

Humbug Resolutions?

For the last couple of weeks of 2022, I asked people, “Are you making any New Year’s Resolutions?”

More than one said, “Nah. I’d just break them anyway.”

Apparently, most people *don’t* keep their New Year’s resolutions. Possibly as few as 8% do.

However—I don’t think that New Year’s resolutions are humbug, as Mark Twain said.

“Quit smoking,” for example, is a frequent New Year’s resolution. Failure is the norm—at first.

But that doesn’t mean forever. It’s just that it takes more than one try to succeed. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says 8 to 11 attempts. The American Cancer Society says 8 to 10.

Quitting smoking is a life-or-death issue. Given the power of addiction, for many people, it’s pretty difficult, too. Nonetheless, people do quit. Many, many of my friends and family used to smoke. They don’t now. Fear of disease and dying can be a great motivator.

So can the desire to *overcome* a fear.

For years, one of my own fears was a great embarrassment to me. I was phobic about driving on any highway, especially if it was more than two lanes wide. I used to take routes that were twice as long as necessary in order to avoid high-speed roads.

I blamed it on my upbringing. In India in the 1950s and 1960s, traffic was slow-moving. The roads were clogged by bicycles, bullock carts, camels, and pedestrians. We rarely traveled in a car doing more than 30 miles per hour. (It's not like that in India now, by the way.)

In the mountains, where I went to boarding school, I didn't get in a wheeled vehicle for nine months a year anyway. We walked *miles*—sometimes three miles to sports meets with other schools.

But on home leave in the States? American traffic terrified me. Riding on the freeways, I was convinced that only by a miracle could we reach our destination alive. Evidence to the contrary (our survival) didn't reduce that belief.

I recovered somewhat from this fear, but not for good. Getting into my forties, I got scared again. I made excuses, I got rides with other people, I cancelled appointments if I had to drive.

However, I wanted to be independent. To be able to drive from the Boston suburbs to the city. In short—I wanted to be a grown-up.

So one New Year, I vowed to get over this problem ONCE AND FOR ALL.

I tried psychotherapy—or, to be specific, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. That aims to change the way you *think* about things. “Research accident rates,” the therapist told me. She hoped that I would be reassured by the fact that middle-aged women had low ones. She counseled, “Think of the traffic as an orderly flow.”

Orderly flow? Boston traffic? I was not convinced.

Changing my mind didn't seem too promising. How about abdominal breathing? Relaxation techniques? I could do those—especially when I was at home in an easy chair.

A doctor friend confessed at my kitchen table that he too had a phobia—public speaking—and he shook out a couple of beta-blockers from an envelope that he carried around in his pocket. “Try one of these,” he said. I had to admit, they were helpful.

Finally, however, I thought of the obvious. Unlike a lot of American kids, I had never had taken driver education. So, one year, in late December, I called a local driving school.

Early in January, I looked out the window to see *two* cars from the school parked in front of my house. The drivers were talking on the curb. One was a well-groomed, trim young man. The other was an overweight young woman, with a lot of dishwater-colored hair streaming messily down her back. I went out to greet them.

“Here, you take her,” the tidy young man said to the messy young woman.

“Sure. Hop in!” She had a Southern accent. What was she doing up here in the frozen North? I peeked into the back seat of her car. It was full of rolled up clothing, paper bags, candy bar wrappers and other debris. Maybe I didn't dare *drive* my car, but at least I kept it clean! Nevertheless, I climbed into the driver's seat.

“So, tell me *why* you want lessons,” she said and I blurted out my problem. “Hmm...I *specialize* in phobias. Let's see how you're sittin'.”

How I was sittin' was all wrong.

“Plant your right heel solidly on the floor,” she said. “To change pedals, pivot your foot.”

I had been in the habit of waving my right foot somewhere in the air back and forth between the pedals, something which produces a feeling of insecurity and not being grounded. In the first minute of instruction, I learned that I had been doing just about everything wrong.

We went over the basics. Using the mirrors. Getting on and off the highway ramps. Changing lanes. We did the roads I disliked most—Route 93, Storrow Drive, the way to the airport.

“Let your body *move* with the car,” she’d say. “Think of it like *dancin’*.”

