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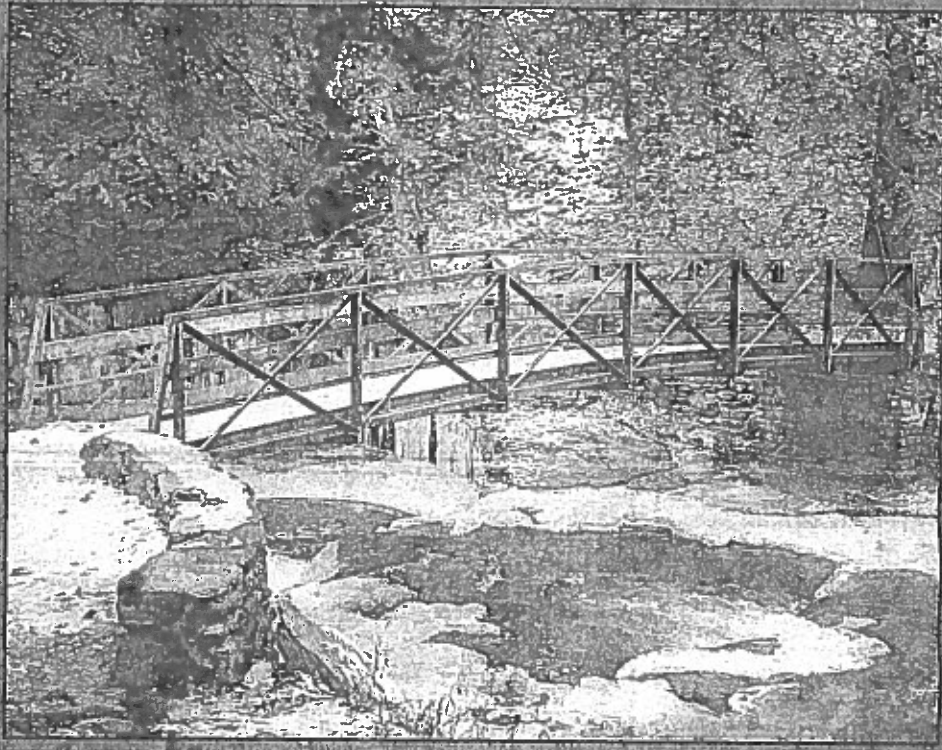
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Begin Again to Love

By Jane Bailey

January. Time for a clean slate and a new year's resolve to start afresh. A list of the 10 most common resolutions for 2019 posted on Inc.com includes diet, exercise, losing weight, saving more money . . . you get the picture. What's not listed is anything close to a spiritual resolution. The list I read was culled from a survey of 2,000 people. Assuming for argument's sake five resolutions per person means that across 10,000 new year's resolutions there is no spiritual resolve at all. Maybe we're just quiet about our spiritual lives, or don't feel the need to reinvigorate them.

That makes me odd woman out, as quite frankly I've been grappling with my spiritual side for a while and need to resolve where I'm headed. I promise myself to be better in the usual worldly ways of living healthier and being happier, but spiritual resolve . . . not so much. If I'm going to make headway in my spiritual life, I need to begin again. So, what should my spiritual resolution be?

If I start with God and God is love, as we are told repeatedly, then the verb *to love* is right at the top of spiritual importance. "God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him" (1 John 4:16). Maybe I should start there.

As I'm formulating a resolution, I find myself thinking, *Do I love enough? Do I accept the fact that God loves me, or do I hide from God's*

love, feeling unworthy, guilty of the many ways I fall short each day? Do I only love those who are easy to love? Yes, there's a problem. I try to love as God loves me, unconditionally, but I haven't gotten there. Maybe this is the year to put some strong resolve into loving the way Jesus teaches us to love. I'll have to begin all over again and rethink how I love, who I love, how I show it and how I receive it. That's a mouthful of resolve . . . and a lot of love to chew.

How do I begin again to love? I wonder. I know it's more than being kinder and gentler, though that's a start. Maybe it's through the liturgical calendar that carries us from the gifts of the Magi to the Christ child—gifts acknowledging God's love in sending his Son to the world—to Jesus's baptism, as Jesus begins his ministry on earth, and on through his teachings, onto the cross, and into the tomb.

Throughout each season of the church year scripture reminds us that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16). The footnotes to that verse on the website of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops remind us that God both gave *in* the incarnation of Christ as well as gave *up* his Son on the cross.

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Begin Again to Love

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God gives his love to us, and in return exhorts, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). The message from Jesus is clear: "I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another" (John 13:34), which reiterates the Old Testament words of Yahweh in Leviticus 19:18: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord." The challenge is the way we are admonished to do this: "with thy whole heart, and with thy whole soul, and with thy whole mind, and with thy whole strength" (Matthew 22:37). In other words, with true resolve. My marching orders are clear, but less clear is what that means to me in my day-to-day resolution to love better.

Trying to get more concrete, I ask myself, "Name a time when you really felt loved. What is it specifically that made you know you were loved?" I flash back to when I was a newlywed suffering from the stomach flu, retching into a toilet bowl. I suddenly felt my husband rubbing my back and handing me a warm washcloth. *God, this is love.* I thought, *and it's not pretty.* First lesson: love isn't always pretty.

