
What Does It Mean to “Resolve” Something?

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
by Dean Sam Candler**

There comes a point in the new year, sometimes after intentional resistance, that one begins to think about “New Year’s Resolutions.” Some of us meet that challenge with eagerness every January; we delight in setting forth our good intentions and hopes for the new year, even while acknowledging that we will have often forgotten the exercise by February.

Others of us enjoy resisting the tradition. Ha, we say, what is it about the mere change of a calendar year that prompts us to take on specific resolutions? Shouldn’t we be about resolving to do good things no matter what time of year it is? Thus, at New Year’s gatherings—parties or halftimes or commercials during football games—some of us want to pester each other about resolutions, and others of us haughtily discuss something else.

Maybe it is worth our pausing to consider what “resolve” can really mean. What does it mean to “resolve” something?

I remember my tenth grade chemistry class, as I spilled sodium nitrate all over myself, that to “resolve” a substance meant to separate a compound into particular elements or components. By heat or solvent, we loosened things up!

In music, to “resolve” meant to find some kind of harmonic concord after an intentional and passing dissonance. To resolve a G7 chord into a simple C major chord could be quite pleasing. My earliest jazz music lessons were about resolving the endless circle of fifths.

When I began to learn astronomy and optics, to “resolve” meant to separate or distinguish components that were adjacent to each other. I remember viewing a telescope and resolving, for the first time, the rings of Saturn. It was incredible! Even from our overly lit city, almost any set of binoculars can resolve the intricate craters on the moon. Try it! Resolving means bringing things into focus.

A “resolution” can mean the smallest interval measurable by a scientific instrument. We refer, for instance, to the resolution of our newest computer and television screens. In each new year’s buying season, for instance, we are urged to crave higher and higher resolutions! What do we see with that higher resolution? We see particulars. We see distinctions. I hope we see the world in a better and more accurate way.

What does it mean to “resolve” something? It means to distinguish particulars; it means to pay close attention. Our best “resolutions” are about distinguishing and realizing carefully crafted assemblies of God’s beautiful creation. Once we have resolved objects or issues, we are set free from fog and confusion. Thus, to “resolve” something means to decide or determine an issue with confidence and clarity. To “resolve” means to be set free from doubt and uncertainty and confusing desires.

The observance of a new calendar year, or the observance of any new beginning, is a fitting time to pay attention to our inner selves and assemblies. Some of us can sure be tangled into some crazy knots this time of year! How can we loosen them and be set free? How do we resolve ourselves, focus on what is important, and move back into harmony from dissonance?

For me, the answer is the practice of prayer. Prayer is the practice of bringing the realities of our lives into focus, distinguishing what is good and desirable from what is not good and not desirable. Prayer, finally, brings into focus the love of God, that power which is able to penetrate the most complex of chemical compounds, the most dissonant of harmonies, and the most fuzzy of our confusing images. Love is the heat, the solvent, the power, which resolves our jumbled lives.

So, in this new year, I pray that we practice resolution. That we practice distinguishing between what is necessary and what is unnecessary. That we see particulars, instead of seeing just big and simplistic globs. The world has lots of globs of stuff! Over time, our human genius has been able to resolve those globs into precise scientific tools. With the assistance of divine genius, with careful and precise love, we can also resolve the cluttered discussions and discordant songs of our own lives and communities. Our best New Year's resolution will be love: precise love, focused love, penetrating love, resolving love. Happy New Year's Resolutions to you!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
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