One morning, it was snowing hard and normally, I would have never left the house. My teacher was delighted. Good practice! With the white stuff coming down fast on the windshield, we went out onto the highway. On the way back, we took the curving bends of Mystic Valley Parkway.

Suddenly, coming straight toward us, was a car that had slid out of its lane. At the last possible moment, the other driver recovered control and swerved back onto his own side of the road.

“Oh, *my*,” said my teacher. “I’ll bet *his* little heart is going pit-a-pat.” My little heart was going pit-a-pat, too. But somehow, the incident didn’t undo the progress I’d already made. My teacher was giving me confidence.

Several years later, I was divorced and living a newly single life in New Hampshire. No backsliding allowed on the driving issue! The choice was

to stay home and mope or get out and drive. Fortunately, a trusty Subaru with all-wheel drive got me out of serious snow.

It wasn't a battle won once and for all. I wasn't cured, only in remission. One winter, I was stricken again with a paralyzing fear of snow and ice.

Happily, I noticed an ad for something called "Skid School" in Concord. It featured driving in extreme conditions. When I arrived, I took stock of the other students: a dozen fifteen-and-a-half-year-olds, all champing at the bit to get their licenses. With each of them was an anxious parent—sometimes two anxious parents.

We did all sorts of drills. Swerving around barriers. Slamming on the brakes to avoid sudden obstacles. When my turn came, I wondered if my sixty-year-old reflexes would pass the test.

But afterwards, the instructor told me, "If this had been real life, you're the only one who would have survived."

My original New Year's Resolution—made more than thirty years ago—worked pretty well. Not entirely, not permanently, not once and for all. Our successes can be fragile and temporary. But—Mark Twain to the contrary—the attempts aren't humbug.

These days, as a senior citizen, I'm allowed to accept rides from others, especially at night. Sometimes I pay folks to drive. A couple of times lately, my drivers have cancelled at the last minute, leaving me the choice of hopping into the driver's seat or missing an engagement. I drive, and each time, I feel triumphant.

A New Year's resolution helped me attack a problem—but I didn't do it alone.

I no longer remember my driving teacher's name, although I do remember her voice. I wish I could tell her now how thankful I am that I climbed into her messy car on that January morning. I'd love to express my appreciation for her expert driving skills and her equally expert teaching. Her encouragement. Her humor. If I had any idea of where to find her, I'd write her a long thank-you note.

Abdullah Shihpar, writing for *the Atlantic*, voices a similar feeling. His piece is called, "Don't Just Make Resolutions. Write Thank-You Notes."

He sums up, "I'll...write resolutions for the coming year, but I won't just be mulling career milestones or side projects I want to complete. I'll also be thinking of the people who were there for me—and how I plan to show up for them too."

That New Year's resolution is broader and more generous than competitive self-improvement. It boosts other people too, makes *them* stronger and happier.

Oh, by the way, if you missed January 1st, there are other calendar-honored opportunities to make decisions and take action. Chinese New Year is coming up. If you miss that, you've got Zoroastrian New Year in March, Bengali New Year in April, or Zulu New Year in July. You could even wait until Rosh Hashanah or Divali. Any day, actually, can be a day of resolution. What about January 8? Perfect day for it!

So—while I'm at it, thank *you* for your gracious ears this morning. Have a happy, healthy, thankful 2023.

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Readings in the service

Mark Twain on New Year's Resolutions

<https://www.openculture.com/2016/01/mark-twain-knocks-new-years-resolutions.html>

Woody Guthrie's "New Years Rulin's" for 1942

<https://www.openculture.com/2014/01/woody-guthries-no-frills-doodle-filled-list-of-new-years-resolutions-from-1943.html>

Ralph Waldo Emerson (Letter to his daughter at school)

"You have done what you could; some blunders and absurdities no doubt crept in; forget them as soon as you can. Tomorrow is a new day; you shall begin it well and serenely, and with too high a spirit to be cumbered with your old nonsense. This day for all that is good and fair. It is too dear, with its hopes and invitations, to waste a moment on the rotten yesterdays."

Society and Solitude (1870)

"Write it on your heart that every day is the best day in the year."