



Apple Eyes

BY SCOTT TAYLER, CO-SENIOR MINISTER,
FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF ROCHESTER, NEW YORK

I suppose, given the state of the economy and the global mood of anxiety, that it isn't too surprising that recent essays about the New Year lack the themes of big possibilities and hope that used to be standard fare for the season.

For instance, Mark Shields—one of my favorite, and usually upbeat, news commentators—recently built his New Year's reflection around the fact that in order for the economy to get back to what it was before our recent recession, we will

need to create 200,000 jobs every month for the next seven years. He went on to stress that this is far more than anything we were able to do during the so-called boom years of the Clinton administration. Needless to say, the interview didn't leave one ringing with hope.

Another social commentator framed things this way: "The last decade was tough," she said, "but it's hard to truthfully talk about the next decade getting any better. Forget climbing up the management ladder in our later years, we're into a time when success will be about just staying on the ladder." The other New Year's predictions—as I'm sure you've seen, too—were just as rosy. War is sucking up our national treasury, leaving little room for social improvements or safety nets. Global competition from rising economic powers like China and India is putting downward pressure on not only blue collar, but also white collar American salaries as well. Climate change is bringing natural disaster, mass migration and thus possible international conflict. Use of food stamps is now at a record high. It all adds up, as one essayist in the New Yorker put it, to "a new era of limits."

Friends, we may not be political analysts or economic experts, but I think this focus on and worry about limits is dominating our own attention and energy, too. And frankly I don't see us handling it all that well. Or rather, I should say, I don't see anyone helping us understand what we are caught up in.

The big piece I see missing is any discussion of how our cultural heritage has left us completely unprepared for dealing with this new struggle with limits and downsized dreams. Parker Palmer, who was trained as a sociologist, but now is known nationally as a leader on spiritual matters, puts it this way: "All our training is now outdated." He goes on to write:

Our problem as Americans—at least among my race and gender (white, male, middle-class) is that we've been taught by our schools, politicians and even religions to resist the very idea of limits, regarding limits of all sorts as temporary and regrettable impositions on our lives. Our national myth is about the endless defiance of limits: opening the western frontier, breaking the speed of sound, dropping people on the moon, discovering cyber-space.... We are the people who refuse to take no for an answer.

Now, Parker does not say this, but it seems to me that this means in the future we are going to see a whole lot of holding on ever so tight. Because of our "sky's the limit" heritage, I believe there will be a large component of stuck-ness, of stubbornness, of refusal to accept the answer "no" in our reactions to the many limits we'll face in the coming future. When the "no's" come, I don't think we'll easily set our dreams and preferences down and sink straight away into depression. No, I think we are more likely to cling tight to our preferred dreams and demands and keep banging our head into that limiting wall. And as we are doing that, I don't think we will best be described as depressed, so much as blind and closed.



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**Every intersection
in the road of life is the
opportunity to make a
decision.**

— Duke Ellington

A monthly for religious liberals

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Which is why I'm not so much worried about us losing sight of our big social dreams and possibilities as much as I am worried about us losing sight of the many ordinary possibilities sitting right there in front of us. Even with all the coming losses, I believe many treasures and gifts will remain; I'm just not sure we will have eyes to see them!

A great example of what I'm trying to get at comes from a story told by doctor and writer Rachel Naomi Remen. She's talking here about confronting the limit of cancer, rather than the limit of a job loss or a career dream, but the insight still applies. She writes:

Before I got sick I was very certain of everything. I knew what I wanted and when I wanted it. Most of the time, I knew what I had to do to get it, too. I walked around with my hand outstretched saying, "I want an apple." Many times life would give me a pomegranate instead. I was always so disappointed that I never looked at it to see what it was. Actually, I don't think I could have seen what it was. I had the world divided up into just two categories: "apple" and "not apple." If it wasn't an apple, it was only a not-apple. I had let myself become cursed with "apple eyes."

It's such a great way of putting it, don't you think? Great, but also tragic. Indeed, who of us doesn't recognize a bit of this curse of "apple eyes" in ourselves or those around us?

