

## Transitions by Sasha Ostrom

How many of you folks here today remember the New Year's resolution you made just last year? I know I do. It's pretty easy to bring myself back to that night. My friends and I were hanging out in the middle of the street in front of my house, standing on our tiptoes and trying to see where the firecracker sounds echoing through the night were coming from. We couldn't see the things, but we could sure hear them. We all held cheap little plastic glasses of almond champagne and we were already a little tipsy. We knew it was near midnight, but we weren't sure how near, so we arbitrarily picked a moment to begin counting down. We reached one, toasted in the dark, and as I sipped my glass I made my resolution: By God, next year I will stop being so lazy and I will be registered for classes before New Year's!

Undoubtedly, you were at a different time in your lives last year than I was, and your resolution was somewhat different. After all, my life and its concerns revolve around exams and costly car repairs, friends who are unexpectedly going off and getting married and whether I can scrounge up enough money to pay rent. Just like mine was, your resolution last year undoubtedly was an insight into your own life and concerns. Perhaps you vowed to keep a cleaner house or spend more time with your kids. Maybe you promised yourself you'd finally move out of that apartment and into your dream house. Or perhaps you decided to devote more time to yourself this year and stop worrying so much about everyone else.

We all have little things we want to fix about our lives. But it's one thing to identify changes we want to make and another thing entirely to actually make them. As of this very moment, I have approximately 37 hours to make good on last year's New Year's resolution. Somehow, I just don't think I'll have classes selected by the 1st. How about you? Do you remember your New Year's resolution? How did it go for you? Were you able to live up to the promise you made yourself? Or, like so many of us, did you find your resolution to be, ultimately, an insurmountable obstacle?

New Year's Day is rapidly approaching once again. It is, we have been told, a time for new beginnings. We'll make our New Year's resolutions, vowing to be better people or perhaps simply to act like better people than we did during the past year. Whether we're making big changes or little changes, they all come back to fixing our lives and ourselves. We think about the last year of our lives, and we choose things we want to change. And then we promise ourselves that we'll change them.

A beginning like New Year's, then is also a time to reflect upon the past, and this can be a sobering experience. We may focus too much on our failings or upon little things we wish we'd done differently. And so we await the freshness of January first with anticipation and perhaps a little fear. We look to New Years as a time when the past year's failings and disappointments can be put behind us and we can turn a new leaf, put old mistakes behind us, start anew, get a second chance, reclaim control, and make the next year of our lives the best year ever.

I don't know. When I really think about it, I kind of find this no-man's land before New Year's Day a little depressing. I mean, at this time last year we all saw the fragile fault lines in our own lives. We focused upon ourselves with a magnifying glass, judged our flaws harshly, and ritually set about the process of eradicating them. And now we're about to begin that process again.

Happy New Year?

At this time in our lives we are trapped in a liminal state. No longer caught up in the rhythms and habits which imprinted themselves upon our lives during the past year, and also not yet rushing headlong into the New Year, we stand at the threshold between past and future, between old and new, and between memory and dreams. This leaves us in an uncertain and yet joyful time, a time to reflect and transform, to celebrate the past and look forward to the future. Thomas Moore writes in "Neither Here Nor There" that in the "narrow confines" of these liminal times "you may find fantasy, memory, dream, anxiety, miracle, intuition, and magic. These are the means by which the deep soul prospers--- neither in life nor entirely out of life. This is a good place from which to make a decision and get a hunch. It is the true home of creativity. It is also the claustrophobic place of greatest fear."

For some, the liminal period of New Year's may be ritually marked and yet barely contemplated: the party, the champagne, the countdown, horns and streamers and hasty resolutions we forget a moment later. For others, this liminal period may be an incredibly sobering experience, or filled with great expectation. My little sister approaches the New Year with the excitement, terror and intense joy of new motherhood and the burden of previously-unimaginable responsibilities. Like I said, we're all at different points in our lives, and the concerns each of us face during this liminal period reflect our different life experiences.

Now, I don't know about you, but as I face the dawning of the New Year, I feel a bit like I'm facing some kind of temporal Schrödinger's Cat. The bastard's staring me right in the eye, but I have no idea what the heck I'm seeing. It could be anything, really. The question isn't one of whether the upcoming year is dead or alive, but whether it is a good year or a bad one. The next year gapes before me, filled with uncertainty, brimming with unlimited possibilities. Will all go as I hope it will? Will this New Year see the realization of the achievements and changes I hope it will bring into my life? Or will my hopes and plans remain unfulfilled, thwarted by unforeseen future obstacles? As I stand at this boundary between past and future, I honestly can't say what it is that I face. It really, truly is some kind of temporal Schrödinger's Cat.

