

The Spirit of 2011
January 2, 2011

New Year. Clean slate. New decade, even. Where are we going? What's in our heart as individuals, as a nation, as a world? What drumbeat will we follow in our thinking, our imagination, our dreams? Do we have any apprehensions at the start of this New Year? What are our hopes? Can we control the journey? How do we understand the signs of the time and measure a well-reasoned response?

My concerns entering the New Year are tempered somewhat – just a little – by the economist, Charles Kenny, author of “Getting Better.” He thinks it's all pretty rosy out there given the statistics of the first decade of the 21st century. Despite two recessions, 9/11, Afghanistan and Iraq, Kenny points out that worldwide income rose 25% these past ten years. And thanks to increases in agriculture efficiency, cereal production grew at double the rate of population in developing nations around the world. Vaccine initiatives have helped cut the death rate from common diseases like the measles by 60%, child mortality is down 17% while hundreds of millions of people around the world have become better educated, more politically engaged...at least more than in Utah...and more aware of social and health issues creating (in his words) a “virtuous cycle of progress.”

I didn't realize we had it so good. But statistics, always malleable, are there for the bending. What I find more helpful than trying to put a good spin on statistics, is leafing through The New York Times' Year of Ideas. It's a nice distraction from the dreary forecasts, and offers new-fangled gadgets and extreme ideas that seem to make the future brighter, if not quite the “virtuous cycle of progress.” For 2011, I liked the following: A guitar that always stays in tune, the emotional spell-check called ToneCheck that asks you to reconsider your words on email before hitting the “send” button. You have a chance to retract your anger. This could bring about world peace.

Looking ahead we'll have the train that never stops, even the 665 mph Chinese speed railway where detachable pods engage the platform from which passengers either step off or get on board while the train is still moving at 665MPH. Sounds interesting but I think I'll take the bus.

2011 holds a valuable place for twitter in our lives where social scientists analyze negative and positive sentiments. Already, after analyzing 2.8 million tweets, they could predict how films would perform in the box office long before the actual count was made. Twitter is a gift to a whole new age of social scientists who have devised six mood categories: Happiness, kindness, alertness, sureness, vitality, and calmness. (It's amazing what we reveal as we twitter). Unfortunately the first application of these social science nuances will be applied to predict changes in the Dow Jones Industrial Average. Apparently we invest or divest according to how we're feeling emotionally. Twitter soon hopes to create a daily happiness index. I'm

not sure what that entails but it sounds like it could supplant yoga, meditation, and religion in general as all people need to do is dial up their happiness index for a reading on how they're doing.

2011 looked especially bright for white guys playing basketball with a new shoe coming out that has a spring-like mechanism that adds four inches to your vertical jump. The shoe costs \$300 but unfortunately for the white guy it has to be made available to all people regardless of race, religion, or ethnicity.

One new gadget designed for the future gives me pause as I must consider whether or not it's really an improvement or just a sign of the scary times in which we live. To counteract what terrorists may spread through urban subway systems, or for anything poisonous in the air, really, there is now a bra mask. It's an emergency brazier whose cups can be separated and converted into two gas masks. It's not exactly the kind of lingerie women have been waiting for. But it's going on my shopping list for next Christmas.

The new and often zany ideas that are published annually are clever and give us a reading, however peculiar, into what preoccupies our thinking, our needs, our desires. We look ahead to these ingenious and entrepreneurial advances with humor and amazement.

But the spirit in which we peer into a new year and possibly a new decade may not be as fanciful as a guitar that never needs tuning. After all, the happiness index, however measured, cannot rely on the old formula where accumulation correlates with happiness. Somehow, if we've been paying attention this last decade, the happiness we seek is always somehow beyond our grasp. But we keep grasping, and then wonder in a perplexing manner how we got so deeply into debt.

We look at 2011 as a time when many municipal pensions will dry up; medicare and Medicaid severely reduced; social security in jeopardy, state budgets on the brink of collapse or collapsing as evident in California. The Bush \$60 billion tax cut extended now for two years to help affluent households earning over \$250,000 a year will end up costing us severely in medical research, universal pre-school, a national infrastructure program to upgrade roads and bridges, mass transit and water systems, and cut clean energy research by 50%.

A helpful perspective, I think, that accounts for the mess we're in and our desire to fix it, can be drawn from Lao-Tzu who says: "Do you want to improve the world? I don't think it can be done. The world is sacred. It can't be improved." The implication, of course, is that the imperfect world has been created by us. We have lost the divine connection in our existence.

The winter storm that blasted the east coast last week serves as a perfect metaphor for our greed coupled with entitlement. New Yorkers, who are not known for their calm demeanor, revealed their worst selves by condemning every city official for

failure to clean up the mess that had inconvenienced them. New Yorkers, typical of Americans everywhere, insist on reduced taxes and increased services. I see 2011 as the tipping point where the failure to increase revenue will ultimately bring city and state governments to their knees.

Isn't it a shame that these irate people whose streets had not been plowed after three days, could not show their outrage after social services to the poor had been cut, homeless services dismantled, and people denied health care even if they were insured. We, by our selfish measures, have created an imperfect world: How am I being served or not served takes precedence over providing welfare to the many.