"I want to get back to top-level management"...everything else is just "NOT top-level management." "I want that planned dream home"...everything else is just "NOT our planned dream home." "I want to be able to afford our child's first-choice college"... everything else is just "NOT being able to afford our child's first choice."

More and more, we all have our apple eyes—privileged or not, middle-class or working class, young or old. All of us. Apple eyes that divide the world into exactly what we wanted and

planned for on the one hand, and total failure and depletion on the other.

And yet, here's the thing—ironically, right here in the midst of this messed up thinking is also our hope!

It's an odd place to find it, but it's there. Found right in the fact, as Remen makes clear, that this division is completely of our own making. "Not apple" may exist in our heads, but that's the only place it does exist, right?

"Total failure"? "Total depletion"?

Yes, no doubt, those exist too, but only as feelings we've created for ourselves based on how we are choosing to look at and frame things.

**I believe many treasures
and gifts will remain;
I'm just not sure we will
have eyes to see them!**

And since they are of our own making, since they exist because of our own choosing, then that means we have power—we have options.

I'm not saying it's easy, but if we are able to step back from that apple eyes framework far enough to realize that it is a just a frame, then suddenly it won't feel so real. And once it feels less real, the odds of us being able to step outside that blinding frame increase dramatically. And if we are able to step outside it, well then...BOOM...pomegranates! REAL pomegranates is what you got! Sitting right there in front of you!

In looking for the solution, two phrases ring through my head: *Note it with interest* and *What else is here?*

Both of these phrases are taken directly from the world of cognitive psychology. Both of them are great tools for us to take home with us today.

And here's how they work: the next time you feel yourself hooked by apple eyes, the next time you feel yourself caught in anger, hurt or pain over the fact that life is saying no to what you

wanted and hoped for, work as hard as you can to take a deep breath and instead of reacting, simply note with interest what is happening to you.

It almost sounds silly, but it works. "Oh look at this," you will say to yourself, "I'm standing here without the thing I've longed for and planned on and my head and heart are telling me that life is empty, and it's all ruined...hmmm, isn't that interesting!"

You see, I warned you it will feel a bit silly, but, darn it, that's the secret. It's precisely that playfulness—that holy playfulness—that will enable you to step back.

And once you feel yourself being able to step back, don't stop there. The next step is the important one: challenge it. Once you are looking at the feeling rather than caught up in it, challenge it! Take a deep breath and simply ask yourself, "Is this true? Is it true that it's all empty, that it's all ruined?" And to get at that best, you simply ask yourself over and over again:

WHAT ELSE IS HERE?

WHAT ELSE IS HERE?

WHAT ELSE IS HERE?

Now I know a minute ago I said I took this from the world of cognitive psychology, but I believe with all my heart that this question of what else is here is quintessentially Unitarian Universalist. We are a people who have faith in the fullness of life. From the start, we've declared that the idea of a fallen world is bunk. We've declared that grace and gifts don't come to life by confessing or believing the right things; we believe that grace and gifts and fullness come right along with life.

And so when you ask *What else is here?* you will most assuredly get a positive answer. No, it won't be the apple, but it will be something, something that will save you, something that will pull you back to joy, back to gratitude, back to the possibility that was sitting right in front of you all along!

And to get at the feeling of that, I can't

think of a better story to end on than a story from UU psychologist and writer, Mary Pipher. It's about a patient of hers named Wanda.

Wanda introduced herself to Pipher as shy and plain. But as she got to know Wanda, Pipher found her to be rather remarkable. Wanda's mother died early and her father was largely absent after that. But Wanda found the courage in the midst of it to make her own way through school, joining clubs and making a family out of friends and neighbors. She became close with her boss's family, watching his children and, over time, becoming known to them as Aunt Wanda.

But never during this time had she been in a romantic relationship. No one had ever asked her on a date. Pipher says that this was the first time Wanda broke down in their sessions. She bawled. Wanda went on to share that she worried whether she'd ever be loved. More than that, she worried that she would not ever be loveable.

Like a good therapist, Pipher listened with interest; she helped Wanda look at her sadness and simply hold it up—note it with interest.

