

HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF THE YEAR

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Rev. Richard Maraj

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'Twas the day after Christmas and all through the house
Everyone was exhausted, even the mouse!
The toys were all broken, the batteries dead;
and Santa passed out with some ice on his head.
Wrappings and ribbons just covered the floor
While upstairs the family continued to snore.
And, I in my t-shirt, new Reeboks and jeans
Went to the kitchen and started to clean.
When out on the lawn there arose such a clatter,
I sprung from sink to see what was the matter.
Away to the window I flew in a flash,
Tore open the curtains and looked through the sash.
When what to my wandering eye should appear
But a little white truck with a really big mirror.
The driver was smiling so lively and grand
And on the patch of his jacket it said, "US Postman."
With a handful of bills he grinned like a fox
Then quickly stuffed them in our mail box.
Bill after bill and bill they still came;
Whistling and shouting he called them by name.
Now Nordstroms, now Dillards, now Walmart and Macy's,
Best Buy and Mervyns and Target and Penneys.
To the top of your limit every store, every mall
Charge away, charge away, charge away all!
He whooped and he whistled as he finished his work.
He filled up the box and he turned with a jerk.
He sprang to his truck and drove down the road,
Driving even faster with just half a load.
Then I heard him exclaim with great holiday cheer:
"Enjoy what you bought; you'll be paying all year!"

[Congregation laughs and applauds]

So, not only is Christmas past; this year is coming to an end, and we will be starting a new year. How many are ready to start a new year; ready for 2020? How many people are thrilled to be over with 2019?

We often get excited about the current year ending and more excited about the new year starting. I think that pattern of wanting the old year to end – and the new year to begin – is one that is kind of surprising, and I don't think one that is always the healthiest. We just want to get rid of it!

I always find it amazing that we get excited about the new year and then, eleven months later – the very same year – we just want it to be over! Sometimes leaving the bad year – the tough year, horrible year – it's, *"Let me just get a new one; let me get a fresh start."* And, while that's certainly understandable, to a certain extent I think that pattern of just wanting to get it over with – and start a new one – sometimes robs us of the beauty of the insights, wisdom and deeper levels of meaning, and for us being and becoming more of who we came here to be.

Socrates once said, *"The unexamined life is not worth living."* What he really means is life is so precious and worth living, it behooves us to take some time to look at how we are living it. It behooves us to take some time for some self-reflection, self-contemplation and self-awareness: to look at how we're showing up, engaging, relating and interacting with ourselves, others and our world.

Just a week ago, we lit a candle to reignite that Christ light in us. And, really it was igniting a light to continue the unfolding of our soul: to continue our spiritual journey and our path. You know, getting a new year just doesn't bring you every new thing. We have to develop a new consciousness, a new mindset. It isn't just changing the outer; we need to continue that inner transformation: to expand into the fullness and into the amazing spiritual beings we came here to be.

This talk was originally entitled, "New Years' Review and Preview"; then it got changed to "Finish Strong"; then it got changed again to "How to Make the Most of the Year." You have to decide what the title is by the time I finish it! But I do think it's an important part of our spiritual process to look at how we end things – and how we begin them – and we will look particularly at how we end this year and how we begin the new year.

Firstly, what we need to do to make the most of this year is to look back and make peace with the things that didn't go well. We need to look back at the things that were painful and difficult, at the areas where maybe we wanted something to happen and it didn't happen and we were disappointed. We need to make peace with those struggles.

One of the Beatitudes is, *"Blessed are the peacemakers."* When I first heard that I thought, *"Oh, peacemakers are people who make peace with other people and communities and their families and countries."* But what I realized is that what *"Blessed are the peacemakers"* really means is blessed are those who make peace with themselves... who make peace with what they're struggling with and what's going on with themselves.

