Resolved: Resolutions Provide Little Resolve
Or
Was Sisyphus a Kissin’ Cousin?

If the title of this article got your attention - good, that's the idea. Because, you see, you blinked, and we’re already close to a month into the new year. So, at the risk of sounding presumptuous, allow me to ask... “How are you doing with your New Year’s Resolutions”?

For those who are right on track, you are most likely walking around with a warm inner smile of self-contentment --congratulations, keep going! If you’re like most, however, you'll hedge a bit, smile sheepishly, purse your lips and in a half-defeated-sort-of-way say “uhmmm…not so good, oh well” or “well, pretty good for the first few weeks, but … or “pretty much the same as my new years resolutions last year…and the year before…and the year before” or, and this is my favorite, “great, I’m right on target…I resolved that this year I would not change genders or races”.

Which pretty much sums it up. Gallows humor aside, our resolutions, more often than not, fall into oblivion. We often end up settling for way less or we simply play it really safe and avoid them like the plague. Deep down, we know that resolutions, like diets, simply don’t work.

The problem is we think they should. And so we keep making them, over and over and over again – until we finally select the “opt out” button. Words of wisdom, from none other than Albert Einstein, often strike point blank, “the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, expecting a different result”. We’re all a little bit loony when it comes to resolutions.

We here at the Pilates Center know this all to well:

The #1 New Year’s resolution people make is to exercise, to become fit.
The #1 broken resolution is to exercise, to become fit.

So, what's the deal here? Are we really this ill equipped to make the kind of significant alterations in our life that could really make a profound difference. Well, that depends – on who we consider ourselves to be in the matter, at cause or at effect.

Let me suggest something here: that we all, to some degree, have a conversation going in our head - if not in the forefront of our consciousness, certainly in the background – that the circumstances will ultimately win out, despite our best intentions. No matter how successful we are, that little bugger is always lurking behind some deep fold in our frontal lobe

These background conversations drone on like stealth invaders: “I'm just not up to it, anymore” or “Maybe for others, but not for me” or “I just don’t have the
time…money… ability…interest…willpower… discipline…courage or whatever to do what I set out to do”. In other words, the circumstances that present themselves in our lives, and our judgments about them, end up being – in our minds - bigger than we are.

The fact that we all have some version of this internal dialog going on isn’t the problem. The problem arises in how we perceive or “hold” what’s going on in these background chat rooms in our heads. In other words, do they run us or do we run them.

So again, the real question here is “who are we in the matter?”. Are we destined to be at the effect of our circumstances - like Sisyphus rolling that boulder up the hill again and again only to see it roll back to the bottom - or can we reclaim our power over them? Is there some awareness that could dramatically increase the possibility of our good intentions actually crossing home plate?

Here’s a “what if” to try on for size

What if we stopped trying to “get it right”? What if we gave ourselves permission to fall back, to have a bad day, to get stuck and stymied…and, at the same time, we made this promise to ourselves, and to whomever else would listen, that we could absolutely be counted on to stay the course, to not bail, whatever curves we encountered. In other words, we commit ourselves - real different than “trying or hoping for the best”, which is what mostly happens with those NY’s resolutions.

Although there will certainly be times when we will fail to fulfill on our promises, when we declare our intentions from a place of commitment, the possibility of success expands exponentially. A commitment has the teeth of accountability. Can you imagine the difference this way of being would make in our lives, in the world if we could count on each other in this way?

Empowering, enlivening, enriching – absolutely! Easy - hardly ever. But neither is anything that truly makes a lasting difference. And isn’t that what we’re after.

But, how to get there?

Well, at the risk of sounding too “Zen-ish”…there’s no “there” to get to. Rather, there’s a place to “come from”. Which is what declaring and living out of one’s commitment is all about. It’s what had Olympian track and field gold medalist, Sanya Richards (who we trained at our studio for 7 years) return to the 2012 Olympics, after a devastating loss in the 400 Meters in 2008, as the world champion and assured favorite, and take the Gold! To confront failure after all those years of sacrifice and practice was almost too much to bear, especially after the 400 in Greece in 2004…but, with the unflagging support of her coaches and her willingness to not give up on her dream, she refused to concede that it was all over…while everyone else, including the commentators, were saying she quite possibly was – she seemed to always choke when it came to the Olympics.
It is here that we must be careful of that voice waiting in the wings: “yeah, but that’s Sanya Richards”. It matters little, Olympian or amateur, we all have the potential to tap the Olympian spirit within.

To be sure, it takes courage. Which is not to be misconstrued as getting more determined, more resolved, more fired up. This kind of “hyping ourselves up” will only eventually peter out, anyway. On the contrary, it takes the kind of courage that embodies, along with a promise to stay in the game, patience and forgiveness when we fall short. It is the kind of courage that declares one to be stronger than the “stuff” that they’ll surely come up against or the internal dialog they will have about it (count on it!) when it does.

