

When we think back about 2011, we may remember these big international events – the Arab Spring, the Occupy protests, and so on. Especially if we ourselves or our relatives were involved in them. But chances are that, mostly, we'll remember the things that happened in our own lives.

When I think of 2011, years from now, I'll do the math in my head and say, oh yes, that was the year that Rosie turned four, and started at the public Montessori School, and that was the year Leo turned one. It was our fourth year in Rockford, and it was when I was really getting involved in local issues. It was the year that Jamie and Kimberlee started at the church.

Of course, you never know. Maybe, years from now, when I think back to 2011, it will be something else that will stand out. That was the year I met so-and-so, who was just an acquaintance then, but years later became my best friend. That was the year I read that book, which eventually inspired me to do X, which changed my life. You never know.

I asked on facebook what other folks, years from now, thought they would remember about 2011.

A few folks mentioned big national or international issues – a colleague of mine who lives in New York mentioned marriage equality, as well as getting a puppy.

Someone said, "Pizza becoming a vegetable."

But most were personal milestones:

when their son acquired language,

or when their son got married.

Joining this church,

starting a new job,

a once-in-a-lifetime trip.

It was, one said, "The year I finally learned that work will always be there, but people and experiences won't, so prioritize accordingly."

Another: it was "the year my mama died."

Another: "getting engaged to my love."

These personal milestones, these things we learned – hard-won, sometimes, these learnings, etched upon our soul, sometimes, these milestones – they mark the year that has now ended.

It is good to remember. To look back, and say, this is what really mattered.

When I think about the year that was,

and I hear the memories of others,

it gives me that ever-longed for "sense of perspective."

When you think about things a year a time,

the big things stick out,

the big decisions and the turns in the road.

The little stuff, not so much.

The daily grind, the everyday vicissitudes,

they fade away in the face of what really matters.

Well, what do you think?
What, years from now, will matter to you about 2011,
the year just past us now?
How will the year be marked for you?

The Year That Is Before Us

A colorful creature with wings to fly and soar.

Our life isn't just a collection of moments,
or a collection of memories.

Our life isn't just what happens to us, or even what we do.

It isn't about folding, bending and creasing,
at least, it isn't just about that.
It is about a colorful creature with wings to fly and soar.

It is custom to make New Year's Resolutions at this time,
a custom that some embrace and some reject.

I, myself, sometimes do make such resolutions,
and some years I refuse.

The most common resolution is, of course, to be in better shape –
to eat less, or better, or exercise more (all three is best)
and I suppose I'll make that one, again.
I know that the gym at the YMCA is always crowded in January.
It's back to normal by the second week of February.

I mean to suggest to you – to us – this morning
something more than a resolution –
although the spirit of such promises –
the idea that we resolve ourselves toward a particular path –
is a good spirit.

I mean to suggest to us this morning
that in the new year,
we notice the beautiful life we are creating.
I mean to suggest that engage the making of this life
as a creative endeavor –
as a work of art.

Like folding a crane, there may be steps to follow –
but no two cranes, like no two lives, are exactly the same.
And sometimes life is more like a Jackson Pollack painting,
or a Jazz set by a group of talented but imperfect musicians –
it is experimental, it happens in the moment,
the elements play off each other.

You have to create and do at the same time.
Adrienne Rich wrote once, using the analogy of music:

we take on
everything at once before we've even begun
to read or mark time, we're forced to begin
in the midst of the hard movement,
the one already sounding as we are born.

That's how the new year is.
We don't get a totally clean slate from the past –
it continues, the commitments, the losses, the joys, the grief, the hope
of the last year carries forward into the new year.
The movement is already sounding,
and we are in the middle of it.

Yet this artificial new beginning is a chance to be reflective,
to be self-aware.
What are we doing with our lives?
What do we want to be doing with our lives?

I was talking with someone recently about this kind of thing –
it's a familiar conversation, I've had it many times –
I said something like,
at this church, we think everyone is important, and everyone has a purpose.
And my conversation partner, wisely, asked,
“well, how do I know what that purpose is?”

All I can give is an abstract answer, a kind of Zen Koan, really:
the purpose of your life is to find and live your purpose.

That's all I got.
The new year is a chance for you to consider the life you are leading,
and ask yourself, is this my purpose?
Is this my calling?
Is this how I will flourish as a human being,
and make more beauty and joy in the world?

Ask yourself the question.
Sit with the question.
Don't try to answer it by the end of the day.

A young writer asks the poet Rainer Rilke for advice:
how do I learn to write well?
which is, really, how do I learn to live well?

Rilke's answer, in part, is this:

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.

That's my New Year's Good News, and my invitation to you:

Ask yourself the questions.

What am I creating with this one wild and precious life?

Is it worthy of the gift of me?

Is it good?

Is it what I should be doing with my time, my body, my spirit?

Ask the questions.

Don't answer right away.

But know, remember, love the fact that you are able to ask,

that you are worthy of asking,

that your life is worthy of reflection, of use, of direction.

Rejoice that you can decide to change, if you want to.

You can decide to keep doing what is working for you,

and to stop doing what isn't working for you.

You can.

Maybe not by yourself, and the new year is a good time to join,

or rejoin, communities of accountability and support and love

so that you can become your full and healthy self.

But you can become aware of the beauty you are creating,

the life that can fly and soar,

and you can fold and crease with care and reverence,

and you can be the hands and hearts of vision,

and you can take this year that is before us,

these 366 days – it is a leap year, after all –

you can take these next 366 days to notice,

to grow, to love, to dream, to care,

and to make all the world a home for your soul.