Looking into 2011, I see a frightened world. Yes, good things have happened like the decline of infant mortality and more grain for developing nations. But even that could be improved upon if we embrace an alternative way of moving through the world...if we could shift the focus from our self-contentment to improving the lives of others.

The frightened world I see in 2011 is a carry-over from the protests in Ireland, England, Germany, and France where their citizens were mandated to make a sacrifice: working more years before retirement, rationed health care, increased university tuition, and the latest – in Israel where the ultra-orthodox are financed by the state not to work but just study the Torah, the plea is made that these men must go out and work and let the state give support to only the great scholars of the day. These orthodox men have families that make Mormon families seem small. And yet Israel has financed their study of the Torah while supporting all their children, too. This cannot continue...obviously...but a brutal protest if not revolution will take place first.

A decade into the 21st century we discover privileges and subsidies are shrinking or disappearing from the make-up of the real world. What is being called for is **sacrifice**, a concept that does not sit well with the human psyche.

At the risk of showing my age and appearing irrelevant to our younger members, I'm going to go back to the 60's and quote from Carlos Castaneda where in *The Art of Dreaming*, Don Juan tells Carlos: "Most of our energy goes into upholding our importance. If we were capable of losing some of that importance, two extraordinary things would happen to us. One, we would free our energy from trying to maintain the illusory idea of our grandeur; and two, we would provide ourselves with enough energy to catch a glimpse of the actual grandeur of the universe."

What could be more fundamental to understanding how we have lost the sacredness of the universe than coming to terms with the fact that we have placed our own personal grandeur as supreme, thereby failing to even glimpse the actual grandeur of what is so much bigger than us. Or – The world is sacred...we have made it imperfect.

President Obama's bi-partisan fiscal commission reported just a month ago that while voters complain about the debt, once you start talking higher taxes and cuts in benefits, you'll find that no one wants to be the one to sacrifice.

That's not a tremendous revelation. What did shed some light on the subject, however, was Karen Tumulty's piece in the Washington Post the other week that claimed sacrifice was hard to grasp when Americans still believed in American exceptionalism. It's this belief that America symbolizes liberty and has a unique responsibility to shape the affairs of humankind. It's the belief that free markets can create a kind of endless prosperity, driving an economic and military dominance that exempts America from having to accept constraints, trade-offs or sacrifice.

In the year 2011 it will become increasingly clearer that our nation is in decline and that the concept of America we clung to last century filled with ideals and virtues and entitlements will be chipped away. The American Dream is no longer affordable for most Americans. We have been in denial this past decade. I don't know the psychological term when denial stops and reality sinks in, but it isn't pretty. Maybe it suffices to call it an awakening. I believe 2011 will begin the difficult awakening as we come to terms with the painful reality of life as it is...a life that requires higher social security taxes, longer work years, higher gasoline taxes, elimination of tax deductions for mortgages, as well as navigating a new way through the world.

I hear a faint echo of Henry David Thoreau, who in the concluding chapter of *Walden* wrote, "Money is not required to buy one necessity of the soul." Put into the language of 2011, it may sound like this: Money does not factor into your happiness index. Will we ever get there?

Thoreau begins his book on life in the woods with a chapter called "Economy." He says he wants to give an accounting of his two years at Walden and examine how people "spend their lives." What a wonderful double entendre: How we spend our lives...

And following Thoreau's predictable finger wagging at all of us...how we have become rote and machine-like in our lives, he arrives at a point that rattles us, even as we enter 2011: His point was that the tragedy is not that we drive ourselves nuts as though we have no choice. He says: We can always change. (We can always change). Can we? Do we want to? The national commission maintains that NOBODY is willing to sacrifice. But that's the change we're talking about. Can we shed our own feelings of grandeur? Can we begin seeing our own insignificance more clearly? That's the change we're talking about.

My thoughts about 2011 turn to how it will feel for us when we finally get real about America's position in the world and the impending environmental disaster staring us in the face. What's it going to be like when we absorb the truth: We don't have the best health care system in the world...in fact one of the worst among developed nations. We don't have the best educational system in the world...in fact among the

worst in developed nations. We are neither the mightiest power nor the greatest nation on earth. We simply are, and must humbly join together with other nations to rid the world of nuclear armaments and to begin immediately with painful sacrifice to make the world more environmentally sustainable.

We need to shake our own sense of grandeur to embrace that which is really sacred. This is the year where such grand pronouncements, uttered by Lao Tzu, Jesus, the Buddha, Thoreau, Castaneda, and McKibben, must exceed their rhetorical appeal and mark the change...the real change we must make because we can always change. 2011 is when we must awaken more fully to the realization that time is running out. Do we have faith in the capacity of humankind to change? That is the question upon which our optimism or lack of optimism hinges. If I am asked about the measure of my optimism about the future, it all boils down to whether or not I think we can change as easily as Thoreau indicated. And the best way to measure that "change meter" or optimism quotient, is to look at myself.

Can I make the change? Am I willing to sacrifice? Even if my neighbor still pursues the old grandiose ways...am I willing to sacrifice for the good of others and to preserve the natural world. Optimism becomes real personal. If I can't change what hope can I hold out that others will. What about you? How optimistically are you feeling on this second day of a new year, the start of a new decade in which life issues and survival itself will become transparently obvious. Are you...am I...ready to make the necessary changes...this year?