And then, when trust was built between them, Pipher challenged Wanda by simply asking her to list all the people she loved. The list was long—so long it surprised Wanda. And then, Pipher asked pointedly, "Do they love you back?" To which Wanda answered with what I can only imagine was joyful and sacred laughter, "I guess I'm already lovable."

Wanda's story may not speak directly to the economic and social struggles that I've been focusing on today. But it can nevertheless be directly applied: No matter what our apple eyes tell us, no matter what limits life asks us to accept, friends, we can always ask *WHAT ELSE IS HERE?*

And the answer will always be...plenty. Yes, plenty.

You can count on it. ■

Born Again... and Again... and Again



BY ROBERT HARDIES,
SENIOR MINISTER,
ALL SOULS CHURCH,
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The Christmas dinner had barely settled in my stomach. The taste of cut-out cookies was still sweet on my lips. The New Year's champagne still bubbled on my tongue when I started to see them—the signs on the windows at the gym around the corner from my house. "Get in shape for the New Year," they read. "Shed those holiday pounds." Even *The Washington Post* ran a front page story on New Year's Day, complete with a picture of two bare feet standing on a bathroom scale.

The fitness and diet industries know—even better than the rest of us—about the small window of good intentions that opens with each new year. When, even as we throw the last piece of fudge into our mouths, we are resolving to do better in the year to come. Not just to get fit, but to cultivate a passion. To change jobs. To find or to leave a relationship.

It is fashionable these days to view New Year's resolutions with cynicism. After all, we know very well that year after year our best intentions go unrealized. Still, I view the whole custom of New Year's resolutions with sympathy and even with delight. They are an opportunity for us to express our often latent but ever-present desire to be changed. To be transformed. The New Year gives us a chance to assess what in our lives is in need of transformation, what needs a fresh start. And though our resolutions can sometimes be trivial, this desire for transformation is not trivial at all. Indeed, it is one of the most profound religious

desires we possess. And so, as we begin the new year, let us focus our hearts on transformation.

You've all heard the expression "born again." "Born again" is one way that religious people describe this experience of transformation. It is usually spoken by evangelical Christians when describing their conversion to Christ. Once rare, it is now quite popular to be born again. Politicians go out of their way to describe themselves as born again. You can even buy a bumper sticker that reads "Born Again" so you can let others know that you are in the club. Religious liberals, fed up with the theological and political baggage that often comes with the phrase came out with a competing bumper sticker. "Born right the first time," it says.

I'm not satisfied with either of these bumper sticker theologies. As the liberals point out, implicit in the phrase *born again* is the old orthodox notion of the depravity of humankind. We are born into sin, goes the story, and our sinful selves must die and be reborn in Christ before we have any worth. You need to know that our religious ancestors long ago parted ways with the orthodox over this doctrine of human depravity. Human beings, they said, are created in the image of God: capable of evil as well as good, yes, but fundamentally worthy creations.

My quarrel with being born again is that it gives the impression that transformation is a one-time affair.

My other quarrel with being born again, though, is that it gives the mistaken impression that transformation is a one-time affair. That once you've come to the faith, your religious journey is over. You're born again. You're saved. End of story. I don't believe this is an accurate representation of the religious life.

On the other hand, although I find it a clever comeback, I'm not fully satisfied either with "Born right the first time." First, it suggests a common failure or naïveté on the part of religious liberals. A failure to see clearly the shadowy side of human nature. Our limitations. Our capacity for evil. And to me it also smacks of a kind of smugness—as if to say, "I'm too good to change. Maybe you need to be born again. But I got it right the first time." The truth is I don't know anyone who—deep down—doesn't want to be transformed: to be changed in a profound way.

So on this issue of being born again, I come down on the side of ee cummings, who once wrote: "We can never be born enough." We can never be born enough. The soul—the curious soul, at least, the alive soul—always longs to be made new. To be evermore whole. To be reborn. Not because we were born wrong the first time, but because we grow and learn and change. And so my wish for us is that we be born again...and again...and again. And indeed, what is our perennial New Year's tradition of resolution making if not a small attempt to be born again...and again...and again.

