

ACTIVE STYLE

Arkansas Democrat  Gazette

ON THE WEB: www.arkansasonline.com

MONDAY, JANUARY 17, 2011



Resolution revised

Already failed? Small steps lead from fizzle to fit

CARTOONS AND STORY

BY RON WOLFE

ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Alexander the Great resolved to conquer the world. Great for him, but what if your big intentions fall through? The answer might be to try, try...smaller.

"Sometimes, the smallest goals are the ones that have the biggest impact," motivational speaker Paul Vitale promises. Vitale, of Little Rock, is the author of several books on how to change for the better, including *Are You Puzzled By the Puzzle of Life?*

The mystery this time of year is why so many New Year's resolutions, sworn with so much champagne-fueled determination less than a month ago, already seem bound to fail.

Most people give up, according to a study reported by the American Psychological Association. Health- and fitness-related resolutions, especially, bum out.

Eat better, lose weight, exercise more—such noble vows go straight to the top of Time magazine's list of the most fudged-on New Year's promises. "People are lazy," the story sums up.

Vitale, though, suspects just the opposite: People are too ambitious, making impossibly huge resolutions, when most of us would do better to build from one little accomplishment to another.

"We need to look at the overall picture of what we want to achieve in a positive light," he says, "weigh the pros and cons, and set small, manageable goals that work together to reach the end result."

"Maybe your goal is to have a more harmonious relationship with your family or co-workers," for example, he imagines. But these people?—they act like hornets. The

change is too much to expect all at once.

"Break it into setting small behavior goals," Vitale recommends. "Resolve to forgive past hurts; answer snide comments with a genuine smile and zipped lips, and offer positive encouragement instead of hurtful criticism."

Chances are, he finds, "the end result will take care of itself."

Applied to fitness, the same approach calls for modest but real gains in place of enormous wishes: a pound lost, if not a dress size; a lap run, if not a marathon.

Even the most reluctant slacker still has all the time and energy it takes to lift a line of encouragement from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

"Any activity at all," the experts say, "is better than nothing."

AULD LANG SIGHS

New Year's resolutions are among the world's oldest traditions, dating back to ancient rites.

The first of the year is a compelling time to start over. Nobody wants to be the bent and tattered Old Man Time, symbol of the year gone by, shuffling off in failure.

Here comes bouncing Baby New Year, full of promise, and the way to be a rosy-cheeked winner like him is to set pen to paper and resolve to be a brand-new individual.

Vitale believes in the pen. "People who write down their goals," he says, "are much more likely to find their own personal course for achievement."

(Ten times more likely than people who don't make resolutions, according to the psychological association's report at apa.org.)

But the idea that New Year's Day is gone, and so it's too late to make a change?—no.

"I firmly believe resolutions can and should be made whenever you see the need," he says. It doesn't have to be New Year's Day to make a New Year's resolution.

It could be, oh, say, Jan. 17.

THE BIGGER THEY ARE...

New Year's resolutions generally start with the idea that bigger is better, which is true of apples and applause, but not so much of vows to mend a person's long-set ways.

Reza Hakkak observes this trend every year at the health club he attends. "The first and

second days of January are the busiest days of the year," he says. "As the weeks go by, the numbers are dropping."

Hakkak, who has a doctorate and is chairman of dietetics and nutrition at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences in Little Rock, holds to a long-time regimen of daily exercise—5 a.m. on weekdays.

Not a bleary-eyed chance you'd be on your feet so early, you say, let alone in gym shoes? Hakkak can't remember that he ever swore to the hour, either. What he promised, having set his goal, was to follow through.

If early morning is the only time to be sure the job is done, then beat the rooster.

If a person's resolution is to get out and walk like the professor generally advises, 30 minutes a day, and it rains, well—"go to the mall."

"You have to stand firm on your resolution," Hakkak says. "You cannot be wishy-washy. All you need is just a day of not doing what you're supposed to do, and after that, it's very easy to not do it."

WEIGHTY ISSUES

Given his knowledge of health statistics—"67 percent of us are overweight or obese"—and the consequences of high blood pressure and diabetes, Hakkak has special motivation to move his legs. But the same background makes him caution against stupendous life- and body-changing resolutions he knows are medically impossible, ill-advised, "crazy diets" or just plain bad ideas.

"You can't say, 'I'm going to lose 200 pounds in one week.' It's not going to happen, and it's not healthy."

Instead of big resolve, he prescribes reasonable patience, suggesting a different resolution for weight loss: "My goal is to lose a few pounds in a few weeks."

After all, Hakkak says, if you feel like you need to lose a lot of weight, it's probably because you've spent a long time packing on the tonnage. A successful diet will take the same strong determination over time as it did to raid the refrigerator on the sly, tear open the potato chips and polish off the ice cream again and again.

The good news: You already know you can do it.

GOING THE DISTANCE

Abraham Lincoln called for "manly hearts" to carry out unwavering deeds. Myley Cyrus resolved to lose the cute image, and did she ever. And who knows? —Brett Favre might actually retire this time.

Hakkak offers these tips on how to keep a resolution:

- No matter what the goal is, set a time for when you expect to reach it.
- The best place to carry out a resolution is where you can find the resources you need to make good. A gym, for example, has exercise equipment—maybe a track for walking. The shopping mall has a roof.
- People tend to do better in groups, rather than alone. "A walking partner can help support your decision to keep going, and you can help her."

SMALL STEPS

Resolutions can start big, only to fade into the failure of pounds never lost, miles never run, gym memberships neglected, classes never taken, decisions stalled, adventures left to somebody else, and the doldrums of winter.

Or—start small, and grow like puppies with big feet.

Exercise goals, for example, can start as changes that might seem too little to matter. Resolve just to sit up straight, and that's a start in Nicholas Hays' view. He's an assistant professor and fitness researcher at UAMS.

Resolve to change the TV channel the old-fashioned way: Get up, cross the room, twiddle the controls, that's a start.

People used to get more exercise in the normal course of a day, Hays says. Before central heat and air, they went to considerable effort to manage the temperature. Now, the house is full of so many conveniences, a person has to look for ways to put a little effort into living, but every bit counts.

"Do anything to be more active," he recommends, "especially aerobic things," that's a start.

The trick is, having started, "you need to progress."

A little more, a little more day by day, a little something accomplished even on days when things don't go so well.

"You'll never have a perfect day," Hays says—but here's this one.

RESOLVED!

Vitale, whose business is convincing people they can do better, never said it was going to be easy—be done by the middle of January—just that it's worth the effort.

"If your resolution is important to you, don't abandon it," he says. "Always be flexible and allow the possibility that adjustments may have to be made. This doesn't mean you have to change your resolution."

Paul Vitale, founder of Vital Communications, Inc., is a professional speaker and author based in Little Rock, Arkansas. He travels the globe presenting seminars and keynote presentations to various organizations while contributing content to regional and national publications. For additional information, visit paulvitale.com or call 501-663-1454.