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'Happy New Year!' ***The Good Life*** **January 2009, page 22**

by Tom Palaima

Dickens' Scrooge and Dr. Seuss's Grinch had issues with the spirit of Christmas, but I'll bet some people out there reading *The Good Life* would be happy never again to hear the words "Happy New Year!"

If you have lived long enough, you know that one year will be pretty much like the next in the good and bad it brings. If you're like me, you usually hope that the year ahead will not be like past years that brought hardship and sadness you thought would never end, and perhaps never has.

Still, at the end of each year, we wish people we meet, and they wish for us, that the new year be happy. Other languages, cultures and ethnic groups do not share this wish. In French, it is normal to *souhaiter la bonne année*, "wish a good year," which is the same thing modern Greeks do when they wish *kalo to neon etos*. Spanish speakers, however, may wish us a "*Próspero Año Nuevo*," a "prosperous new year." German-speakers can extend *fröhliche Wünsche zum Jahreswechsel*"cheerful wishes at the year change," but they wish, like the Spanish-speakers, "*Prosit Neujahr*," "may the new year prosper," and also "*einen guten Rutsch*," "a good beginning."

The last German greeting shares with the French and the Greek the idea that it is enough to hope that a year be good. The word *rutsch* makes it more pragmatic still. Rutsch probably comes from the Yiddish *rosch*, meaning "head" or "beginning." The phrase then captures the sentiments of the Hebrew greeting "*shanah tova*," "a good beginning of the year."

To me this is consistent with the cultural tradition that has given us the work that defines what it means to be human, the *Book of Job*. As one critic has remarked, the *Book of Job* is "about the total of human pain and woe." It teaches that God or, if we prefer, the universe in which we live, does not always reward us for good faith and good works or punish us for wickedness and bad acts. The Hebrew, Yiddish and German greeting is commonsensical. It gives those who speak it and those who receive it better odds. It conveys hope that the beginning of a year will be good, nothing more, nothing less.

So why do English speakers wish people Happy New Year? Only if we don't think of the history of the English language, might we assume that English-speakers have always been more naively optimistic than the other culture groups we have sampled. The *hap* of 'happy' turns up in our words *happen* and *haphazard*. The verb form with its meaning of "take place" or "come about by chance" captures the sense of the root.

The word happiness is a star-spangled word. Via the phrase "pursuit of happiness" in our Declaration of Independence, as Carol V. Hamilton, PhD, has discussed in a finely reasoned

essay (http://hnn.us/articles/46460.html), "happiness" has a distinguished philosophical pedigree going back through Thomas Jefferson to Samuel Johnson, John Locke, ancient Epicureans, Skeptics and Stoics, Aristotle, Plato and Socrates. The Greek notion to which it is linked, *eudaimoneia*, means something like "having a good spiritual force influencing your life." But, as Hamilton argues, happiness never meant the pursuit of wealth and status as embodied in a McMansion, a Lexus, and membership in a country club. Instead it meant something well beyond the pursuit of individual wealth, honor or pleasure, and was bound up with the civic virtues of courage, moderation and justice.

I doubt anyone wishing us a "Happy New Year" is thinking in Jeffersonian or Platonic terms, but I also doubt that they are hoping our stock portfolios rebound. Most people probably have in mind what we mean when we say that "we just want our kids to be happy."

Yet even this parental wish has been criticized recently because of what is implied by the word *happy*. In earlier, harder times, according to child psychologist Aaron Cooper, PhD, parents wanted their children to get good educations and good jobs; but nowadays they have shifted to "something less practical and less tangible," "a quality-of-life dimension that they wish for their child." He thinks that parents have been seduced by consumerism to believe they can buy things that will make their children happy.

Cooper is my age, fifty-seven. He claims, "I know that my grandparents would never have said that happiness was the most important thing. My parents, I don't think, would have said it either."

If this is true, I feel sorry for him. One of the best gifts my parents, who knew suffering firsthand, gave me was their wish that I "just be happy." And I think that most of those modern parents Cooper criticizes are giving their children the same gift. My parents were not wishing me a fancy car or house. They were wishing me some things they had, with family, friends, church and community, and some things they sensed they had missed. They knew that happiness was not simple to get and even harder to keep.

It is no bad thing to wish for this indefinable virtue whether in the New Year or for one's children. We all know it is out there. If we are lucky, we get some part of it, even in those years when the new year's wishes we have received don't quite come true.

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