That's what we who have chosen the liberal religious path have gotten ourselves into. Because it is not a path that offers us a once and for all answer to our questions. The motto of the great 16th century Unitarian reformer, Francis David, was "*semper reformanda*." Always reforming. His motto could be ours today.

Now, people ask me, "Rob, what, exactly, do you mean when you say, 'born again'?" Because we're much more comfortable with the notion of spiritual growth. Isn't that a nicer way of saying 'born again'?" No. It's not. Both are worthy aims, but we're talking about a completely different order of things. When I think about spiritual growth, I think about the 3rd century Desert Father, Abbot Lot. Abbot Lot

was into spiritual growth. He sought God earnestly. He did all the right things. He prayed and meditated and fasted and kept silent. But even with all that he felt he hadn't come to know God. Something was missing for the poor monk. So he went to his elder, Abbot Joseph, for advice. That's when Abbot Joseph stretched out his hands and made his fingers burn like lamps and said, "Why not be totally changed into fire?" Why not be totally changed into fire? It's a worthy question.

Abbot Joseph is putting the young monk on notice: the religious life, he's saying, isn't finally about rituals and prayers and piety, it's about transformation of ourselves and our world. It's about your soul catching on fire and burning bright. It's about giving your life over to the good. Abbot Joseph is trying to say the same thing that C.S. Lewis said about religion. Religion, he said, isn't about making people nice. That's just a byproduct of religion. But religion isn't about making people nice, it's about making people new. Not nice people, but new people. Born again...and again...and again.

The Greeks had a word for this kind of transformation. They called it *metanoia*, which means, "to be given a new heart." To have someone reach in and grab hold of the old one, pull it out and put in a new heart. Not because the old heart was corrupt. Maybe it was just too tired, or had been broken and patched too many times. Maybe we just needed to trade it in for a larger model. To be given a new heart. Imagine if that were our New Year's resolution. Not a new diet, or a new work-out regimen, or a new investment portfolio, but a new heart. This would surely be a worthy wish for the New Year.

But while we can wish, we can't will or force the kind of transformation I speak of. We can only prepare ourselves. We can only remove barriers to its fulfillment. If being born again is indeed akin to a new heart, then what

we can do is try to make sure that our bodies and our souls won't reject the transplant. To make sure that our usual defenses are removed. So that when transformation comes, we will know it for what it is, and welcome it.

ee cummings is right: for those of us who choose, the journey of the free spirit can never be born enough. Life is an endless series of rebirths. *Semper reformanda*. Always forming and reforming. Always opening to greater embodiments of love. Always reaching out in a wider embrace. Always ready to receive a new heart. Always willing to be changed into fire. Born again...and again...and again. ■

Giving



January is when CLF members are asked to contribute or make their pledge of support for the year to come. Please respond to our upcoming letter requesting your 2011 CLF commitment as generously as you can.

The CLF especially appreciates automatic contributions set up with a savings or checking account. These direct bank transfers are secure and easy to set up, and are the most cost-effective type of gifts. All gifts and pledges for 2011 can be made online at www.clfuu.org, by using the enclosed envelope, or by responding to our upcoming letter.

Remember, even if you cannot make a gift now, you can pledge now and make payments at any time during the 2011 calendar year. We embrace all our members, and if financial support to the CLF is a hardship, please request a one year waiver from this obligation.

Thank you in advance for your generous support to the CLF in 2011. The CLF wouldn't be here without you! ■

The Heat Wave

BY "SPENCER," CLF MEMBER LIVING
IN A PRISON ON THE EAST COAST

I'm responding to an invitation by Rev. Riley to describe my corner of CLF (as stated in your lovely article in the July/August issue of *Quest*). Something happened this past week which describes my corner pretty well, and can illustrate for Chaplain Pat why I appreciate her work, so I wanted to tell you about it.

