



Radix

Resolutions of the Spirit

Resolutions? ... Yeah, yeah, like at New Year's when everyone makes lists of all the things they're *going* to change about themselves but usually run into problems with the 'doing' part. As a list-maker extraordinaire who is somewhat challenged when it comes time to actually perform the sometimes elaborate tasks I lay down for myself, I know only too well that resolutions, New Years' or otherwise, are often easier said than done.

It is hard enough to follow through on a vow to improve your study habits, quit smoking, or to carry out your pledge to lose weight or get in shape (— always a popular one). But what can be even more difficult to do is to make a concerted effort to improve your religious character and spiritual self — those aspects of yourself which don't always have an obvious visual manifestation. One meaning of the word 'resolution' which I found interesting was 'firmness of purpose'. Maybe some of what we need to resolve *about* ourselves can be found *within* ourselves in what we perceive our life's purpose to be. By continually defining what we want out of life and, more importantly, what we feel we can contribute to it, we can strengthen our personal power to actually accomplish those goals. This year, find time to pause and reflect on what you feel you have to offer the world which can be served with your own unique set of gifts and talents... Find time to reflect on your own resolutions of the spirit.

Practice What You Preach! An Ideology for Equality

Early in the year we are more inclined to ponder our goals and purpose in life. This year, my thoughts have wandered towards an issue that is of larger significance to society as a whole and to the Sikh community in particular. It is also something that has affected me personally and led me to renew a sense of purpose in my life.

Sikhism is a religion whose ideas were revolutionary at the time it was born. It was the first religion to have an egalitarian ideology behind it, one where men, women and children were treated equally. However, as is the case with many religions, what is preached, is sometimes not practiced. There still exists a major gap between Sikhism and Punjabi culture. I think that there has been a double standard set by older generations, which I feel my generation needs to break. While a woman cannot be out at night or alone with a man without falling into disrepute, a man suffers no consequences for the same actions. Parents tend to worry much more about their daughters and

Be Nice!

The Trick to becoming a Good Person

A true story (... or so I've heard): There once lived a man who suffered from a distressing psychological condition which rendered him sleepless for nights on end. He would toss and turn, sweating profusely, tormented by thoughts and feelings of self-disgust. You see, this man believed himself to be incapable of being *nice*. He had convinced himself that it was just too hard a feat to accomplish. Days would go by, sometimes months on end, and not a single kind word would exit his mouth. Why, he couldn't even remember the last time he offered so much as a smile to another human being. But this was not the worst of it... Most horrendous was the fact that *internally* he just simply was not a nice person. The thoughts he thought about other people were not nice. He was envious of nearly everyone and was very quick to anger. Our man knew that this was not right. He knew that it is not nice to not be nice — hence the sleepless

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(*'Be Nice!'* continued) nights
 — but he didn't know how he could solve the problem. So, he sought help. He went to about 14 different psychologists, therapists, psychoanalysts, psychiatrists, you name it, but to no avail. Most of these sessions were spent in the pursuit of "self-discovery", Western culture's idol of late where the goal, was to get to the "root" of the problem. Everyone figured that if our man only "expressed himself" and just "let go" he would be cured. But it only led our man to sink deeper and deeper into the cold dark pit that he himself had dug.

One day, a friend suggested that he seek out the advice of a certain rabbi who had a good reputation for helping those in need. Our man solemnly reasoned that he had nothing more to lose, so off he went to pay a visit to the revered sage. The lineup to see the rabbi was long but finally, after what seemed like an eternity, his turn came. Approaching the rabbi, the man found himself looking into the kindest pair of eyes he had ever seen. He instantly burst into tears, his entire story pouring out as the rabbi listened intently. When he finished, his crying eyes pleaded with the kind rabbi looking for any hint of salvation from his misery, pleading for a bit of profound insight into his problem, a wise solution to such a severe psychological condition. The rabbi gave him a wide smile, and said simply, "Why don't you try to just do nice things?"

In Judaism, there is no status quo. If one is not using this moment to do a *mitzvah* then this moment is given over to *sin*. Within every moment is the opportunity to connect with G-d. In forging a new connection with G-d, our own sense of self is re-affirmed. At every moment, we are either "plugged in" to G-d as our source, or, (G-d forbid) unplugged and powerless.

The 613 commandments (or *mitzvahs*) dictated by the Torah to Jews, can be divided into two broad categories, namely, the *positive* commandments and the *negative* commandments. The positive commandments are active and affirmative: "Eat *matza* on Passover", or "Light candles before *Shabbos*" are some examples. The negative commandments are passive and tell us what *not* to do. Examples of these are the prohibition against eating milk products with meat, or refraining from writing on *Shabbos*.

Even though there are two categories of *mitzvahs*, some Jews have a peculiar tendency of only focusing on the negatives. To some, Judaism may seem nothing more than a bunch of restrictive rules that suck all the fun out of life. But this

often deny them as much freedom as their sons. Having a son is (continued)
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 in a sense then, 'hassle-free. As a Sikh and as a Punjabi, I think that we need to rise above this kind of backward thinking and put forth a more positive view of young women that emphasizes trust and confidence over gossip and suspicion. Through education and awareness I believe that we have the power to bring about true equality that would bring us closer to our egalitarian roots. After all, what is the point of withholding the gift of experience and knowledge from the individuals that make up half of our society?

