

Alyssa Lee  
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“Dust Yourself Off”

Several months ago a good friend and I were talking. We were both trying to get more movement in our lives and were serving as sort of accountability partners to check in and see if we had been successful. We both were lamenting that we were not living up to our goals and I said something to her like, “Oh well, I guess there is always next Monday. You can start again then.” And she said, “No, I am going to restart tomorrow. Every day is a new day and every day is a new chance to start over.”

I really appreciated her framing it this way. Every day is a new chance to start over. It’s a simple concept but honestly not one that had occurred to me before in the context of long-term goals or changes I wanted to make to my life. I tend to be a person who researches everything to death and then wants all the conditions to be just right before I start a project. Like, when I finally get that journal I ordered online, then I will start meditating, or, I will start that couch to 5K program next Monday because I’ve now bought the shoes, and Mondays or the first of the month are when you start something. Heaven forbid I should start eating healthier on a Tuesday after all.

So, my friend’s idea that I can start again each day. That I don’t have to wait to enact some new change or resolution in my life helped me reframe this concept of beginning again, and also helped me see that if I fell short of my goal for a given day, week, or even month, I could always start again tomorrow. There is no limit on chances to begin again.

Many of us look to the start of a new year as a benchmark upon which we want to take stock of our lives and finally get a handle on long-desired goals for change. Some

people adopt a resolution for the year, or several resolutions, Gretchen Rubin, who hosts the podcast, Happier, recommends setting a series of goals, for instance, 22 goals for 2022 or 23 goals for 2023. She advises on setting goals that are both small and achievable, that you can immediately cross off your list and feel like you get a win, like find the perfect black handbag, and some that are less so, like practice more patience or incorporate more prayer into your life.

Other people like to adopt one word for the year, like a mantra. Something like the word “Less” to indicate a desire to consume less or make quieter choices for the year. While others, might choose something like “Move” which tells them to get out and socialize more, add some movement into their everyday lives, and suck up the marrow of life as it were with a greater sense of passion and fulfillment than in years past.

Certainly all of these endeavors are worthy goals, but I also wonder about their effectiveness? A mantra or a list of resolutions that help you start the new year off with vitality and a renewed sense of purpose, can often be left forgotten sometime around Memorial Day, or worse, leave you feeling like you failed when you remember that they exist sometime around Thanksgiving.

And what about those of us, who are experiencing disappointment and grief on such scales that the thought of looking into the new year with promise and hope seems an almost insurmountable charge? How do we unhook ourselves from the tentacles of grief, regret, and sadness in such a way that we can look to the horizon and see the promise of a new day or a new year? Sometimes the shadow hangs over us in such a way that we struggle to see the pricks of light coming through the clouds.

There is a band I listened to a lot in the early aughts called Death Cab for Cutie and they have a song titled "[The New Year](#)," which starts off "So this is the new year/ And I don't feel any different..." I wonder if many of us feel the same way. We hear the well wishes of Happy New Year and field phone calls from relatives eating their black-eyed peas for luck and friends setting mantras or new goals for the upcoming year and we feel nothing. The advice from the song The New Year is to go ahead and put your best dress or suit on and pretend that your in it, it says, "Light firecrackers on the front lawn as thirty dialogues bleed into one." In other words, go to party, and have the loud, overlapping conversations. And perhaps that is the advice many of us need, fake it 'til you make it. Don't feel like celebrating? Don't feel like restarting the year? Do it anyway. Celebrate it.

For others though, perhaps they are better served by seeing New Year's Day as a day like any other. I had a friend text me the other day and wish me a happy new year and say she would be doing this throughout the year because this day is arbitrary and has no meaning other than what we give it. For many people, this framing is key, this day is like any other which lessens the hold it has on them and the pressure they feel to celebrate.

