

## *From the Kitchen*

4 January 2012



All over the world people are thinking about what this new year will bring to their lives. Will the world be different? Can they (or will they) make changes in their habits this year? Will life be better? Is this the year that *Homo sapiens* will snuff it?

We have a need to measure our existence in periods of time: from seconds to millennia. We treat many of these periods as affording us opportunities to start afresh. The start of each day allows us to pretend that we are reborn; Monday mornings allow many people to launch into a new week with new potential; the start of new years allow the wiping clean of slates; and centuries and millennia bring hope to many that everything will be better.

The flipping over into the 'new' period also gives comfort to doomsayers, although why they keep believing their own misguidance is a mystery to me.

Having an excuse to turn over a new leaf can be useful. We accumulate baggage at an alarming rate – attitudes, memories, grudges, likes and dislikes. The enlightened Masters tell us to live in the moment, to not be bound by the past. Most of us find this a challenge and having an excuse, such as the flipping over of a calendar page, can help. If we can progress from new year to new week and, eventually, to new minute, we may achieve a state of not even needing a new second – every second will be new, as if we haven't lived before that moment.

Some luggage is useful and carrying it from second to second, year to year, enhances our life: wisdom and experience are two bags to bring along and add to.

How do we distinguish between the debilitating baggage and the useful luggage? The distinction is probably to be found in the accompanying feelings. Does an action or reaction feel good, right, empowering or does it feel like a weight or something being dragged along? If the 'bad' feeling can be identified at the time, it is possible to drop the bag and leave it behind. This takes awareness (of the feelings and what they are linked to) and courage (to drop the past and leave it behind, where it belongs).

A newspaper columnist recently wrote about having a 'to do' list and a 'will do' list. Both are useful – the first as an indication of changes we are determined to bring to our lives and the second as recognition of those things that may enrich our lives. The two lists can overlap. The 'to do' list can be a shopping list or a list of 'past' things we want to do something about, or some of both of these. The 'will do' list is more a recognition of what we are going to do because we want to and it may include 'self-indulgent' activities like reading, having a massage, going for a walk or lying around doing 'nothing'.

We need, however, to be careful how we handle such lists. It is easy to turn unachieved items into baggage: the should-haves and could-haves of life. There is magic in having intentions, whether written down or not, and letting the unrealised intentions slip down the 'oh well' drain.

It would be wonderful to sing along with Edith Piaf and mean it: *je ne regrette rien*. I acknowledge that Piaf failed to live up to this herself, but it is a powerful sentiment that, if

manifested, frees up energy to apply to those things that enrich our lives. There is an aphorism: it is not what happens to you that is important, but what you do with what happens to you. How you respond to circumstances depends a lot (perhaps even entirely) on the respective contents of your baggage and your luggage.

In *The Colour of Magic* (1983), Terry Pratchett invented an item of luggage that followed its owner on its own set of many legs. It required no carrying or other intervention from the owner – it was simply there when needed. It can be seen as representing the useful tools we accumulate and carry through life, lightly, to be applied as needed.

How can we mere mortals deal with the past that we drag along? It is a process. Become aware of patterns of behaviour that don't serve you well. Recognise reactions that seem out of proportion to the stimulus, or simply don't fit the stimulus. Monitor the feelings that come with the responses or linger afterwards. Then choose to drop what is not useful or causes unnecessary pain. You probably won't drop your bundle in a single act, but you can reduce the baggage bit by bit, leaving it behind.

Happy New Year. Have a nice moment.