

Artspeak: New Year's Promise: Live Simply, Laugh Often, Love Fully

Written by Irma McClaurin, PhD, Culture and Education Editor
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The three maxims in the title greet me each morning. They are kitchen magnets placed above my stove, meant to guide me on the attitude I should carry into my day and into life generally. I take them to mean: 1) do not overly complicate my life (with work, obligations, possessions, other people's problems, or needless drama); 2) find joy and fun in my daily routines; and 3) make time to be connected and deeply embrace the passions that arise from friendships, family, and special friends/partners/lovers.

They seem simple enough, but as I listen to NPR, read the newspaper, or watch msnbc, I realize that the world we wake up to each day is complicated, messy, and unpredictable. How ironic that at a time when we can deconstruct DNA, purchase a ticket on a shuttle for a future trip to Mars or Venus, or deploy drones that kill civilian children in another country, we seem unable to live a simple life, laugh enough, or love completely.

Last year, in 2012, I stayed with a friend through her final days. She was only four years older than me. What a wake-up call. At the close of the year, I learned another friend has cancer, a reminder that life is fragile. And, throughout last year I mentored a person terminated from a job after years of service and loyalty—life is not fair nor predictable.

Such events cause me to question the fairness of life. Why does that person get ill or die? Why does another person end up unemployed? Where is the logic and "science" to explain such things? I am an anthropologist, trying to answer a fundamental question: What makes us human? We have explanations for many things, but those that can explain some of the events above are not among them.

After years of research, I've learned that explanations are not facts. They are constructions derived from interpretations, correlations, hypothesis testing, data collection, and sometimes just our best guess or conjecture. Explanations are our feeble attempts to exert some control over our universe and our lives by giving that there is order in our world.

The truth is, most of the time, we simply don't know why some things happen. The truth is that we live in the midst of a natural world that we have attempted to control, but without understanding the full implications of what we do. Are the changes we witness and experience in our climate (Storm Sandy) the result of air pollution, deforestation, coal mining, "fracking", global warming, placing pipe lines on the ocean floor, continuing to drill for gas and oil, or constructing skyscrapers that block out natural sunlight?

We can explain some diseases, but not all. We are better at explaining the devastation that diseases wreak upon the body. We can explain that some people will recover and some people don't. But in truth, explanations are not certainties. There are many things for which we lack the deep knowledge that will enable us to know with absolute certainty.

This is the dilemma of the human experience. We evolved with a brain that makes us curious. We have used that curiosity to create a culture that privileges science and technology. We want answers to the mysteries of the universe and spend millions on research. Yet, we not found a solution that prevents people from starving in one of the wealthiest countries in the world.

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Have we been so seduced science and technology and our accomplishments of landing "men" on the moon that we forget more often than not that new knowledge often arises out of accidents? That is why replication is so critical to the scientific method. But let us not forget that we never hear about failed experiments or those that succeed but cannot be replicated. Explanations are not facts; they are puzzle pieces assembled in order to see what picture emerges. And each generation a new community of scientists and researchers improve upon the knowledge we believe to be factual, and it changes.

I have no explanations for why my friend had to die two days shy of her 64th birthday. I can't explain why another friend has been diagnosed with a serious illness. I can explain that the firing of my mentee is related to one of our main flaws as humans—our capacity to be inhumane to others and the petty desire to exert "power over. "

We see this ugly side of our inhumanity being played out every day in life. We are a global community of binary oppositions: rich vs. poor, educated vs. uneducated, employed vs. unemployed, white vs. black, straight vs. gay, married vs. single, the global north vs. the global south, the U.S. vs. Russia, the U.S. vs. China.

None of these oppositional categories or social polarizations is innately negative. It is the value we attach to either side of the category that will determine the outcome and dictate how we treat those whom they represent. If we value wealth over poverty, then we invest our efforts in protecting wealth and penalizing the poor. The fiscal cliff polarization was clear enough evidence of politicians making such value judgments.

The United States of America is not so united; it is increasingly becoming a society that has lost its moral compass and forgotten its social contract of "equality for all." The fact that this principle was not equally applied to women and Blacks is one of the major contradictions of American society. We should realize that democracy as we know and practice it in America is still very much a work in progress.

The experiences I observed, shared, or personally felt in 2012 were immensely humbling. As a result, I pay greater attention to the three maxims above my stove. In 2013, I have made myself a New Year's promise to LIVE, LAUGH, and LOVE more.