

Taking the plunge



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Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "Be not the slave of your own past — plunge into the sublime seas, dive deep, and swim far, so you shall come back with self-respect, with new power, with an advanced experience that shall explain and overlook the old."

The new year brings hope and opportunity for each of us to let go of what slaves us in the past and welcomes us to dive deep. Isn't this what New Year resolutions are intended to be? Yet, often the chosen direction is a superficial change directed at one of our flaws. Such resolutions seldom work.

What if we faced the New Year from a different perspective? Instead of being focused on weakness, what if we reflected on our personal strengths? Sounds simple, but it is not for most people. Often in my practice, I will ask people to identify their strengths. Few can readily identify them. Often their flaws come immediately to mind. People are not used to looking at their positive attributes. By pausing, and insisting they concentrate on their strengths, people eventually stumble upon identifying descriptions of what is good about themselves.

To intentionally and emotionally "dive deep," below the surface allows us to con-

nect with our core strengths composed of passions, beliefs and purpose. As this year unfolds "dive deep" and consider taking inventory of your attributes and strengths. Ask yourself (and those close to you):

- What are your strong characteristics?
- What skills do you possess?
- What do you do well?
- What compliments or positive feedback do you often hear from significant others?
- Often strengths are defined by our roles, for example, being a good mother, father, teacher, CEO, accountant, or friend. Continued internal searching may reveal characteristics of kindness, loyalty, or perseverance. If you look even further, you may uncover personal love or passion.

■ Finding our strengths does require a shift in focus for most of us. The shift is from identifying what is wrong to what is right; from what we don't like to what we like about who we are.

What are the benefits?

1. We continue to nurture our self-esteem.
2. We are more in sync with our passions.
3. If we recognize our strengths and highlight them, others are likely to do similarly and will support them.
4. We can rely on our strengths during times of trouble.

Let's consider a few examples from 2009 of people

drawing from their strengths. Nathan, a 22-year-old man entered graduate school. Shortly into the program, he became overwhelmed, lacking in confidence. By shifting his focus from his fears associated with personal deficits to identifying skills he could draw from, Nathan was able to regroup and in time perform well.

A second example is of a woman who innocently entered last year, not realizing how ill her husband was. Early in January he was hospitalized. For the next four months she traveled back and forth from hospitals, spending eight hours a day talking, feeding and being present for him. Eventually hospice was invited in to help. Her loyalty and love were unflinching. When he died in April, she was deeply saddened, yet was able to cope well in the subsequent months. Her strengths were her capacity to love, unwavering loyalty, and an intense ability to nurture and express her care.

In summary, as the New Year unfolds, I am suggesting that you begin by doing your own personal inventory of your positive attributes. That once identified, write them down and find ways to maintain focus and nurture your strengths. Be mindful of the personal resources you possess and, similar to a toolbox, draw from your strengths when necessary. More shallow New Year resolutions will be easily forgotten, whereas your emotional, physical, and intellectual gifts are your foundation of substance, self-respect and power.

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