The facility in which I'm incarcerated is a tightly-packed, poorly maintained, old building, with no air-conditioning in the southern housing units where I'm located. A heat wave lasting over a week with high humidity and triple-digit temperatures causes a degree of suffering, especially for older and ill inmates, that I'm sure would cause a public outcry if the public did (could) ever find out about it. Most summers are bad, but *this* heat wave was the worst I've seen in 10 years. What I want to tell you about is what did (and didn't) happen when one of the guards decided to require an inspection in the middle of the heat index reaching as high as 107 degrees last Tuesday. We had to pull everything out of the cells and dorms, scrub, clean, put it all back and then get inspected, which is all well and good, but there's absolutely no reason to do it during a forecasted heat wave. So, here's the situation: several dozen tightly packed men with anger and/or violence issues, sleep-deprived after a week in the heat (sometimes the nights are worse than the days, men get painful prickly-heat, and can't sleep in a puddle of sweat), irritable and breathing each other's inevitable funk, being asked (told) by a guard who just got back from an air-conditioned break room and goes home after 8 hours to an air-conditioned house, to do heavy work that could easily have been done last week or next week. Now normally that could result in a lot of "entertainment" for the guards in terms of fights or

drama. But that's not what happened.

I was amazed that the guys who are seen as the spiritual leaders of the wing for the Muslims, Christians, UU (guess who that one is), etc., without even discussing it worked very closely together to make sure our oldest guys didn't have to do any work, kept everyone hydrated, got the work done, and kept people calm. We got through heavy work in suffocating conditions with some sleep-deprived and grumpy people without one case of heat exhaustion and no fights (not even an argument).



...when a crisis came we
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For all the men, it was a spiritual victory that was tangible, even if they didn't have the words to call it that, and even if the victory was simply not losing his temper for 4 hours, jammed up with a bunch of stinky men in brutal conditions. (Some of these men don't do well controlling their tempers under *good* circumstances.) Part of the spiritual victory was also seeing some of them let in the fact that others were caring about them. By "let in" I mean they actually felt it and they let it in from people they may not normally interact with that much.

I wanted to share this with you because it's my corner of UU—tapping into the similarities between spiritual paths under difficult conditions. Because of dialogue, friendship, and understanding in several areas of diversity, often using UU materials (especially the sexual orientation info), when a crisis came we came together in a human spiritual victory instead of being this week's "entertainment" by coming unglued. We each tapped into something in ourselves, but my belief is that we also tapped into a universal strand

of energy which provides amazing power when mutually accessed. My belief, my dear Chaplain Pat, is that you help us keep closer to that by your thoughts, meditations, and ministry on our behalf. I'm sure that's also true of you, Rev. Riley, although I only know you, so far, through your *Quest* article.

When this was over (the inspections, not the heat wave, unfortunately), I wrote the following poem because this experience reminded me of the psalm about having a feast (at least a spiritual one) in the house of your enemies. I showed it to the man who is the Muslim leader on the wing. He asked me to put it on a 3 x 5 card for him, and we each have it posted in our cells now to remind us of this experience:

The Heat Wave

A fast of thinking
Is a feast of wisdom.
A fast of food
Is awareness of plenty.
A fast of dogma
Is a feast of knowing.
A fast of privacy
Is a feast of humility.
We fasted from our selfishness
In a feast of receiving love.
A fast from denial and ignorance
Is now our feast of truth.

"Thou preparest a table before me
in the presence of mine enemies."
(Psalm 23:5)

My corner of the CLF doesn't smell particularly good, but it's a beautiful place in a sense. Unitarian Universalism has helped me define spirituality as "what actually happens." A lot is happening here before, during, and after a crisis, and also day to day. It actually happens inside people, and it manifests in events where it actually happens externally. My UU work is impacting people on other paths, and they are also spiritually impacting me—which I can tell because stuff is actually happening.

In peace and friendship,

"Spencer" ■



From Your Minister

BY MEG RILEY
SENIOR MINISTER,
CHURCH OF THE
LARGER FELLOWSHIP

Recently I ran into someone who said, “You changed my life! After you told me that you liked pedicures, I had one myself, and I liked it so much I began having them weekly. They’re now my favorite luxurious treat for myself. But if you hadn’t said you liked them, I never would have started.”

I gaped at her in astonishment. I have had one pedicure in my life, because a friend dragged me there twelve or fifteen years ago. I must have run into this woman right afterwards and said it was more fun than I expected. I never even considered having another one.

I think we change each other all the time, in ways just this unpredictable and surprising.