When I asked my sister this question, she didn't hesitate: she felt most loved when our father showed up at college and said, "Pack your bags. I'm not paying for another

semester of poor grades." She qualified her response: "Of course I didn't feel loved by him then. But when I later put myself through college, I knew how much he loved me to have given up his dream of my college education." Love isn't always easy.

My son remembered striking out for the West Coast and not being able to keep up with his rent, yet not wanting to let us know he was in trouble. A friend's parents invited him into their home and they became his second family. Their love was a true work of mercy.

One of the women in my writer's guild used to bring delicious desserts to our weekly sessions. We thought it was because she loved to cook. At her memorial service, her grandchildren tearfully shared how she prepared special things for each of them to show her love, which they felt in every morsel. Barbara shared her baking with us not because she loved to cook, but because she loved our writing group. She gave her love to us through her baking. After Barbara's funeral, her family handed out a book of Barbara's recipes. I feel her love each time I make one of them.

The love we give during our lifetime lives on after us, like the Martin Luther King Day of Service on January 21, which honors his life of love in the best way possible—as a

community of love serving each other. What a wonderful reminder that to love is an action-based verb.

There are so many ways to fulfill God's great commandment, some simple, some surprising. No matter how we choose to nurture and serve each other, love leads us directly onto the Lenten path ahead, the season for penance and reflection. Lent, according to Catholic.org, is "radically baptismal"—the time of washing and renewal by the Holy Spirit. The time when we "come clean." What better armor can we put on to get us through Lent than love? Love strengthens us to overcome sin. Repentance and forgiveness are two sides of the same coin. And what is more loving than forgiveness? Love strengthens us to forgive, both ourselves and others, again and again. Just as we need to love, again and again.

So before Lent begins, as we celebrate the beginning of our Lord's ministry on earth, I hereby resolve to begin again to love. To love better, more kindly, and in more ways than I have before. To take Scripture at its word, that the most important commandment is to love God and love my neighbor. To see God's hand in the love I receive and the love I give. To notice, really notice, the love that percolates even from within the pain of this broken world.

My sister spent the last months

of her life in the hospital fighting metastasized cancer. She had been a nurse and spoke the special language of her care team. The nurses and doctors congregated in her room during their breaks for the chocolates and camaraderie she provided, even in her pain. Beneath the laughter, the love of the care team seemed to ward off the sure bet that death was approaching. The night before my sister was to have very serious surgery on her leg and pelvis, the nurses threw a party. They painted her toenails with glittery polish and wrote a note to the surgeon on her leg: "Thank you for helping me put my best foot forward." Their funky love surrounded my sister to the end. Love comes in many forms, even funky ones, offering us infinite ways to love. All it takes is one resolution to accept that offering: *I will begin again to love.*

Jane Bailey is a freelance writer who lives in Litchfield, Connecticut. She is a retired educator who enjoys writing about matters of the heart. All bible verses cited are from The New American Bible, Revised Edition (NABRE), found on the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops website (<http://www.usccb.org/bible>).

The Wildflower

By Roger Karny

Several years ago, I spent some time working near Rocky Mountain National Park in northern Colorado. I arrived in mid-May. Right after that, an explosion occurred—not a terrorist bomb, but an explosion of beauty. Wildflowers appeared out of nowhere, a myriad of varieties, all over the landscape.

Out on a walk, I stopped to look closely at a particularly striking flower. The inside was delicate but incredibly intricate. I examined it and thought to myself, how could something so amazing have come from nothing? There must be some creator, some master designer, some intelligence who somehow, somewhere, some time began all this. I refused to believe that something this minutely intricate and beautiful just developed by itself, even if it took billions of years to arrive at its present form.

This particular flower, of course, soon died in the fall, withered, and was absorbed into the ground as inert, organic material. But by next spring, something else appeared, either in that same place or nearby—maybe another wildflower, a pine seedling, or perhaps some repug-

nant, thorny thistle. But it changed itself, while in the wintry ground, to become some part of the nourishing soil to give to what was coming later.

That question of how to define the term *soul* has been on my mind recently. Some atheist friends tell me that there is no such thing as a soul, that we are just mind and body. When we die, the material decomposes and that's all that happens—a natural declaration for an atheist.

But I counter that by saying that even if you don't believe in a creator or an afterlife, there is still some intangible essence we would call a soul. I maintain it is what lives on after we die, even if it is just here on earth.

The soul is what poets and singers write and sing of, it is what philosophers search for, what theologians ponder, the deep level on which two people connect. It is the dream of one's life and the precursor of things to come, whether in this world or the next.

We are all more than just brain and body. A personality can change in the now, but one's intuitions and beliefs, the impressions others have

had of us, and even the trail of our past actions and words remain. They provide "fertilizer" for those who follow us, just as the gradual decay of that wildflower did for the growth of spring.

Roger Karny is a freelance writer living in Colorado, and a graduate of Swarthmore College. He worked for 30 years in social services. His articles have appeared in the Industrial Worker.

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