When things don't go well for us, we have a few ways to respond. One is with judgment, hatred and anger and disappointment. And the other is with avoidance, diminishing and pretending. Either one of them fits into a larger category called just **RESISTING**. Resisting and fighting against what really happened. Sometimes that can cause us a lot more pain than we realize.

There's a woman I know who went to see a therapist for her relationship with her Dad that wasn't very good. After a few sessions, the therapist said, *"I think at some point you really need to find some acceptance of where your relationship is with your Dad."* And, she got mad and said, *"What kind of therapist are you? You want me to just settle and give in to this how it is?"* Then, over time, she realized it wasn't just the pain of the relationship not going well, but the pain she was inflicting by trying to control something that was beyond her control. Trying to make something different than what it was.

You know, acceptance is an important thing if we want to experience a level of peace or make progress. If we're stuck fighting it, judging it, being angry about it, hating it, wishing it didn't happen, we're not going to find peace and make progress.

So, in 2019, what was it that you have hated or resisted? What is it that you're having a hard time accepting? And what is it that you need to make peace with before we can really move on into the new year?

Here's the thing about acceptance because we get this idea that it just means settling and giving up. Acceptance: here are three things about it. First, it doesn't mean you like what happened. It doesn't mean you don't grieve or feel the pain. That is not what it means. It means letting go of the resistance and the anger and the hatred about it and not dealing with the feelings or having to like it. Second, it's a process. It's not a one-shot deal. It needs to be practiced on a regular basis. And third, It doesn't mean you still don't improve or want to improve the area.

So, it's just about letting go of the anger, the hatred, the resistance and the judgment about it, and actually just dealing with what's going on.

In Alcoholics Anonymous' "Big Book" page 417, it says this, *"Acceptance is the answer to ALL my problems today. When I am disturbed, it is because I find some person, place, thing or situation, some fact of my life unacceptable to me. And I can find no serenity until I accept that that person, that place, that thing or that situation is exactly as it is supposed to be at this moment. Nothing – absolutely nothing – happens in God's world by mistake. Until I can accept my alcoholism, I cannot stay sober. Unless I accept my life completely on life's terms, I cannot be happy. I need to concentrate – not so much on what needs to be changed in the world – as in what needs to be changed in my life and in my attitude."*

So the question is: what is it that you need to make peace with? And what is it that you still have not had a place to find acceptance with that has happened to you in 2019? The fact is that it's not easy, it's not simple, and it's not quick. But, it's important work if we want to find peace. It's important work if you want to move forward and make true progress and really discover a deeper level of joy, happiness and meaning for our lives.

The second thing about making the most of this year is to look back on things and appreciate and celebrate all the good things and the things that went well in our lives. We take things for granted so often. Sometimes we let one or two things that happen overshadow, diminish or keep us blind to how much good stuff is actually happening in our lives.

Have you ever had a day where all kinds of good things were happening and you were in the flow? In the groove? Meeting and connecting with people? And then some checkout person was really snotty to you? You go on with the rest of your day and things are going well, and you get to bed and you lay there... and what do you think of? That snotty cashier! It seems ridiculous, but sometimes we can let one thing that didn't go well ruin a whole day, week or even a life of things that do go well.

In Thessalonians 1, it says, *"In all things give thanks, for this is God's will for you."* That means to recognize the good that's always there. Don't wait until everything is going your way to be grateful. There's always things, blessings, ways that we feel supported and loved.....so many things always going good in our lives! And sometimes we're blind to them; we don't recognize them, appreciate them or enjoy them and, certainly, we're not always celebrating them.

Heaven means “expansion.” And as we expand our awareness to the beauty and goodness in life, we expand our heart and love... That’s a heavenly experience. The word Hades – the word Hell comes from Hades – means to be blind. It is a hellish experience when we cannot see the goodness, the love and the beauty in our lives.

One of our favorite parables is the one of Jesus and loaves and fishes. Here’s a situation where there wasn’t enough... and what does he do? He gives thanks and recognizes the good that was there. Not putting focus on what wasn’t there – what wasn’t enough – but putting focus on all the good that was there.

