

?Commentary . . . Reflections, Observations, and Expectations

Written by

Tuesday, 30 December 2008 00:00 - Last Updated Tuesday, 30 December 2008 15:08

? I have to say up front that I'm not big on New Year's resolutions. I don't have anything against them but the practice of making such promises to myself simply because an arbitrary calendar date rolls around seems wrought with potential for me to disappoint myself. I would prefer to set goals for myself rather than make promises to myself.

I know that may be a distinction without a difference; in my twisted way of thinking a goal involves strategies whereas a resolution can lead to all sorts of self imposed guilt and disappointment as well as shortsighted rationalization.

I do, however, see benefit in assessing progress toward goals and the setting of new goals at this time of year based on every changing conditions. Some of these changed conditions have been of my own making while others have been totally out of my control.

An example of these uncontrollable conditions would be the state of the economy. A controllable change is what my wife and I have done in response to the economic slowdown. Anyone paying attention a year ago did not need a Phd in Economics to understand that the U.S. was poised on the edge of a recession or already in one. However, even those with advanced degrees in Economics and Finance likely would not have predicted the 40% downturn in the stock market, the multi-billion dollar bailouts, and an unemployment rate topping out between 8% and 9% by the time the economy finally bottoms out.

Adapting strategies preemptively to deal with a foreseeable event or as a reaction to an unforeseeable event are all part of goal setting. It is a situation just like this that lends itself to goal setting much better than resolution making. Like many other people who suspected that some tough times were on the horizon, my wife and I pulled in our financial horns by tightening our budget, making adjustments to our investment strategies, eliminating consumer debt, postponing large purchases, and increasing our savings rate.

As I continue to reflect back on 2008, I become intensely aware of just how interdependent individuals, families, communities and nations are. I also understand how that reality is often ignored or rejected in the name of politics, religion, nationalism, or socio-economic elitism.

The long existing cultural and social fissures brought to light by the recent national election and the reactions to the outcome of that election sets the stage for expectations about 2009 and beyond. You would have to live under a rock or be just plain stupid not to realize that our society is on the cusp of a sea change. I suspect that the Obama presidency is but the first in a long chain of events that reshapes America. Only time will tell if the result of that reshaping will be positive or negative. That issue will have to be debated by a yet unborn generation in order to get any type of historical perspective..

I have hopeful expectations that a new era guided by shared values rather than absolutism and zealots from the far right or far left has dawned. An era when those of us in the middle (60% to 70% of all Americans), who are either slightly to the right or the left of the median can and will begin to take back the responsibility and right of articulating the American Dream.

I expect that compromise will once again be defined as seeking common ground for the common good rather than its more recent meaning of capitulation. I for one am tired of the "in your face" attitude of politics at both the national and local levels.

I expect that 2009 marks the beginning of a time when the local community begins to accept and embrace the realities and challenges of the 21st century rather than pontificating on and perpetuating policies and attitudes as archaic as double knit leisure suits, Farah Fawcett hair, and Billy Beer.

Issues ranging from county wide zoning to the most productive use of diminishing tax revenues and adopting fiscal practices consistent with state and federal laws should and will

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head the agendas of elected officials for the foreseeable future. In addition, it is time for the movers and shakers of the community to focus more on growing the economic pie than on slicing it.

I know of at least three economic opportunities that are likely to present themselves to Washington County in the next year. Those opportunities could be the shot(s) in the arm so desperately needed to start the metamorphosis from a primarily agrarian/manufacturing based economy to one anchored in technology and service. Hopefully, community leaders will see these opportunities for what they are, economic life lines being thrown to a drowning community. Grab the rope and kick—our economic life and future depends on it!

I would have to classify myself as a cynical optimist. I am optimistic enough to believe that given the opportunity to do the right thing, most people will do it. However, I am cynical enough to believe a very small portion of the population including the aforementioned zealots and ideologues plus greedy mercenaries will attempt to smooth talk and parse words effectively enough to convince a significant number of people with good intentions to disregard the age old wisdom of the Golden Rule for the sake of personal gain and fortune.

I expect that we are on the edge of a more understanding and empathic era. I doubt that it will be apparent at the beginning but I suspect it will start to manifest itself by people being elected to public office based more on their actions than their words.

I expect more people to start realizing that even those who appear to have diametrically opposed views base those views on similar values: equality, honesty, opportunity, patriotism, love of family, and self responsibility are not the exclusive domain of any one side of a debate—refer back to the paragraph about compromise.

In conclusion, I do not expect to hear The Fifth Dimension's "Age of Aquarius/Let the Sunshine In" pouring forth in a chorus from every street corner across America or to see news clips of Mitch McConnell and Nancy Pelosi holding hands and singing "Kumbaya". I expect to be disappointed; not by the lack of change but by the rate of change. Society changes in ebbs and flows, surges and lulls, revolution and evolution. Regardless of the pace or method of change, I expect change to continue as long as we strive to survive and/or succeed. Individual definitions for each of those states of being is where the difficulty arises as we attempt to build better families and communities, and in turn a better nation.