"More Dancing!"

by Lynn Ungar

I think I deserve to be congratulated. For the first time ever, I have actually kept a New Year's resolution. Yep, from the first of January 2010 right through to January 2011 I have consistently and diligently followed through with my resolution. This, in the face of the fact that hardly anybody ever actually does what they commit to as the year begins. The key to my success is clear. I don't have extraordinary will power or determination. What I had was the right resolution.

My resolution for the past year has been: "More dancing!" (Always with the exclamation point.) That's it. More dancing! How it has worked, pretty much, is that every time I've had to decide whether to go dancing or not, I've decided to go—even if it was hot or I was tired or I needed to get a pet sitter while I went off for a weekend of dance camp. I just decided to say yes.

Now, it's easier to say yes to something that you want to do anyway than to something noble but uninspiring, like flossing your teeth. But here's what I've learned: I can choose joy. You can too. This seems to me like a pretty important thing in a world where all the problems, from lack of jobs to climate change, seem pretty overwhelming. There's a lot of super-depressing stuff in the world. You don't need a list. But however sad or mad you might be over the state of the world, you can find what gives you joy, and choose that.

I'm not suggesting that we should ignore all the problems. The world surely needs people who will write their senators and go to marches and call their representatives and make signs and use less energy and recycle and help feed the hungry and all the long list of things we can do to help make the world a better place.

But in the long run, I think the energy to do all those things come from choosing joy. You can inspire people to a certain degree by sheer terror. And there's plenty to be afraid of just on the environmental front alone. Knowing all the terrible things happening to our planet can be a kick in the pants to make some changes. However, if we're going to keep those changes going, if we're going to find new and creative ways to build better lives, then I think we're going to have to draw on some deep wells of joy.

Here's the thing, though. There are a whole lot of people in the world who are interested in selling us entertainment, rather than joy. Joy is that feeling that comes spilling out from inside of you when you are really engaged with something that you love. I feel joy when I'm contra dancing, spinning and twirling down a line of people, catching the eye of each person who approaches, taking a hand and then moving on, being caught and tossed and caught again as the music pulls us forward. That's me. Maybe you feel joy helping things to grow in your garden, or watching the basketball you've thrown swish into the net, or speeding down a hill on your bike as the wind makes your eyes water, or paddling a kayak, or building harmonies in a choir or orchestra, or watching people enjoy something that you cooked yourself. Joy bubbles up inside and spills out onto the people around you.

Entertainment, on the other hand, is something that someone else gives to you (or sells to you). You can have fun watching TV or playing a video game, but when the show is over or you stop the game the fun is pretty much gone. You haven't connected to the world or the people around you, and you probably haven't really connected with your own soul, either. Entertainment is OK, but it doesn't pull you wider or deeper. It doesn't remind you that this world and all the people and other beings we share it with are precious. It doesn't bubble up from inside you and overflow as love. It's enjoyable in the moment, but it's like eating junk food—have too much and you don't feel fed, you just feel kind of sick.

Maybe this New Year's you'd like to take a look at how much of your free time goes to entertainment, and how much goes to creating joy. What truly lifts your spirits, and what leaves you feeling flat when you're done? What makes you feel connected or creative or caring? What makes you feel dull or distracted or disinterested?

When you have it figured out, you can make your own New Year's resolution to follow your own particular path to joy. I'm still working on mine for this year. I'm thinking maybe "More singing!" sounds good.

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