

Your Personal Coach

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Here we are, on the cusp of yet another new year. If your life has been anything like mine, I'm sure you will count many blessings along with whatever challenges and difficulties fate threw at you during 2003. As we move into the future, there's something rousing about the "out with the old, in with the new" idea. We may not be able to change everything about our lives, but we can certainly make some new decisions about how we want to live. As one wise person once noted: "Though no one can go back and make a brand new start, anyone can start from now and make a new ending."

It seems like our ancestors liked this idea as much as I do. The celebration of the New Year is the oldest of all holidays. It was first observed in ancient Babylon about 4000 years ago though they determined the beginning of the New Year to coincide with the first New Moon after the Vernal Equinox (the first day of spring). They were also the geniuses that came up with the idea of resolutions to get a good start on the New Year. By far their most popular pledge was to return borrowed farm equipment. I assure you, this is not high on my list for 2004.

The Romans continued to observe the New Year in late March, but their various emperors tinkered with their calendar so much that it soon became out of sync with the sun. Then Julius Caesar, in 46 BCE, implemented what has come to be known as the Julian Calendar (named after you know who). It established January 1st as the start of the New Year, but in order to coordinate the calendar with the sun, Caesar had to let the previous year drag on for 445 days. Hey, more time to borrow farm equipment that you can return much, much later.

Around 600 BCE, the Greeks initiated the tradition of using a baby as a symbol of the New Year and the rebirth of Dionysus, the God of Wine. The superstitious Scottish tradition of "first footing" says that the first person to enter your home after the beginning of the New Year would set your luck for the rest of it. The best luck – it is said – would come in the form of a tall, handsome man carrying coal, salt, and a cake. I can tell you that if some tall guy bearing gifts walks into my house shortly after midnight on New Year's Eve, he better be Harrison Ford or I'm calling the police. The worst luck you can get comes when the first footing is a woman or a red head. Being both, I must take issue with this totally outlandish concept.

New Year's Eve traditions run the gamut from the sublime to the, well, ridiculous. Buddhist temples toll their bells 108 times at midnight on December 31st symbolizing the 108 human frailties. Once listeners have heard all 108 chimes, they are relieved of these sins and have a fresh start in the New Year. In Romania, young men race around the countryside banging drums and cracking whips. In Naples, Italy, residents toss pots and dishes out their windows to bring good luck. Danes leap off their chairs at midnight so they can "jump" into the New Year. Hawaiians believe that sweeping out the house on New Year's Day brings bad luck. So do I.

Making the proper food choices on the first day of the New Year are high on the list of superstitious practices. The Norwegians dive into big plates of lutefisk – dried codfish treated with caustic soda. Yummy! At the stroke of midnight, Spaniards begin shoving twelve grapes – one with each chime of the clock – down their gullets. Peruvians do the

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same thing, only they swallow the grapes whole while sitting underneath a table. Go figure.

The Pennsylvania Dutch must eat sauerkraut to insure good fortune. Here in the south, we're granted good luck for the New Year if we've consumed a meal of hog jowls (can we replace this with a nice, lean pork loin?), collards, and black-eyed peas. As a Yankee transplant, I've never quite acquired a taste for collards, though they do amaze me. A wheelbarrow full will cook down to a serving for two people if they are not very hungry. At any rate, regardless of your tradition or your food preferences to ensure good fortune, may 2004 offer a brand new start and bring many blessings to you and yours. Feliz Ano Nuevo! Happy New Year!

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2003 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.