

Traveling Companion: No More Resolutions for Me!

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I decided I am not going to make any more resolutions. I will not make any resolutions for the New Year and I will not make any resolutions for Lent. Don't get me wrong, I am not doing this because I am perfect and I have nothing to work on. Don't think I am too proud to make resolutions. I am not. Then, why, you may ask, have I decided that I will not make any resolutions ever again.

The answer is simple. Something I read recently helped me to make that decision. Recently, I read the book, "Forgetting Ourselves on Purpose – Vocation and the Ethics of Ambition" by Brian J. Mahan. Toward the end of the book, he has a chapter called, "The Meritocracy Machine."

He says, "What's wrong with New Year's resolutions? Why do they so seldom take hold, so frequently lead to discouragement, self-recrimination, or February's brooding fatalism? I would say that New Year's resolutions by and large suffer from the same error that characterizes many reform movements. Would-be reformers often indulge in the rhetoric of replacing – lock, stock, and barrel – something thought to be deeply distorted with something thought to be much better, something idealistic, something pure and brand spanking new. On the face of it, this seems to be a pretty good idea."

That paragraph really got me thinking about our rationale for making resolutions. Could such resolution-making be an escape? Could such be a way of projecting a do-good attitude? Could it be a way of giving ourselves a back-handed pat on the back? Could it be a way of reminding people of how committed we are to changing something about ourselves, even though, if we are honest with ourselves, such change is often just cosmetic?

Could it be that such an approach and mentality is often undertaken because of society's preoccupation with a utopian mentality. Our culture is often built on the premise of newness and improved. Advertisers spend millions deciding how they can trap more customers into buying their product. They appeal to our emotions, our heart-strings. They test color appeal and flavor to get the right mix that will sell. Often the words "New" and "Improved," boldly proclaimed on a product's box cover attracts us even though the product may have nothing new or improved in it. They may appeal to our bargain-hunting sense by proclaiming that we get "20% more" in the box. They may make the box look a little taller but when opened, it shows more of a vacuum than a "more" product."

Mahan goes on to ask, why do we go to all the trouble of adding something new which is what we do when we make a New Year's or Lenten resolution. He says that making something new is God's business, not ours and God has already taken care of that. He then suggests that our addictions are themselves part and parcel of the compromised structures we nurture. He invites us to name our "compromised structures." What whispers to us in the daytime but shouts to us in our dreams? What sufferings have we stuffed and now need to be healed? He ends up by saying that these "compromised structures" are an "odd bunch, but they say it was you who left home, and they'd really love to have you back."

Frederick Buechner said that "the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." The deep gladness and deep hunger make strange bedfellows and challenge us to confront our compromised structures.

Maybe our resolutions are really a chance to let ourselves off the hook and feel some sense of euphoria, shielding us from the real need to revisit the depths of our being where we find a hunger that can only be satisfied with God-given gladness. So, this New Year, I am going to try and keep a close watch on my own shadow.