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Writers and wordsmiths

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A Year-End Reckoning -- A writer performs a year-end evaluation of his accomplishments and considers what actions he must take in the coming year to bring his life to a fitting close...



by: Matias Travieso-Diaz

The doors of the temple of Janus Quirinus ...the Senate decree should be closed on three occasions while I was princeps.

— Augustus, *Res Gestae, Chapter 13*

I always find the days between Christmas and New Year to be the most trying span of time in the entire calendar. It is in those days that I feel the need to render accounts to myself for my actions during the prior twelve months, go over the projects envisioned at the start of the year, and assess the results: what had been done and with what success, what had failed, what had turned out different than expected and, in many cases, what had remained undone. It is a melancholic undertaking, which often leads to much disappointment. Another year has been largely wasted. Myriad opportunities for recognition, self-satisfaction, contributions to society, all allowed to vanish unattained.

Then an even more difficult process will follow: dreaming up new resolutions, proposed actions that will render me a more successful person (however success can be defined). Like Sisyphus facing his boulder at the foot of the hill, I will be daunted by the difficulty of the potential tasks and the low probability of a positive outcome that many present. Different challenges have risen over time as I grew older: Would I be able to escape from Cuba? Would I continue my education as a penniless refugee in a foreign land? Would I get a decent job and manage to live above poverty? Would I find love? Would I raise a family? Would I be able to make some meaningful contribution to the world? Would I keep in decent physical shape? Would my health remain as good as is possible for an octogenarian?

Over the years, the more fundamental of these questions would eventually be answered in the affirmative, though not always in the manner I had envisioned. One way or another, I managed to negotiate, more or less unscathed, the turmoil of youth, the challenges of maturity, the infirmities of old age. Now, as most of my life lies behind me, my internal debate has acquired a new focus. What do I need to do to tidy things up before departing?

I had already endeavored to simplify my financial affairs so that the economic transition to my daughter and other successors would be as straightforward as possible. There were other things that remained unresolved, however. Disposing of my possessions; establishing mechanisms for continued dissemination of my creative work, in case it was determined to be worthy of preservation; righting any uncorrected wrongs.

After much thinking, I concluded that many of these concerns were only expressions of greediness or vanity. Material possessions are ephemeral things, useful or necessary at some point but becoming of decreasing importance as one approaches the end of the line. Since you cannot take anything with you, why worry about how your goods are treated after you pass

away? As to the merit of whatever work you leave behind, the only way to court a favorable judgment from posterity is to place your writings, your paintings, your symphonies, in the public domain in the hope that they will be appreciated by future generations — an egotistical wish, unlikely of accomplishment.

But good deeds left undone or ills left uncorrected are black marks left on one's soul — and getting away with them, unpunished, offers no consolation if you possess a moral compass. In my case, I believe that those sins of commission or omission have in almost every case been the result of self-absorption or indifference rather than willfulness. For example, I did not spend as much time attending to my parents and other close relatives as I should have, but this was not due to lack of affection but rose from assigning a lower priority to tending to my family compared to my own immediate needs. Likewise, I had a thorny relationship with my brother and, consequently, avoided dealing with him instead of spending time and effort trying to help him surmount his problems and become closer to me.

Most of these instances of reprehensible indifference are now beyond remedy, for the victims have passed away. There are, however, a few people still roaming the world who I may have wronged through indifference. Some of these people are relatives or former friends: they are findable and my affronts can be cured; I will endeavor to repair my failings to them this year. The more difficult cases are people whose whereabouts are unknown and I will need some detective work before I can make amends. To this effort I will dedicate my energies in the coming months.

Perhaps, if I live that long, when I conduct my next year-end tally, I will be able to take credit for having remedied some of these pending obligations. I sincerely hope so, for like Emperor Augustus, I would like to tell myself eventually that I have closed the doors of the temple of my life, all strife ended, and can now rest in peace.

Born in Cuba, Matias Travieso-Diaz migrated to the United States as a young man. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. After retirement, he took up creative writing. Over two hundred and thirty of his short stories have been published or accepted for publication in anthologies, magazines, blogs, audio books, and podcasts. One of his four novels, an autobiography entitled "Cuban Transplant," and four anthologies of his stories have also been published. His most recent novel, The Last War of Independence, has just been completed.