The issue of how young Sikh women bear the consequences of a double standard is something that has bothered me for quite some time. But this year I have resolved to create awareness on this subject so that my daughter will be free to live her life according to her own good judgment. To move forward I think that we need to look to our past... We should look to our Gurus, their scriptures and their teachings for inspiration and guidance. We need to

Even as a mirror stained by dirt shines bright when it has been cleansed, so al so the embodied soul on seeing the true nature of the Self, becomes one, its goal attained, free from sorrow
 ~ The Upanishads

is because, as passive onlookers, they see only from the *outside-in* which inherently emphasizes the passive-negative side of things. The only way to see clearly is by looking from the *inside-out*. For example, for our friend in the story, this would require actually *doing* the nice things himself rather than simply fretting about how to be considered a nice person. By keeping *positive mitzvahs*, we can be plugged in to the active side of the Torah so that passivity will face into the background. As Lubavitcher Rebbe said, "One should occupy oneself with so many mitzvahs, that there is no time left to sin!"

When you busy yourself with lighting up the world with *Shabbos* candles on Friday evening, singing *Shabbos zmiros* or *nigunim* at the Friday night meal, running to synagogue to speak with our Creator, and, with devoting yourself to actually *being* nice, who has the time to worry about anything else? If you devote your time to acts that demonstrate goodness, you will not have a moment to waste thinking about yourself.

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Resolutions for the Soul

Ahhhh. The new year. Time for new beginnings. A new outlook. A fresh start. Time to make those impossible-to-fulfill resolutions. *Will not fight with siblings. (Ha) Will no longer procrastinate. (Yeah right) Will be more physically active. (No time) Will give up eating junk food. (Maybe next year...)* When it comes to resolutions, most of us attach importance to changing aspects of our worldly life, but what about our spiritual life? Don't our spiritual selves deserve a moral boost?

When I think of resolutions and how the term applies to my life as a Muslim, I think about the fasting month of Ramadan. Muslims all around the world were recently partaking in Ramadan, refraining from food and drink from sunrise to sunset for 30 days. Aside from the obvious experience of hunger and thirst, fasting in Ramadan enables one to develop self-discipline and control, and provides one with the opportunity to be closer to God by engaging in extra acts of worship, prayer, and charity. But what does fasting have to do with resolutions? Ramadan is a month of self-training and betterment, a month in which the fasting person abstains from lying, backbiting, and other such illnesses of the heart in order to obtain a higher consciousness of God. It is a month, in fact, to make resolutions, to make a firm commitment to God and to oneself to apply the spiritual good gained during the month to the remaining 11 months of the year. So that one applies the self-discipline gained from not eating, drinking or lying while fasting in Ramadan to the discipline needed, for example, to pry oneself away from worldly affairs to pray 5 times daily. Similarly, the frequent acts of charity done for the sake of pleasing God in Ramadan facilitate alms giving throughout the year. The steps taken towards improving one's behavior and increasing one's spirituality during one month serve as a stepping-stone for self-betterment for the rest of the year.

So yes, it's great to want to be nicer to one's siblings, lose a few extra pounds, and get more organized, but when making resolutions, our spiritual selves deserve some attention too. *Will be more helpful and considerate of others. Will try to speak the truth. Will be more forgiving. Will try to control anger. Will take some time to reflect, to quietly con-*

Courage in the Moment

After the authorities arrested Jesus and led him away, Peter followed at a distance. They lit a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat round it, and Peter sat among them. A serving-maid who saw him sitting in the firelight stared at him and said, 'This man was with him too.' But he denied it: 'Woman,' he said, 'I do not know him.' A little later someone else noticed him and said, 'You also are one of them.' But Peter said to him, 'No, I am not.' About an hour passed and another spoke more strongly still: 'Of course this fellow was with him. He must have been; he is a Galilean.' But Peter said, 'Man, I do not know what you are talking about.' At that moment, while he was still speaking, a cock crew; and the Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. And Peter remembered Jesus' words, 'Tonight before the cock crows you will disown me three times.' (Luke 22: 54-61)

Why did Peter deny that he was one of Jesus' disciples? If he had admitted to being a friend and follower of Jesus, Peter would have opened himself up to public ridicule. Such an admission would have also risked his life. Once he realizes what he has done, Peter is deeply ashamed of himself. How often do we think of all the things we should have said and should have done after the crucial moment passes? Wouldn't it be great if we could rewind and edit those wimpy on-the-spot reactions out of our lives?

But I think those in-the-heat-of-the-moment situations serve an important purpose. They are part of a plan for our own self-definition. You don't always know your values or what you believe until you have occasion to say it out loud. While our self-preserving instincts can be at odds with what we know is right, I wouldn't put it all down to delayed reaction... It just takes courage. Fear of social ridicule is a powerful barrier but when we give in to it, we enhance its power to control how we live our lives. By standing up for our values we channel that power into ourselves and turn it into courage so that it is this courage, not fear, that defines who we are. By not allowing the situations to control us, we take a major step in defining the kind of people we want to be. Men and women of courage are not born but are molded by their experience and how they handle difficult situations. Your everyday choices build character — make them wisely.

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