This has been a challenging year for me physically: not being able to stand, hurting my shoulder, my knee and my heel. I’ve been in my chair a lot this year, and I’ve worked from home a lot this year. And I love my house, but not that much! So I tried to look at that situation for what I can appreciate. And one of them was that I had more time to look out on my backyard. And be in my backyard and observe the animal life in my backyard.

I am so not an animal guy, I’m telling you. I’m not into cats, dogs, let alone other wildlife. But, in April, I found this rabbit in my back yard, and its leg was broken off and flopping around. And I saw the little guy, and my heart just went out to the little guy. I knew he’d be vulnerable to, like, a coyote, and I really wanted to protect him. So I called Jim, our landscape guy, and he helped me catch it and put it in a cage right by my patio. And every day I’d feed it carrots, celery – or whatever it would eat – and I’d have a chat with him. I just called him “Rabbit” (I didn’t want to get too close!)

[Congregation laughs]

Every day I started to look forward to seeing this little rabbit. I called the wildlife preserve, and I felt like my heart was breaking letting him go. And I even said, “*Hey, when you fix up his leg can you bring him back? I’ll take care of him.*” They said, “*We take wild life...we don’t bring it back.*”

[Congregation laughs]

That was an experience that might be simple, but something I so appreciate... because it opened my heart in a way it hadn’t been opened before.

Then, the animal thing continued! A couple weeks later, I was having this on-going fight with this squirrel, because he walks around the place like he owns the joint!

[Congregation laughs]

And he actually broke into my house and was running and playing up in the roof! And then when we had that sealed up, he started digging holes in the backyard. I saw him once propping himself up in this patio chair, surveying his territory. I saw that and I was staring daggers at him! So, we had a little thing going on! Have you ever seen a grumpy old man staring out to see if some kid is walking on his grass? That was me! I was looking to see where that thing was!

[Congregation laughs]

So, clearly, I have to do some healing work and making peace with that. But then a couple of months go by, and I start to see these little squirrels running and zipping across the back wall: running down the wall, running around the bushes, back up on the thing. They looked like they were having so much fun! Somehow I had transformed. I started to look out to see if I could see them playing, and they were so fun. I had a moment with one of them. We caught each others' eye and I could feel my heart open. I even said the words, *"Mi casa; su casa!"*

[Congregation laughs]

That's how much I had changed! So, fast forward to like October-November. I'd had a couple of setbacks with this heel thing, and I'm feeling a little down and frustrated. And I hadn't seen the squirrels. There had been a lot of rain, and I was thinking about them. Then, one day, one of them came out and I thought he was going to run across the wall. So I got to the other part so I could watch him more, and he stopped and went by the shed and just sat there. And I looked and I thought, *"That's a long time for a squirrel to sit there."* So, I started timing it; it was more than three minutes! And, after a while, he just slipped away. Not even running!

It's so funny, because I was in a lot of distress, and I was feeling down and frustrated. He gave me a little clue to be still: to quiet my mind and calm the storm that was going on in me. I found it interesting that my squirrel relationship started as an adversary, went to a friend and then a spiritual teacher. It's amazing!

[Congregation laughs]

So, my question is: what in your life this year happened that surprised you and that inspired you and made you smile? Because, sometimes it's those little things that make life precious. And we shouldn't gloss over them or just go by them, because they're an important part of life. It's important to notice and reflect on all the things. What were some of the highlights or your life this year? What is something you overcame? What is something that you learned? What was the time when you felt the most loved? When did you have your biggest laugh? What made you laugh this year? Where did you travel to that you found captivatingly beautiful? What milestone did you have? Did you turn some big age or celebrate a number of years in sobriety? Or pass a number of years in your job? What surprised you? What person inspired you and had a powerful impact in your life this year? Who did you have a powerful impact on this year?

