Living With Limits

It’s tradition. The start of the New Year is a time to look back at what we did well and where we fell short and then, hopefully, make a commitment to improve.

The idea of coming up with at least one New Year’s resolution did not really occur to me until 11:59 PM on December 31st when I was handed a glass of bubbly and informed that I would be making the official New Year’s toast.

As the appointed master of ceremonies, I wanted to come up with something that would be applicable to everyone. Typical resolutions like losing weight and exercising might appeal to others but would seem a bit funny coming from me. I have very little excess weight to shed. As for exercising, I already spend 45 minutes a day on a regular basis. When I’m out of town at the various meetings, I seem to be part of the same gang that always hits the hotel fitness center at exactly the same time.

There’s always the issue of time. Just about everybody can relate to a lack of it. I could have proposed that we all resolve to spend more time with our families, not to mention make more time for other interests that are consistently put on the back burner. People can relate to that.

Then, as the seconds before midnight ticked away, my thoughts turned to my professional life. I could use more time for that, too. I feel that I spend enough time with my patients to establish rapport and reasonable expectations, but more time would help. After all, the number 1 complaint of patients is that their doctors do not spend enough time with them. And I would like to not feel so pressured for time in the operating room; I never was one who believed that a faster surgeon is a better surgeon. I just want to do the best job I can.

I thought about my traveling and the plastic surgery meetings I attend around the world: I could resolve not to wait until the last minute to prepare my presentations; I could also spend more time writing; or shouldn’t I resolve, instead, to do more reading than writing?

I pulled myself back to the task at hand, which was preparing my toast. Yes, we probably all could resolve to be more effective in our professional lives, but more time for our profession often means less time for our families. What’s good for one may not be good for the other—or at least, so it seems. I happen to have an understanding and supportive spouse, but even she has limits!

And then it hit me. Limits. That’s the key. Everything in nature has limits; the seasons and the limitations of day and night give the year its meaning. Setting reasonable limits on ourselves can be a good thing, too. Not the type of limits that restrict our growth, but ones that allow us to be comfortable with ourselves.

Limits can help us make time for our patients and time for our families. They can help us use our best judgment. Limits keep us from “pushing the envelope” in the operating room. Limits allow us to simply say “no” to patients with unreasonable expectations.

Limits can help us to better define our lives and our responsibilities. They can preserve our energy so that it is not wasted on less important things. Even limits on our enthusiasm can be a positive thing. They can help us to see that our way is not the only way, and this can open the door to even better ideas than the ones we’re used to.

“Here, here,” I said as the clock struck midnight. “May we all choose our limits wisely in the New Year.” There was a moment of silence as my carefully chosen words fell on expectant ears. Then everyone shouted and clinked their glasses, without a clue as to what I had meant, but then, not really caring either. After all, it was just tradition.

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