**OK, so there may be no place to “get to”, but let me suggest a place to start…**

Here’s a framework that, if we are willing to take it on, will greatly expand our chances of weathering the rough terrain we will occasionally encounter:

1. **Get clear about what you specifically want to achieve.** What, by when, how much, etc. –be **specific!** e.g. I promise to lose 20 pounds by (date); I promise to be at the advanced level with my Pilates practice by (date).

   Don’t be so concerned with “how” at this stage; this will fall into place as you move forward out of your commitment. You can jot down some strategy notes and potential resources here, but don’t get hung up in the details. You will find through this process that, if you can truly commit “in spirit” to your goals, you will find a way to make it happen. Besides, our life’s landscape is constantly changing, that’s just the way it is. But no matter, because once we choose to operate out of commitment, the accomplishment of our goals is no longer conditional on certain things being present. If something we had counted on disappears, we find another way. What drives our success is no longer the circumstances, rather, it is our commitment.

2. **Create a commitment that has you reach beyond your comfort zone.** Write it down. Litmus test: you feel a kind of tingly sensation of excitement on the back of your neck, along with some “butterflies” in your stomach. You have the genuine feeling that it is definitely something worth taking on; something that if you did achieve would make a real difference.

3. **Declare your commitment publicly** - to your partner, to your friends, to your coach. Yep, that’s right…it’s much too easy to slide when we keep it to ourselves. What’s more, this will infinitely increase your chances of success.

4. **Even better, take on someone as your coach;** someone who’ll hold you to your commitments.
A personal aside here – I don’t do New Year’s resolutions, I spend a couple of days in a personal “retreat” each December, usually over the holidays, and create my intentions for the year. Towards the end of my retreat, I review them, and ask myself, with as much honesty as I can muster, “Are there any of these intentions that I do not see myself putting my full heart and soul into, or that I’m not willing to stay the course with, no matter what comes my way”. Wherever I find that my answer isn’t a resounding “yes”, I either revise that goal or eliminate it. Then I sit down with Wendy, my wife, and declare my commitments to her, and request her support in holding me to my word. I promise her that I will regularly and honestly (that urge to embellish or make excuses just never goes away) review these goals with her, and (here’s the important and often the most difficult part) agree to listen to and abide by her coaching. And she has this way of not buying into my excuses and justifications that…well, let’s just say, that I’m asked to remember that I requested and agreed to be supported. Not so enjoyable at times, but, I’m so thankful I have someone that I’ve empowered to listen for the bigger me, rather than to all my reasons for “why not”. (I often do this same process with someone who I have taken on from time to time as my “coach”).

5. **Ongoingly conduct a personal inquiry** into what does it mean to “come from” commitment, to “live as your word”, to hold yourself senior to the circumstances. An inquiry, by its nature, doesn’t produce answers; but answers are not what were after. Besides there aren’t any that are worth much, anyway. What we are after are new insights, a deepened awareness, a renewed ability to take stewardship of our lives.

6. **Willingness to hang out with “no results”, until those ah-ha moments propel you forward to the next level.** In other words…

   Be kind to yourself,
   Take a stand, make a promise
   If you succeed, acknowledge yourself
   And those around you,
   If you fail, forgive yourself,
   Then, let go of yesterday, and recommit to today…everyday,
   And, remember, it’s a journey, not a rush to the finish,
   We’re creating a new muscle of accountability
   With ourselves and each other
   Be kind to yourself.

So, it all sort of boils down to this: without committed action, and without surrounding ourselves with people who will support us in our commitments, a resolution cannot withstand the inclement weather that this mind of ours throws at us, one day to the next. As Austin’s own singer/songwriter, Jimmy Dale Gilmore so aptly penned: “my mind has a mind of it own”. The good news is, we can profoundly rewire “who we are in the matter” – and transform ourselves into
someone who is in charge, rather than at the effect of the circumstances we encounter. And, not just in our Pilates exercise practice, but in every aspect of our lives.

There are no magic bullets, Pilates included; however, if we can commandeer a shift from our incessant desire to find “that answer” that will make it all alright, and instead commit ourselves to the journey, to the exploration, to “living in the inquiry” – then we will have found a path that will take us forward into something far more powerful, substantive and enduring.

This “inquiry” is at the heart of everything we do and stand for at our Center.

And, It is here where one can truly tap the power of their coaching relationship with their trainer. Here, neither student or teacher are looking for answers, but are now committed to participating as partners in an exploration, to meeting challenges with fresh and open eyes, and to getting clear on what distinguishes committed action from whatever else we have been doing.

Once we are engaged in this inquiry, predictability transforms into possibility, being at effect shifts into being at cause, hope is replaced by committed action. Unpredictable results show up. And dreams unfold.

"Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back--Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation), there is one elementary truth that ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one’s favor all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance, which no man could have dreamed would have come his way. Whatever you can do, or dream you can do, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it. Begin it now."
--Goethe

Here’s to living life full out,

Michael Arbuckle,
Program Director,
Pilates Center of Austin

"If you asked me what I came into this world to do, I will tell you: I came to live out loud."
--Emile Zola