

A New Year of Ordinary Time

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By Lucia A. Silecchia

I remember it well.

Many years ago, I stopped at the supermarket for groceries on my way home from work. The gentleman who rang up my order said, “*that will be nineteen eighty nine, miss.*” I ran my credit card through the terminal, authorizing the charge of \$19.89.

It was then that the cashier said, either to himself, or to me, or to both of us, or perhaps only to God, “*1989. That year ...*” His voice trailed off and he did not finish his thought out loud. If there had not been a lengthy line behind me, I might have stopped to ask him what it was about 1989 that crossed his mind. In retrospect, I regret that I did not – even if that would have roused the ire of other shoppers in a hurry to be on their way.

That cashier has crossed my mind from time to time since that day long ago. I have wondered what was on his mind as he thought back on that one year of his life, a year that obviously made a deep impression on him. 1989 may have been a good year, but the look that crossed his face led me to believe, instead, that it was a year that held sorrow in his life. I will never know. That grocery store closed years ago.

Yet, as a new year dawns I have thought of him again. All of us likely look back on certain years that have been pivotal in our own journeys through this life. Perhaps they were years of immense joy when we celebrated the births of loved ones, marriages that expanded our families, accomplishments achieved, and dreams come true. However, it is also possible – perhaps even likely – that some of the most pivotal years in our lives were those that held a measure of sorrow. Perhaps the death of a loved one, the dashing of a hope, the fading of a dream or the limitations brought on by illness made a particular year a turning point.

Now that 2024 has begun, none of us know what it will hold – for us as individuals, for those we love or for the human family. Some of us begin the year anticipating this will be a momentous year. Those whose calendars hold plans for graduations, weddings, ordinations, job changes or moves are likely to look back at 2024 as a year when life changed in a dramatic way.

Yet, at the dawn of a new year it is impossible to predict all of the unanticipated, unplanned and, yes, ordinary moments that will be less dramatic but no less profound pivot points in our lives. It is these that so often are the things that change our lives in ways we cannot yet know.

It may be a seemingly random conversation or chance encounter with a stranger that changes the course of our lives. It may be a decision to forgive another or ask forgiveness that sets a new path for a future. It may be reading a book recommended by a trusted friend or hearing a word spoken in a homily that offers insight into a truth that will shape the rest of a lifetime.

It may be in time “wasted” with the very young or the very old on a random afternoon that gives a glimpse of something we have never noticed before. It may be a glance at an explosive sunset or a sky full of stars that makes us feel small in the best possible way – and in that smallness we get our first true sense of the greatness of God.

It may be an unexpected crisis or loss that we could not foresee – a cross that breaks our heart in a way we never thought possible. And, it may be that same crisis or loss that shows us the strength a broken heart can hold and the deep kindness that dwells in the loving hearts of those who sustain us in sorrow.

When 2024 ends, many of us may look back on it with the same profound reflection as a stranger long ago pondered 1989. I hope, though, that it will not only be the big things that catch our attention this year. Often, it is those things that, at the time, seem most ordinary that leave lasting marks in our lives. So often, I have realized only in retrospect that seemingly little things have changed my life in the most unexpected and important ways.

There is something both exciting and frightening about the start of a new year with all the unknowns that lie ahead. I do not yet know if in the future I will ever say to a stranger, “2024. *That year*”

But there is one thing I do know. The start of a new year is the perfect time to repeat a prayer of St. Francis de Sales that I keep in my office, so I see it every day. It pleads “*Do not look forward to what may happen tomorrow; the same everlasting Father who cares for you today will take care of you tomorrow and every day.*” May God bless all that happens in the tomorrows of our ordinary times. Joyous new year!

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