

The Vintage Voice

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You Can Be Better Than You Are – You Could Be Swinging On A Star!

—From the film *Going My Way*

The Rev. Edward R. Sims

Even if you're not as old as I am, you may remember the movie in which Bing Crosby played a young priest assigned to revive a parish languishing under the declining energy of a charming old Irish cleric played by Barry Fitzgerald. Crosby brought the place to life mostly by bringing the youngsters together into singing groups; one of their memorable songs closed with the couplet I've quoted above. The song's promise strikes me as an appropriate, light-hearted text for the New Year.

The Bible is by no means the grim and sober book its heft and density might suggest. For all the turbulence and tragedy that has attended our departure from the blissful obedience of Eden into the life of freedom and responsibility to which God calls us, the joyous song of creation is never silenced. Isaiah sings, "Before you the mountains and the hills shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands!" In even so sober a tale as Job, the voice of affirmation and promise is not stilled: ". . . when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy!"

The key is the promise — the promise that we can change, that life can be different, that no darkness of human failure can extinguish the power of the grace God offers or the light of the hope he holds out to us. A respected teacher once said to me, "Regrets are wishes for a better past, and part of maturing is giving up those wishes and accepting the reality that the past cannot be changed."

I labored a long time under that falsehood: "the past cannot be changed." Liberation from that fatalism came to me when I realized that I am creating my past every moment I live, in every breath I draw and in every decision I make. Time has this curious quality about it: the present becomes both the past and the future as we experience it. The moment has a kind of "quantum" nature about it (apologies to anyone expert in quantum science.) By "quantum" I mean that the

moment is gone in the very awareness of it, and the future arises in the very experience of it. This means to me that I can change the past, because my present decision becomes both my past and my future as it crosses my awareness. And in that future, because of my decision, I live with a brighter or a darker past.

You want a better past? It's yours for the asking — and what's more, a better future is thrown in as a bonus. It's all in the moment, and in the decision born in that moment. The meditation tradition of all the religions that practice meditation teaches its aspirants to live “in the moment” — to pay attention to the “now” of the human experience, to focus on what is immediate in the consciousness. In my own still-developing experience of meditation, I am beginning to realize that the moment is all we have, and that no decision of any consequence can be postponed. In the process of building the quality of our life, the word “postpone” does not exist. The moment requires a decision, the moment IS the decision. Now is the only time we have, and in the grace of God, it is the only time we need.

In my adolescent years, my mother and I occasionally took an evening walk. Often our destination was the spacious grounds of the Nelson Gallery of Art, a few blocks from our home. The gallery was surrounded by a handsome low stone wall, and my mother once remarked, “Your life is like that stone wall; each day is a stone, and once that stone is placed, it's there forever.” She was both right and wrong. The stone is there and we can't go back and change it. But the days go on, and one stone changed will make it a different wall. So with the moment — each one an opportunity and a promise.

You can be better than you are. Isn't this the promise of the Gospel? Isn't this the point of the Gospel? That God's grace can lift you from any failure, can raise you to any height, propel you to any dream? You have only to choose, and you could be swinging on a star. Do it now, this moment; it is the only time we have.

Happy New Year!



Edward and Elizabeth Sims live in Rockport, Massachusetts; two daughters and their families live nearby. Edward celebrated his eightieth birthday this past summer by purchasing his first self-propelled lawn mower; the grass has never looked better.



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