As a minister I have been told that something I said or did changed someone’s life. Of course I live for this! However, what people say in this context is often as mysterious and surprising as the pedicures. People quote lines to me that I don’t remember speaking, and then share what they have gone on to make or do because of my words.

I have certainly made some pretty major decisions of my own inspired by a scrap of poetry or the random words of a hitch-hiker. I am a highly intuitive person and, for better or worse, navigate my life in ways that completely baffle more rational souls. But, as mysterious as the ways our lives touch and affect each other might be, I want to use my precious days consciously creating more life and being in contact with others who are doing the same. I want more love, more vitality, more health for me and for the world—those I affect directly through the ripples I send out, and those inhabiting some

section of the independent web that I’ll never even know about.

Last summer I was in Ely, Minnesota, a small town at the edge of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, millions of acres of wild land. I was in the combination sporting goods/book store. Standing in line, I could see a sign that said something like, “We think this book is so important that we are selling it at our cost. We won’t make a cent on it. But we think you need to read it.” Blocked by the other shoppers, I couldn’t see the book that went with those words. I wondered, would it be a safety book for canoeists? A primer on Scientology? A book of poetry by the shop owner’s spouse? I decided I would buy it and read it no matter what, if someone cared that much about it.

Our only real hope is to create new ways of being wherever we are.

The book is *Eaarth*, by Bill McKibben. At first I felt relieved. I already knew and respected McKibben’s work as an environmentalist and as a writer. But the concepts in *Eaarth* are so big, so revolutionary, that almost anything else would have been less difficult to read. McKibben’s premise, convincingly documented in chapter after chapter, is, that, “global warming is no longer a future threat, no longer a threat at all. It’s our reality.... We need now to understand the world we’ve created and consider—urgently—how we want to live on it.” He says that the planet is so changed it needs a new name: hence the title, *Eaarth*.

Reading the book is terrifying. I have been reading it slowly. Over and over I have longed to put it down, so I don’t have to know what he is telling me. But when I put it down, I see reflected back to me everything he is saying. I see it in the weather I experience locally, and in media about the extreme weather around the globe.

As McKibben puts it, “We’re on an uphill planet. We need to change.”

I am sitting with exactly how much change I want to make now, voluntarily. I spent a great deal of time in the Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina. I know what involuntary change looks like. At the time of Katrina, lots of voices said, “Those people should have known this was coming and have left before it did!” Now, as I sit with McKibben’s information about politics, economics, and global ecology, I think that we’re all “those people.” Where are we supposed to go?

Our only real hope is to create new ways of being wherever we are. Not just to use less and consume less, but to think about food, housing, heat, transportation, and community in new ways as a culture, to shape new ways of being. McKibben’s last chapters, which I’m still exploring, are dedicated to people who are doing exactly that. What they are doing feels small and insignificant next to the magnitude of the problem he has laid out. But there is also hope, and beauty. As McKibben says, “Reality always comes with beauty. But hope has to be real.”

How does this information transform how we are with each other as spiritual people? What does *Eaarth*-centered religion look like? How do we stay centered in love for our planet and each other, rather than running around like Chicken Little spreading terror about death and suffering?

These are the questions I’ll be living into as I continue to explore my identity as an *Eaarthling*. I am glad to be doing this in community with you. I believe that we are the people who can, literally, save the planet. No superheroes, no magic solutions, no miracle chants. Just us, all of us, touching each others’ lives in ways mysterious and organized, particular and seismic. ■

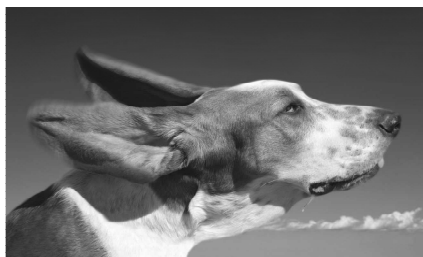


January 2011

REsources for Living

BY LYNN UNGAR, MINISTER FOR LIFESPAN LEARNING, CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP

I think I deserve to be congratulated. For the first time ever, I have actually kept a New Year's resolution. Yep, from the first of January 2010 right through to January 2011 I have consistently and diligently followed through with my resolution. This, in the face of the fact that hardly anybody ever actually *does* what they commit to as the year begins. The key to my success is clear. I don't have extraordinary will power or determination. What I had was the right resolution.



