

On this day last year, I vowed that by the end of 2011, I would have completed a new book, lost 15 pounds, gone from a 35 waist to a 33, and visited Brooklin, Maine to see the farmhouse where E.B. White lived and wrote. One year later, I'm on my third chapter of a new book, lost eight pounds, none of it on my waist, and visited Portland, Oregon, where I went to Powell's Bookstore and purchased a book about E.B. White. I've been making resolutions at the start of each year since I was 15, and have never, not once, achieved even one of them. The closest I ever came was in 1990, when Joan and I were living in a farmhouse near here, and I vowed, at the start of that year, never to live in the city, "the god-forsaken city" I think I called it. I lasted five months, until May, when Bob Garris, the yearly meeting superintendent, phoned to see if I felt led to pastor a church in the city.

"Not on your life," I said.

We moved to the city the next month and lived there eight years, where I discovered among other things, that God had gotten there well before me. So now if you ask me where I will be this time next year, I will give you the only honest answer I know, "I have no idea." And if someone were to ask you that same question, if someone were to ask you where you will be next year and what you will be doing, the only honest answer you can give, despite your best intentions and your most fervent resolutions, is, "I have no idea."

In this season of birth, we've been thinking about spiritual birth and awareness. We first talked about how we are not bodies with a soul, but souls with a body. Then we talked about putting up stores of wisdom, insight, and faith in the summer of life, so that when life is cold and barren and the ground is frozen, we can go down to the cellar and carry up a feast and it will be summertime at our table. Following that, we focused on spiritual sensitivity, about what we notice, and maybe even more importantly, what we fail to notice. Do you remember all of that?

Today, on this first Sunday of the year, as we think of our goals for the months ahead, let's not forget that life is fluid, that life changes. We can make all the plans we want, but our circumstances can change. How we deal with those changes is a reflection of our spiritual, mental, and emotional maturity.

Joan and I were listening to NPR this past week, the radio network our sons fondly refer to as Nerd People Radio, and there was a story about the Swedish writer, Stieg Larsson, who wrote the Millennium Trilogy, whose first book, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, has recently come out as a movie. Larsson had been a journalist most of his life, exposing right-wing hate groups. He was nearing retirement and was surprised with the trilogy's commercial success in Europe.

He'd not been able to save much money, so was pleased with his newfound wealth and what it would mean for his retirement. One morning, he awoke and drove to his office. The elevator was broken, so he climbed seven flights of stairs, then collapsed, dying instantly of a massive heart attack. He was 50 years-old and never lived to see the retirement he'd hoped for.

If someone had asked Stieg Larsson, at the start of his watershed 50th year, what he intended to accomplish that year, he probably would not have said, "I intend to die."

What happened? Life happened.

Most of us have clear ideas about the things we'd like to see happen this year. We want to be promoted, we want to graduate, we want to retire, we want to have a child or grandchild, we want to find a new job, we want to get married, or maybe even separated or divorced. Will some of our goals be realized? Yes, the chances are good some of our aspirations will be achieved. But the chances are also good that events we never anticipated, never dreamed in our wildest moments, will also take place, changing our lives dramatically. Some of those changes will bless us, others of those changes will baffle us, even wound us, sometimes deeply.

We will ask ourselves, "What happened?" Life happened.

Life happened to Moses when God appeared to him and said, “I have seen the affliction of my people. I am sending you to Pharaoh that you might free my people.”

Life happened to Mary when Gabriel said to her, “You will bear a son and you shall call his name Jesus.”

Life happened to a father when his younger son demanded his inheritance and left home to live among the pigs.

Life happened to that same son, who came home and found forgiveness.

Life happened to two brothers, James and John, when a rabbi came to them and said, “Follow me.”

Do you notice the common theme in those events? Surprise. Bolts from the blue. The crack of lightning on a sunny day. That is the way of life. We make our plans, and we should, for not to plan, not to aspire, not to dream, is tragic. But always leave room for the movement of God in your life. Always leave room for life to happen.

Do you want to be wise? Certainly, no one wants to be an idiot. But you can't predict the events that will teach you.

Do you want to be successful? Yes, no one wants to be a failure. But you can't predict the nature of your success, or the avenue to it.

Do you want to be happy and full of joy? Of course, you do. But you have no way of knowing how happiness and joy will enter your life.

Do you want your life to matter? Yes, surely you do. But you have no idea how or why or to whom it will matter.

When I was 14 years old, I hated two things with a white hot intensity: going to church and writing papers.

Make your plans, yes, but leave room for the movement of God in your life.

“Live,” our Quaker ancestors said, “as way opens.”

Live as way opens.

Leave time and space for God to work.