

Responsibility, Freedom and a Personal Spiritual Practice

The period between Christmas and New Year provides us with an opportunity to look back over the previous twelve months, or even longer. Between these two celebrations, when our daily routine is somewhat altered, we have the chance to hopefully look at our lives afresh. Over the following days, we have the opportunity to determine those areas of our lives that we wish to single out for attention over the coming year; we usually do this by making New Year resolutions. The resolutions vary but at core, many of them come down to some kind of self-nurturing. For example, nurturing our body by taking up some form of exercise, nurturing the mind by aiming to read more or the nurture of the heart by trying to visit an art gallery more often.

However, how many of us actually keep our New Year resolutions or even bother to make them anymore? I know that I certainly don't keep mine. I suspect that the problem might be the way that we approach our resolutions. The dictionary defines 'resolution' as 'courageous firmness of purpose; determination.' This definition strikes me as over-idealistic and unsustainable as the year rolls on. With that definition, you are almost certainly going to feel you have failed, when in two weeks, you realise many of your resolutions have fallen by the wayside. I have to admit, that I'm a little short of the 'courageous firmness of purpose' that our contemporary use of resolution implies.

I would like to suggest that this conventional meaning of 'resolution' and the annual game we play with ourselves could easily become a form of asceticism. We set our resolutions, knowing fine well that we will deal with the feelings of failure, then beat ourselves up about it, and then fall back into our usual routine and laugh it off. What I would like to do now, is take us through a process that should allow us to make this year's resolutions actually sustainable. I'm going to use three sayings from everyday language to guide us through this.

The first of these being – *'face the truth.'*

I believe that spirituality is about the transformation of the self and the sense of freedom that comes from this. Maybe you are also searching for a sense of freedom about your life? Freedom begins when we confront those past actions that have produced hurt. We have to admit how selfish, cruel, misguided and stupid we have been in the past - I know from experience it's not pleasant to admit this, it's easier to push away or rewrite our past. Nevertheless, no progress along our pilgrimage will be made, until we see the reality of those actions we would rather suppress.

At this point, our second piece of wisdom from everyday language is crucial - the phrase *'just let it go.'*

This is a wonderful phrase compared to the concept that we usually beat ourselves up with, that being the concept of guilt. Guilt about our past actions is unhelpful. It's unhelpful because guilt is a poor way of altering the way we will act in the future. Guilt works alongside fear and shame. These are emotional states that confine us within a spiral of self-loathing; they don't liberate us in any way. To be liberated is not to feel guilt but to actually admit how our actions have lacked compassion.

We know have a chance to 'just let go' of our past actions that have lacked compassion. On the other hand, maybe we have been on the receiving-end and need to let go of the hurt we still carry. I invite you to write on your piece of paper the most significant regret, pain or secret you harbour from this year (maybe longer), the one that you would rather enter the New Year without. Then come forward and mindfully release yourself from that burden by burning your paper in the copper pot.

[Fire ritual: People come forward mindfully to burn the paper; music playing in the background.]

Taking responsibility is the key concept, not guilt. When we have truly taken responsibility for something, we are unlikely to easily repeat the same action. Once we have confronted our past or 'faced the truth' we take responsibility and then 'just let it go.' No guilt is necessary because we have actually taken on board the hurt of our previous actions. We 'just let go' by forgiving ourselves for it, knowing that we couldn't repeat that action without consciously going against our truth nature.

Our final phrase from everyday language is *'deal with it.'*

The way I deal with my life can broadly be split into three areas. I only want to focus upon one of them but I will begin by briefly mentioning the other two.

The first way I deal with life is by trying to be a person who fosters open-minded thinking. That's one reason I'm a Unitarian. We aren't a community for people demanding certainties and revealed truth. Plenty of other places peddle that delusion.

My second way of dealing with life is through a philosophy that deeply values community. Our individual journeys are encouraged and enhanced by rubbing shoulders alongside others. If we isolate ourselves, our ego self easily convinces us that we more or less have it sorted, we don't need anyone.

Now, my third and major way of dealing with life. We somehow need to take ourselves out of ordinary time, claim some space for ourselves away from the pressures of home and work life. We need time to re-focus our attention.

New Year resolutions can act as reminders for the need to do this. The original meaning of 'resolution' is 'breaking into parts.' To me that is a more useful definition than 'courageous firmness of purpose' because the New Year should be about the opportunity to tear apart the many parts of our self and life.

I would like to suggest that the main way we can resolve to deal with life is by taking up some form of self-reflection. We can do this in a number of ways. These are some of my methods; walking and gardening alone, eating a meal in silence, keeping TV to a minimum, regularly meeting up with a very close friend. All of these and many, many more are spiritual practices. A spiritual practice is your individual way of encouraging self-reflection. For this reason, your practice will usually require being alone or within an intimate group but outside of that, we have the freedom to develop methods that work for us.

This is often expressed as, 'I should have some time everyday for meditation'. I make this resolution every year, and every year (so far) I fail at it. Significantly, I don't fail at it because I don't have the time for daily reflection. Of course, I say I can't do it because I'm too busy, but I know that this is actually a load of rubbish, an excuse. The reality is I don't want to make time, because I know that when you commit to any practice of reflection it's going to be hard going. Spending time alone with ourselves, looking at ourselves in the mirror, beginning to see through the illusions we have about ourselves in challenging - no wonder we can think of one hundred and one other things we have to do.

This year I'm going for 25 minutes every other day as soon as I get up, I'm just going to sit in a chair, no fancy meditation techniques, apart from following my breathing if my mind really races away. I know that my ego self will try all it can to deter me from sitting like this but by facing that truth, I can just let it go and deal with it by putting my bum on the chair. That's my resolution.

So far, this has all sounded like hard work. Why bother adopting a spiritual practice that encourages self-reflection, if all this junk from our mind is going to hit us straight between the eyes? That's a good question. If you don't feel able to deal with all that now then I wouldn't suggest you take up meditation as a spiritual practice - do something more structured within a group. No matter what you feel able to adopt this year, our spiritual tradition tells us that it's only by self-reflection we can have a life that is authentically lived. Fulfilment will not come from another realm but by being actually embedded in this life, self-aware, embedded in this very moment. This is real freedom. I hope that whatever resolutions you make this year they will encourage you to that greater freedom. Amen.