Perhaps I'm not alone. Perhaps you feel similarly at this time, as the year winds down to its end. Perhaps for you too the New Year brims with possibilities. It fills you with the weirdest blend of expectation, hope and perhaps even fear, doesn't it? We see the uncertainty of our future, and we're driven to contemplate the past, identify trends in our lives, discern between desirable and undesirable aspects of our lives and very selves, dream of something "better", and plan how we will actualize our dreams from the midst

of our uncertain futures. Victor Turner once noted that states of liminality such as the one in which we find ourselves help define our relationship to the world as well as incite us to change. And he's right. After all, isn't change what New Year's is all about?

Yet I have to wonder if this process is a good thing. I find myself wondering when precisely we stop dwelling upon the year that is past and turn instead to the year to come. How do we go about reconstructing our pasts in our minds, sifting through our memories, picking out perceived flaws and using them to structure our dreams of the future? Peter Brook once noted in "The Secret Dimension" that we live "from cause to effect from an unbroken chain of reactions" and "these in turn produce a stream of sensations and images which are never the reality they pretend to be: they are mere interpretations of a reality which they are doomed to mask by their constant flow". I wonder also what are some of the perennial concerns and existential crises these processes reveal in us. An obsession with maintaining control over our lives and environments? A self-depreciating drive to reflect upon our flaws and build ourselves as though we were machines to be repaired rather than organisms who grow?

More and more to me each year, especially as I grow old enough to catch a glimpse of the little dissatisfactions, disappointments and fears which reveal themselves in New Years resolutions, I wonder if New Year's Eve is really as happy a time as everyone makes it out to be. And I wonder if we should be focusing so much on the past, dwelling so much on perceived flaws and failures we want to fix or eliminate, instead of simply living.

In his book "Simply Sane" Gerald May writes:

"There is a tree outside my window. One half of it is full and green. The other half was struck by lightning many years ago. The gnarled, empty branches of this half frame the spring leaves of the other. Do I call it deformed, inadequate, in need of surgery because it is not perfectly round and full? Its imperfection is its beauty. Its imperfection is its perfection.

Human beings might recognize the beauty of an imperfect tree. But human beings can no longer see themselves as natural and beautiful in their own imperfections. Not when fixing offers perfection. It is easy to love imperfection in nature, but not in ourselves. Fix we must, and the fixing requires more fixing...

To say that this leads to alienation is mild. It leads to much more. Alienation is a wandering emptiness, dry, lifeless, barren. There is a quality of quiet to the despair of alienation. But modern society is dynamic, driven, relentlessly striving, very noisy. There is more than alienation in this. This is a deep propulsion to \*do\* something about the human condition; a chasing and racing after something somewhere which will make it all better. A challenge to conquer alienation. To master despair. People are propelled by the belief that continually increasing effort, more and more sweat, more and more noise, will finally bring peace."

I am confident there are other, healthier, more uplifting ways to approach New Year's resolutions than engaging in this process of self-criticism and self-"improvement". It is

possible to face the coming year not with the determination to “fix” ourselves and eradicate all perceived faults, but instead with a willingness to embrace ourselves as we are---fragile fault lines and all. As Gerald May writes, “There is a sense of being-ness deep inside which often seems very far away. Whenever one speaks of wanting to ‘just be’ or to ‘relax and be myself’, that is an expression of longing for inner nature. The desire for a way of being which is as pristine and fresh as new snow. It lies, we feel, somewhere beyond or beneath all the self-manipulation and improvement.”

And so I urge you, as I face you from the introspective depths of this liminal period, to make a different New Year’s resolution this year. Instead of perceiving ourselves as things, as objects to be repaired, we should strive to think of ourselves as plants to grow. We are as nature made us, and we should accept and love ourselves, faults and all. Rather than trying at this time every year to pick apart our lives and identify things in need of changing, let us this year embrace those things in our lives which we appreciate and wish to preserve, those aspects of our deepest being which encourage us to growth or help bring a sense of peace and gratitude to our days. In a word, let us this year vow simply to be---and to love being---ourselves.

Happy New Year!