Sometimes we gloss over these things, and it behooves us to look back and to remember and celebrate how great our life is. Don't just label it a tough year, a bad year. They're all good years... They just have different dimensions and aspects and textures if we'll pause to appreciate them.

The final thing that I want to talk about is our attitude. Have you ever had a server wait on you who had a bad attitude? Or somebody in retail? It's tough to be around that kind of energy. It's not fun!

I heard of a guy who had a neighbor who was so negative: a negative, negative, negative guy. Always had a negative attitude about everything! And he was always trying to get him to say something positive and trying to get an expression of something good out of him: something positive or optimistic. So they were both hunters, and the guy was looking for a good bird dog and found a dog that actually walked on water! And, he thought, *"Oh great! I'm going to invite my neighbor to go hunting, and he's got to say something good about a dog walking on water!"* So, they go hunting, and the guy shoots a duck. And the

duck lands, and the dog walks on the water and gets the duck and brings it back. So, the guy says to the neighbor, *"What do you think of that?"* And, the neighbor said, *"He can't swim, can he?"*

[Congregation laughs]

Attitude! It makes a difference.

Somebody once said that the key to success and happiness is in one thing, and that's the quality of our attitude. We could have difficult, difficult circumstances, but – with a good attitude – we can transform it. And, we can have easy and wonderful circumstances and – with a negative attitude – we can get nothing out of it.

I always use Nelson Mandela as an example. I know I overuse him, but it's hard for me not to be inspired by someone being imprisoned for over 26 years, and coming out with a loving attitude – and an attitude that I'm going to make a positive difference in the world – and to be president of his country and one of the greatest statesmen in the world. Can you imagine going through that, and what kind of attitude he had?

Has anyone heard of Bethany Hamilton? She's the young woman who had her arm bit off by a shark at the age of 13? What an attitude! The next year she came back, she won nationals and won again at 15. Surfing for more than a decade! What a great, great, great attitude!

Nobody has a perfect attitude all the time. Jesus got angry: flipped tables over, got frustrated and upset. And he wept. It's not about getting it perfect all the time. It's working toward that attitude and developing one as best as we can.

I saw a thing that said, *"Ability is the capacity to do; motivation drives us to what we do; and attitude affects how we do it."* Attitude is the spirit in which we do all the things that we do. We can interact with love and energy and a positive attitude, or we can do it with a negative attitude. And it does make a difference.

To me, to have a good attitude is an inside-out and outside-in thing. If you want a good and more positive attitude, the #1 thing to do is to start with the inside. The more we can connect in silence, the more positively, joyously, spiritually and more grounded way we'll see life, ourselves, situations and the world. Viktor Frankl said, *"There's one thing no one can take from us; the one thing we can always choose is the attitude and the mindset we have."*

So, if you had to pick one – a mindset to use to look back on this year – what attitude would you pick? If you had to pick an attitude to begin the year, what would you pick? Would you pick a hopeful attitude? Robert Louis Stevenson once said, *"It is better to travel hopefully than to arrive."* Because, when you travel hopefully, the whole journey is good!

So, would you have a grateful attitude? Would you have a joyful attitude? Would you have a more compassionate attitude? A more relaxed and laid back attitude? A more generous attitude? What kind of attitude would really serve you well and make a difference on how you look back on the year, and how to begin the new year?

2019 is about to end; 2020 is about to begin. We can fall back into the same cycle of wishing it was over and hardly wait to start a new one... Or we can do some reflecting. Because, if we stay in that old cycle then – like New Years' resolutions – it will be in one year and out the other.

[Congregation laughs]

The fact is that, if we want to find more peace and make more progress in our lives, it behooves us to take some time to reflect, to make peace with everything in the year, to appreciate and celebrate all the good, and take time to adjust and create the best attitude that we can. And that is how you make the most of the year!

God Bless You All!

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Thank you to volunteer Laura Wright for transcribing this message.