

The Not So Big Life: The Year End Ritual

By Sarah Susanka

In the Ancient Egyptian calendar days 361 through 365 were considered feast days of the gods—extra days, if you like, completing the cycle of the year and the Earth’s rotation around the sun. This exercise is intended to give these same days an exploratory purpose in your own life here in the 21st Century. If you fully engage this yearly ritual, you’ll find that the time spent greatly enhances the process of your own unfolding. Though you may forget precisely what wishes you articulated during the five day period, when you look back a year later you’ll discover that many of the things you’d expressed an interest in came into being over the past twelve months, although not through any planning on your part. They came about simply because you allowed yourself to listen to the inner longings of your heart, and then let them go.

The process is very similar to sowing seeds. When you plant a garden, you don’t sit and stare at the seeds until they sprout. You know that some will germinate and some will not, but it is not up to you to make them grow. All you can do is set the conditions for their growth with good soil, adequate water, and the right amount of sun. In exactly the same way, all you can do for your own unfolding is to set the conditions by slowing down a bit (that’s the good soil), giving yourself the gift of your own presence in your life (that’s the water), and meditating regularly to help open to more of who and what you really are (that’s the sun). None of this can take place, however, without sowing seeds. And that’s what this exercise does—and while you are sowing seeds during this five-day period, you can be enjoying the fruits of the previous year’s harvest at the same time.

You can design this exercise to fit your own time schedule, so there’s really no one way to do it, but I’ll tell you how I’ve practiced it, and then you determine what works best for you. I designate two hours each day between December 27th and December 31st—five days in all—to engage the questions below. During each two-hour period, I don’t answer the phone or email, and I ask other family members not to interrupt me. Some years, if I’m going to work each day, I’ll take these two hours in the evening; other years, if I’m on vacation, I’ll take the time right after breakfast—the time of day when my mind is clearest. Before starting the exercise each day, I’ll meditate, so that I’m really open to what arises once I begin writing down my thoughts, memories and insights.

As you plan your own year-end ritual, it helps to make it happen at more or less the same time each year so you'll remember to do it. So, if summer vacation works better for you than the last few days of each year, feel free to do that instead. If you'd prefer to designate one single day where this exercise is all you do, rather than spread it out over five days, that's fine too, of course. Just don't cut the period down too much or you won't have time to really get into it. Ten hours of time seems about right to really give the exercise its due. The fewer interruptions you have as you engage this process the better, so it's very helpful to let other family members know ahead of time what you are up to. If you have children who you can't leave alone for an hour or two, you might try to engage them in their own version of this discovery process by suggesting they use crayons to illustrate their dreams of what they will be like when they are older, as well as places they'd like to visit, houses they'd like to live in, etc.

You may want to write your responses to the questions below in a blank book or journal similar to your Not So Big Life notebook, or you may prefer to make an audio recording. The medium is up to you. The key is to make this an enjoyable process during which the faucet can simply flow unimpeded.

Here are the questions:

Past

- How have I spent my time in the past year?
- What are the results of the actions I have taken?
- What events, realizations, and understandings have come into being over the past twelve months?
- What has inspired me over the past year?
- What blessings have I received during the year?
- What were my sorrows and disappointments from the year, and how have I been changed by them?
- What were my enthusiasms, accomplishments, creations and joys, and how have I been changed by them?
- What books have I read this year and what impact have they had?
- What movies and other entertainments have moved me this past year, and in what ways?
- What journeys have I taken?
- What patterns and themes have I noticed in my nighttime dreams?
- What have been my most significant dreams, and how have they affected me?
- What patterns and themes have I noticed in my waking dream?

- What conditioned patterns have I recognized, and what experiences have allowed me to see them more clearly?
- What hidden beliefs have I uncovered in working with these conditioned patterns?
- What previously unrecognized aspects of my personality have been revealed?
- What habitual patterns have I experimented with or changed?
- What new patterns of behavior have I adopted over the past year, and what effects have they had?

Present

- How am I different this year than I was last year at this time?
- How can I integrate the key lessons of this past year into my life?
- Are there any strategies, phrases, questions or flags that have particular significance for me right now? If so, why?
- Are there any things I'm being asked to do right now that I am rejecting? If so, what would happen if I simply did them?
- Are there any things I'm trying to force into existence right now? If so, what would happen if I stopped trying to make them happen?
- Are there any new characters in my life that can reveal to me unrecognized aspects of who I am?
- What recent synchronicities do I recall? What do they appear to point toward?
- To what part of myself am I giving birth?
- What am I becoming?
- Who am I really?
- Has my experience of time changed at all since last year?

Future

- Specifically, what is it that I wish to focus on or experience in the coming year?
- If I could see far into the future, what wishes, longings, or creations will I be bringing into being, or engaging in some way?
- If I could sum up all my desires and longings into one simple statement, spoken from the highest aspect of myself, what would it be?

That's all there is to it. The more engrossed you allow yourself to become, the more potent this tool for transformation will be. When I engage this exercise, my first step is to answer all the questions—which I usually do in the first three days.

And when this part of the process is completed, I reread the previous year's answers. This is always the high point of the process for me, because, just like my rediscovery of the forgotten list in the drawer of my nightstand, it is only then that the results of the previous year's planting become apparent. This is the moment when you can really appreciate the power of the entire ritual.

At the end of the five-day period—or however long you've designated for your own ritual--close your journal and place it in a locked file safe, or somewhere else out of harm's way, so that you won't be tempted to look at it until next year. Then forget about it, and drop all attachment to anything you've written, understanding that that part of the process is not in your hands. You are simply the gardener.