

How are you spending the end of 2009? What are your plans as you begin 2010?



In some form or fashion, most of us will be around family and friends as we usher out the last 365 days to welcome the clean slate of our new year. By the time this column is published, I will have stood with my family around my father's grave to listen to my niece, on the occasion of her sixteenth birthday, read from a letter he wrote to her a little over fourteen years ago.

I wonder what he wrote.

I wonder what wisdom his words will impart – for Natalie and for the rest of us.

I was seventeen when my father had open-heart surgery, one year older than Natalie will be this December. At that time, bypass surgery was still new, and the risk factor for a negative outcome was higher than it is today. Knowing this, and being pragmatic, sometimes a bit fatalistic, my dad penned his Ten Commandments for his children to live by in case he did not make it through the surgery. The operation was successful, and although I don't have my dad's laws memorized like Moses' stone tablets, I remember the essence of the framework he drafted for my brother, sister and me.

- Take care of your mother when I am gone.
- Get an education.
- Be smart about money. Don't become obsessed with it, but respect it and learn how to manage your finances.
- Keep God in front of you.
- Don't drink too much.
- Take care of one another and yourself.

- Grow up to be good spouses and parents.

Like I said, I don't have Stan's Commandments in front of me, but you get the drift. They are the basic tenets of being a good person, a fine son or daughter, and a good husband or wife.

So what has he written to Natalie? My dad's letter will be almost miraculous, a voice reaching out from the stillness after an eight-year absence. The letter is handwritten, not something crafted on a typewriter or computer. This is important, because shortly after he wrote Natalie's Sixteenth Birthday Letter, he had a devastating stroke that resulted in the paralysis of his right hand, his writing hand. When he died, he had learned to use his left hand to sign his name to important documents and birthday cards.

My brother has had the letter locked up in his safe for all of these past years. The other day, my sister-in-law took it out of safekeeping to pack it for the trip back to Pittsburgh, kind of like removing holy scrolls from their sacred resting place.

This brings me back to the question of how I will end 2009 and begin a new decade in this young millennium. Of course, the idea of starting fresh and making resolutions to "become a better version of myself" – a term coined by author Matthew Kelly – will be at the forefront of my thoughts. Quite frankly, I am tired, and gearing up for the next year, let alone the next decade, is a bit foreboding. I need to remember and be grateful for the blessings of a good job, a working body, a loving family, and a useful mind. I need to continue to build a stronger faith and a more solid financial foundation. I must take time to grow creatively, and remember that reading and leisure are as important as that next plane ride I will take to visit a critical client. I have to set aside time for my marriage, especially as the dynamics of age and time soften the edges of the vitality of my relationship with my husband.

What is apparent is that my father's Ten Commandments are like perpetual New Year's resolutions. What they lack is the prescription for how to succeed. At my core, I know that the God my dad told me to keep in front of me, the one a cab driver in New York spoke about as he explained his Muslim faith to me, and the one a choir of school children from the Effingham Christian School sang about in the Savannah airport terminal during this Christmas season, is the source of my strength to become a better person next year.

This may not be the place for proselytizing, but if I pose the question, I have to be honest in my answer.

Not necessarily the answer to your New Year's quest, but mine.

Prayer and action are needed in 2010. We have to go beyond ourselves in this new decade. We have to make technology work for us instead of letting it lead our lives.

We have to find a way to work through our differences for the betterment of our nation.

We have to be vigilant.

We have to take deep breaths, and rise with a renewed enthusiasm to move forward when the stresses of family life and financial challenges prove to be difficult.

I believe that somewhere buried in my father's letter to Natalie, there will be a message for me, some guiding counsel to her that will echo in me, casting off some glimmer of light for the years ahead.

I will be leaving 2009 the same way I will enter 2010 – full of hope and anticipation, and depending on the power of prayer to see me over life's hurdles. And my journey remains rooted in the Lowcountry, this piece of heaven that floats on the brackish tides that rise and fall inside banks of pluff mud and hollow cord grass.

Each of us has our compass.

It is just a matter of looking inside ourselves now and again to make sure we are on track.

I hope the weeks that couch the passing of one year to another provide you time to reassess your direction, and I wish you much happiness on your life's trek.

Happy New Year.

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