

Happy Federal New Year

And now let us believe in a long year that is given to us, new, untouched, full of things that have never been, full of work that has never been done, full of tasks, claims, and demands; and let us see that we learn to take it without letting fall too much of what it has to bestow upon those who demand of it necessary, serious, and great things.”

—Rainer Maria Rilke, Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke, 1892-1910



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If the hospital or clinic where you work is anything like my medical center, the looming deadline of October 1 is anything but a contemplative occasion. There are encounters to close, budgets to prepare, a flurry of e-mails—either pleading or threatening—to complete consults, mandatory training to finish, and on and on with protean tasks in the parlance of bureaucracy. For many it is the nadir of the mundane, mindless drudgery we slog through all year in pursuit of those transcendent moments when we feel morally certain we have made things better for a real human being.

What is the origin and rationale for the federal New Year beginning on October 1? In 1974, Congress passed the Congressional Budget and Impoundment Act. The act shifted the beginning of the fiscal year—for our purposes the date of the federal New Year—from the first of July to October 1. Shifting the end of the fiscal year 3 months later enabled Congress to have additional time to study and prepare to receive the annual budget from the executive office and productively engage in the subsequent negotiations regarding federal spending priorities.¹

For all of us who practice in a federal health care system, our New Year is fast approaching and will indeed be past when most of you read this editorial. While January 1 may be the date for parades and football for the rest of the country, the federal government is not alone in selecting a different day on which to begin the New Year. In fact, were we to look at most of the world, we would find a variety of dates chosen for reasons both symbolic and functional to be the end of an annum. Let's look at a few of them to see whether we can glean any hints about how we might sublimate what often seem to be meaningless demands into something more personal and profound.

Currently, we are in the last quarter of the Chinese New Year of the earth dog, which

began on February 16 using a lunar calendar. In the modern era China has adopted January 1 as the official New Year, but the traditional Chinese festival remains among the most popular holidays in China—and for good reason. Historically, the New Year in China was a period of turning away from work to focus on the honoring of family both living and dead, those in heaven and on earth joining in one timeless community. The family home was often thoroughly cleaned to purge any residual bad luck from the prior cycle and to welcome the good fortune sought for the coming year.²

Several weeks before the writing of this column, the Jewish people celebrated Rosh Hashanah (literally, “head of the year” in Hebrew), one of the holiest days of the Jewish liturgical calendar. It is a commemoration of both creation and judgment. Rosh Hashanah ushers in a period of introspection and repentance, of taking responsibility for past actions, and of committing to do better in the future.

There are some common themes in all these celebrations, religious or secular, and among the most prominent is preparation. Too often, preparing in federal service is a word associated with resentment and apprehension. The US Department of Veterans Affairs prepares for the next investigation, the US Public Health Service for the next inspection, and the military, sadly, for the next war. Our thoughts are perforce focused on funding and finances: Will the president and Congress agree on a timely and sufficient allocation of resources for all of us to do our work well and without excessive worry and wear?

With the exception of the most powerful among us, these negotiations are far beyond our ken or dominion, and the new fiscal year becomes yet another imposed burden. I suggest that we all take back some of that power and purpose, not literally but psychologically. No, I am not advocating either sedition or a new

Hallmark holiday with “Happy Federal New Year” cards and parties. Instead I am inviting all of us to consider how we can reset as we do with our computers.

Management experts tell us that cleaning our desk can have positive mental and even physical health benefits. I am not there, but I am willing to try to be more organized if you are. Combat veteran and psychologist Dr. Brett Moore offers “tips to police your workspace” as a means to fight against stress.³ Organizing your desk is a way to unclutter your mind so it can regain the attitudinal agility that is key to resilience.

Another New Year’s theme is remembering as a way of consolidating lessons learned and rededicating yourself to continue personal and professional growth in the months ahead. Invent your own rituals to commemorate another year of working for federal health care, even if that custom is to mark your calendar another year closer to retirement! Fall is beautiful in many parts of the country: Go outside for a few minutes a couple of times a week. Find somewhere quiet to sit and look around at the leaves turning and reflect. Reflection is literally, “return of light or sound from a surface.” It does not have to be formal meditation but simply mindfully looking back on the year to see what fruitful images and ideas return to you.

Reflection and preparation prime us for the third theme, which is a rekindling of motivation to be better and the commitment to do things differently, however that is expressed in the unique struggles and rewards of each individual’s career. New Year’s resolutions have become a trite cliché for stores to advertise exercise clothing and the Internet to feature fad diets. The ancient history of resolutions reveals their more spiritual nature as a celebration of the renewal of life.⁴

Virtue ethics tells us to look to walk in the steps of those we admire to know how to stay on the higher moral road: Who in your unit or clinic or office inspires you to aspire? There are a multitude of opportunities to recreate your work personae to be more like those you would emulate, the colleagues who are often able to solve the “impossible” problem, to stand up to the bully, and to find the ethical values in even the most ridiculous or demoralizing rule.

Songwriter and performer Bob Dylan was right when he wrote, “You’re gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed.”⁵ But no matter how oppressive we experience that mastery, we must hold tight and recognize that these forces are external.

No one can stop us from the small acts of compassion toward ourselves and one another that keep us free. Pick up the phone or walk over to see someone you know or used to work with and ask how they are doing. Volunteer for a new committee or service project to feel as though your work is more than your job. Repair a torn relationship or mend a departmental fence so you leave work with less emotional baggage than you carried in with you that morning. The next time you want to say something sarcastic or critical, challenge yourself to be silent instead or say something kind or affirming. As a priest I knew once told me, when someone cuts in front of you on the road, instead of raging “bless them before you start cursing.”

After you read this column, take a few minutes to ask yourself how you can cast off the shadows that gather around us from the media and government and find a new way of letting sunlight into your work life. Happy Fiscal Year 2019 from the Editor-in-Chief.

Disclaimer

The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of *Federal Practitioner*, Frontline Medical Communications Inc., the US Government, or any of its agencies.

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