

Happy new year, whenever that might be

Gayle Nichol - January 2024

Years ago, I met a woman on a grey New Year's day and we started talking as strangers often will. It started with a seasonal greeting, and moved quite randomly into thoughts about what was happening in our respective worlds, in the wider world, and some lamentations about the state of things.

I suggested that with the start of a new year, perhaps there was some hope of change, improvement, and alteration in perspective.

She shared that this new calendar year wasn't really a new year for either of us. That it was the night before our birthday that truly signified the beginning of a new year, and that all around the world, people were kicking off a new year each and every day.

This January 1 was just some date that the collective shared as an annual restart, but it wasn't truly the beginning of our new year.

Interesting.

I let that get inside and rattle around for bit.

I don't know that I ever set eyes on that woman again, but each year since then I have taken a few moments on the night before my birthday to have a quiet New Year's celebration. Sometimes I'm even awake to count my new year in.

For people who dread their own personal year in review, staring back at a gym membership that did not get used, the pounds that were not dropped, the money that was not saved, the relationship that was not healed, or the new career that was not started, this might buy you some extra time.

You're welcome.

But for the wider world that will still see this month as the start of a new trip around the sun, I have compiled a short list of things to work on.

It's time to stop complaining about paper straws and cardboard spoons. They are the worst. We all know it. We're all in agreement. But they aren't going away. Carry reusable utensils and cherish the memories of the good old days before we knew better.

Not every thought that comes into your head should come out of your mouth.

This cautionary rule used to be a staple handed down from parents to children.

In the days of online message boards and the relative anonymity of keyboard warfare, so much of our dialogue has forgotten that elegant rule. Just because you can say it, does not mean you should.

The world would take a sharp turn from the trajectory it is on if this mark of civility could make a comeback.

Remember to meet others where they are.

In my waning middle age, I will remember that not everyone is still grinding it out in a 40, 50, 60-hour work week. Some are up all night with new babies, bleary-eyed and challenged to keep both feet on the ground while making the world a safe place for new, innocent souls. Others are winding down and have heaps of time to assess how they would run the world differently if they were still at the helm.

Each stop in the journey of life has its challenges and each experience is valid.

Even if I know this, others may not. In such cases I will refer to the suggestion in the paragraph above and let my thoughts be simply that. My thoughts. No need to share.

I'll dust off The Golden Rule and remember to treat (or not treat) others the way I would be (or not be) treated. This was standard learning in my corner of the world, foundational to my understanding of how to operate with others.

Today, I hear a constant refrain of "I hate people" from all around me.

What a sad commentary of our time.

It comes most often as a reaction to the harshness we've experienced in our connections with each other. If we want the world to be better, we have to be better.

That will likely involve a review of the paragraphs above, understanding that not everyone is living in my space, with my perspective, with my values. It doesn't make me – or them – wrong. Just makes us different. I can move away from people without hating them, creating a different kind of ripple in the pond.

It's tough out here and the focus on change in a new year can be overwhelming. But it might be time to flex a few different muscles, seeking to sculpt attitudes instead of abs, remembering that Mahatma Gandhi once encouraged change in ourselves that would lead to change in the world around us.

But paper straws are still the worst.