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Reflections on New Year's Eve

*By Diether Haenicke
December 30, 2009*

The date at which a year ends or begins is rather arbitrary. The Chinese do not ring in the New Year on Jan. 1. Neither do American schools and universities or state government. The academic year starts on the first of September, and the fiscal year for government agencies, banks and businesses may begin and end at variable dates on the calendar.

Even our regular calendar year did not always have Jan. 1 as its first day. Up to the late 16th century, the New Year was rung in with a week of festivities beginning on March 25 and ending on April 1.

When King Charles IX of France decreed the adoption of the Gregorian calendar for his country, presumably in 1582, the beginning of the New Year shifted to January 1. Those people who did not keep up with the change of the calendar were ridiculed as “poisson d’Avril,” which became the English April fool.

The new calendar spread quickly throughout Europe and, from there, to the rest of the western world. By now, most of the world runs on our western calendar. Dates on the geopolitical stage are set by our calendar, airplane schedules follow it, our calendar’s months and days are used to set the dates for all international commerce, deliveries, conferences and private travel. For our personal lives in the West, New Year’s Eve is on Dec. 31 and the new, fresh year begins on Jan. 1.

The calendar, as much as the hours of the day, gives structure to our lives. We see special meaning in particular numbers and celebrate our 50th, our 60th or 70th birthdays with greater gusto than, say, the 42nd. The beginning of a new century, as on New Year’s Eve of 2000, stands out in our minds as a noteworthy event, although no major changes occur in our lives or in the events of the world at large just because the clock strikes 12 at midnight.

While setting the beginning of the New Year may be arbitrary, we have grown accustomed to use the end of each year for reflection and for resolutions, because we need milestones in our lives that mark endings, transitions and new beginnings.

For many of us, New Year's Day is the one important day of the year that looks into the future, a day when millions of people make hopeful resolutions — to lose weight, to try harder, to be kinder and more caring, to get more order into their lives or simply to become better persons.

Most of these resolutions stay on the list for many subsequent New Years, because the resolutions' power diminishes as quickly as the year unfolds, and they have to be repeated, 365 days later, with just as much enthusiasm and good intention.

I gave up making New Year's resolutions a long time ago. If I want to make changes in my life, I think any day of the year is a good one to do so, and I don't believe that the magic of the year's end lends any strength to such wishful intentions.

However, I never forego the opportunity for reflection and hope that is embedded in the year's end. It is a good time to give thanks for all the blessings one has received in the old year — that one was spared or survived major illness; memorable hours or days spent with families and friends; elations experienced through concerts, books, good conversations or art. And no matter how old one is or feels, there are the hopeful wishes for the future that visit us at year's end — that our blessings may continue or, if not, that we may be given the necessary strength to cope with hardship.

As I replace New Year's resolutions with New Year's wishes, I wish fervently, particularly at this time, that our world may become more tranquil; that good solutions be found for the many troubles here at home and abroad; and that the angelic pronouncements of peace on Earth and good will toward men may hold reign over our world throughout the New Year and long beyond.

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mlive.com/kalamazoo*