My resolution for the past year has been: "More dancing!" (Always with the exclamation point.) That's it. More dancing! How it has worked, pretty much, is that every time I've had to decide whether to go dancing or not, I've decided to go—even if it was hot or I was tired or I needed to get a pet sitter while I went off for a weekend of dance camp. I just decided to say yes.

Now, it's easier to say yes to something that you want to do anyway than to something noble but uninspiring, like flossing your teeth. But here's what I've learned: I can choose joy. You can too. This seems to me like a pretty important thing in a world where all the problems, from lack of jobs to climate change, seem pretty overwhelming. There's a lot of super-depressing stuff in the world. You don't need a list. But however sad or mad you might be over the state of the world, you can find what gives



you joy, and choose that.

I'm not suggesting that we should ig-

nore all the problems. The world surely needs people who will write their senators and go to marches and call their representatives and make signs and use less energy and recycle and help feed the hungry and all the long list of things we can do to help make the world a better place.

But in the long run, I think the energy to do all those things come from choosing joy. You can inspire people to a certain degree by sheer terror. And there's plenty to be afraid of just on the environmental front alone. Knowing all the terrible things happening to our planet can be a kick in the pants to make some changes.

...You can make your own New Year's resolution to follow your own particular path to joy.

However, if we're going to keep those changes going, if we're going to find new and creative ways to build better lives, then I think we're going to have to draw on some deep wells of joy.

Here's the thing, though. There are a whole lot of people in the world who are interested in selling us entertainment, rather than joy. Joy is that feeling that comes spilling out from inside of you when you are really engaged with something that you love. I feel joy when I'm contra dancing, spinning and twirling down a line of people, catching the eye of each person who approaches, taking a hand and then moving on, being caught and tossed and caught again as the music pulls us forward.

That's me. Maybe you feel joy helping things to grow in your garden, or watching the basketball you've

thrown swish into the net, or speeding down a hill on your bike as the wind makes your eyes water, or paddling a kayak, or building harmonies in a choir or orchestra, or watching people enjoy something that you cooked yourself. Joy bubbles up inside and spills out onto the people around you.

Entertainment, on the other hand, is something that someone else gives to you (or sells to you). You can have fun watching TV or playing a video game, but when the show is over or you stop the game the fun is pretty much gone. You haven't connected to the world or the people around you, and you probably haven't really connected with your own soul, either. Entertainment is OK, but it doesn't pull you wider or deeper. It doesn't remind you that this world and all the people and other beings we share it with are precious. It doesn't bubble up from inside you and overflow as love. It's enjoyable in the moment, but it's like eating junk food—have too much and you don't feel fed, you just feel kind of sick.

Maybe this New Year's you'd like to take a look at how much of your free time goes to entertainment, and how much goes to creating joy. What truly lifts your spirits, and what leaves you feeling flat when you're done? What makes you feel connected or creative or caring? What makes you feel dull or distracted or disinterested?

When you have it figured out, you can make your own New Year's resolution to follow your own particular path to joy. I'm still working on mine for this year. I'm thinking maybe "More singing!" sounds good. ■





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Did You Know

that this month the Rev's
Bill Murry and Kendyl
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more information.

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Burning the Old Year

Letters swallow themselves in seconds.
Notes friends tied to the doorknob,
transparent scarlet paper,
sizzle like moth wings,
marry the air.

So much of any year is flammable,
lists of vegetables, partial poems.
Orange swirling flame of days,
so little is a stone.

Where there was something and suddenly isn't,
an absence shouts, celebrates, leaves a space.
I begin again with the smallest numbers.

Quick dance, shuffle of losses and leaves,
only the things I didn't do
crackle after the blazing dies.

by Naomi Shihab Nye, *Words Under the Words: Selected Poems (Portland, Oregon: Far Corner Books, 1995)*. Copyright © 1995 by Naomi Shihab Nye. Reprinted with the permission of the author. ■

