name the things we can't do.*** Now I live on a golf fairway to remind me every day. And this house I picked!

One of the blessings of the beloved community we are becoming is the group thinking(NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH GROUPTHINK = ECHO CHAMBER, no not that!) and the group teaching we sign on to here. Of course we have different takes on what is needed and what we can do. One reason we have congregational meetings is so everyone has the opportunity to say what more we can do, and to do something about it.

I suspect the issue is not so much what new thing can we resolve to do or to be. We could start by remembering when we have been most on fire, impassioned by ideals. Of course, we had more energy but as long as we are breathing, we have energy. The fire and the ideals beget conversation and that can still lead to doing.

Where to begin, where to end? WE HAVE THESE PRINCIPLES AND ONE REASON I LIKE BEING HERE, TCUUC, IS THAT IF I GET STUCK ON HOW TO APPLY THEM, I CAN COUNT ON YOU.