They recognize the cultural constructs inherent to the pressure many of us feel to perform on New Year's Eve and New Year's Day. For instance, why do many of us feel bad about being alone on New Year's Eve when we would otherwise delight in our solitude on any other night? Why do we feel we need to stay up all night (not that I do anymore) or that we are somehow lacking if we had a quiet night in and were in bed by 9 on New Year's Eve? It makes no sense why these two days should be treated

differently than other days in the year and yet they are. We feel pressured to perform in ways we often don't in say mid-March. Similar to setting intentions or resolutions for the year, what can be a meaningful way to mark the passage of one year to the next, can be for others a ridiculous societal benchmark that has no meaning other than the pressure we put on ourselves to perform.

For me, though, I think I'm going with the Dust Yourself Off and start again tomorrow philosophy. As some of you know, my family and I moved to Massachusetts from Oklahoma the August before last. We had never even traveled to New England before so it was a big move for us. I spent a lot of that summer beforehand playing the song "Into the Unknown" from the movie [Frozen II](#) for my then five year old son and talking about embracing the unknown and the adventure life had in store for us. But, lately, as I am coming upon graduation from seminary and the unknown that comes with finding employment after a significant career change, I've been thinking more and more about another song from that movie titled "The Next Right Thing," and I wonder if it would resonate for people who might feel like it is difficult to find the promise in a new year. Who are leaving beloved people and places behind in 2022 and looking into the unknown, unsure of how to proceed.

The lyrics to the song talk about a darkness the protagonist Anna had not experienced before as well as feeling empty and numb. She talks about grief having a gravity that pulls her down, but then she sings,

But a tiny voice whispers in my mind  
"You are lost, hope is gone  
But you must go on  
And do the next right thing"

Anna wonders if there is a day beyond the night she is currently experiencing and she is unclear about what to do with the complicated choices and the unknown that lies before her. So she resolves to simply do the next right thing. She says,

I won't look too far ahead  
It's too much for me to take  
But break it down to this next breath  
This next step  
This next choice is one that I can make  
  
So I'll walk through this night  
Stumbling blindly toward the light  
And do the next right thing  
And with the dawn, what comes then  
When it's clear that everything will never be the same again?  
Then I'll make the choice  
To hear that voice  
And do the next right thing

This Next Right Thing doesn't necessarily have to be some monumentally shifting decision for your life, maybe it is just the next right thing for you? And perhaps it is making that choice, bit by bit, every day.

I have heard it said from a variety of sources that choosing to make changes to our lives has to happen in incremental bits, not sweeping changes because those are almost impossible to sustain. But, so often we are hardwired to want to change everything and to change it now. I sometimes imagine my subconscious as Veruca Salt from Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory yelling in my head, "But I want it now!"

And yet, I also know, deep down that is never going to happen. That any changes in my life are going to happen one small step at a time, often accompanied by five steps back and that process will repeat over and over again.

How many of us have embarked on some new program or discipline for our lives and then felt discouraged because we couldn't sustain it and then just dropped it? How many of us have tried to start a new hobby and felt deterred because it took longer to grasp than we'd hoped? You don't want to ask my husband how many craft projects have been left abandoned and are now in the back of our closet.

But, you know what? Maybe 2023 is the year I give myself some grace for that? And maybe it is the year you do the same? Maybe it is the year we see each new day for the promise it brings and resolve to not be too down on ourselves for eventually abandoning them? Maybe we pull those projects out and start again and when we fail or forget about them, we allow ourselves to try again another day.

Or, maybe it is also the year we let ourselves off the hook and realize that we're never going to learn to quilt or make homemade kombucha or learn to play the banjo. Maybe this is the year we look at what we didn't accomplish and tell ourselves and our loved ones, "It's fine." I'll start again tomorrow with something else. Because perhaps it was the journey of self-discovery that mattered in the end, more than whether we actually learned to watercolor? It was the act of narrowing down what we like and do not like, that mattered. The joy we got from researching a new project and talking about it with friends or taking a class and meeting new people was what mattered more than the end result.

Maybe this year we learn that the fun part is starting again, deciding on the next version of ourselves we want to try on and perhaps discard.

2023 becomes the year we dust ourselves off and start again and again and again and again—and we're okay with that.