Opinion
Spirituality



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My New Year's resolution is to be more generous. And my hope and prayer for the world is that we all be more generous in this coming year, that we accept God's grace and respond to human need with kindness and mercy.

We all know about random acts of kindness. Maybe we've done a few. My task of this year is to make them a habit. Luckily, The New York Times has an article on the scientific method of making New Year's resolutions into habits.

The first recommendation is to think big. Frame the resolution as a theme for the year. So I'm resolving to be generous, rather than to budget extra money for sidewalk giving or refrain from criticizing a particular neighbor's frequent demand that government cut taxes. Be generous. Assume the best. (My mother always said about difficult people that they didn't have our advantages.)

Next, identify the cues that spark the behavior. So what cues draw out my most generous impulses? If I see a need, I'm willing to act, but often, afterward, I realize I was blind to the needs of somebody ill or lonely or overworked or crabby. Their need isn't necessarily for me to take on some of their work or resolve what makes them crabby. It takes thought to identify real needs that I have the capacity to meet — like a regular phone call to check in.

That's the movement from generous impulse to generous habit, giving my attention to the need, figuring out what I can do, and, of course, doing it.

The Times says you need rewards for acting on those cues and the rewards are better if they are intrinsic to the act. I can see that. When I puzzle over how to help, figuring out an action is rewarding. Carrying out the action may be time-consuming or impinging on my plans but recognizing what I can do is a satisfying moment. Of course, I'll fail sometimes to get my rear in gear and do what I see I could do.

The article says to plan to fail and to celebrate often. And to hang with folks who support your new habit. OK. I can do plan-to-fail and I know how to celebrate. And I have good friends. Generosity it is. Happy New Year.

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