

# Resolving to Create a New You

By Ruth Chang Jan. 3, 2015

## Opinion

THE annual ritual of the New Year's resolution — I'll lose 10 pounds, get my finances in order, be more patient with my family, feel more grateful — misses the point. We try to steel our wills to do what we already know we should be doing. Kick-in-the-pants reminders, however stern, are missed opportunities for genuine self-renewal. (Not to mention that the shelf life of any motivational juice we generate in January tends to expire in February.)

The turning over of a new year is an opportunity to create ourselves anew. How? The key, I suggest, is in shifting our understanding of the choices we make. For many people, the most important choices in life are sources of agony, dread, paralysis — even depression or suicide. It doesn't have to be like this.

A hypothetical example: Eve works as a textbook editor at a Boston publishing house and was approached by a small but prestigious imprint on the West Coast that was looking for a fiction editor. The job would be a big promotion, with a significant raise, and Eve had always wanted to work in fiction.

But Eve is in crisis. Should she move her husband and young daughter from their cozy life in Boston, her home of 15 years, to the wilds of California? If she stays, will she be forsaking the opportunity of a lifetime? If she moves, will her new boss turn out to be a jerk? Will her child be bullied at school? What if her husband can't find a good job? Will the family quarrel, the marriage dissolve, her boss fire her for being incompetent, and she and her

child end up on food stamps in a homeless shelter?

Many people are like Eve and see their choices as, in essence, problems of computation. But choosing between jobs is not like computing the distance between Memphis and Mumbai. The view of choice as a matter of calculating maximal value is assumed in cost-benefit analysis, government policy making and much of economic theory. It's even embedded in the apps you can download that purport to help you decide whether to buy a new car, get married or change jobs.

At the heart of this model is a simple assumption: that what you should choose is always determined by facts in the world about which option has more value — facts that, if only you were smart enough to discover, would make decision-making relatively easy.



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But the assumption is false. When we compute distances, there are only three possibilities: one distance is more than, less than or equal to another. Similarly, when we compute value, there are only three possibilities: one thing is better than, worse than or just as good as another. But we shouldn't assume that goodness is like distance. Values don't have the same structure as facts.

Options can be "on a par" — different in value while being in the same overall neighborhood. If your alternatives are on a par, you can't make a mistake of reason in choosing one instead of the other. Since one isn't

better than the other, you can't choose wrongly. But nor are they equally good. When alternatives are on a par, when the world doesn't determine a single right thing to do, that doesn't mean that value writ large has been exhausted. Instead of looking outward to find the value that determines what you should do, you can look inward to what you can stand behind, commit to, resolve to throw yourself behind. By committing to an option, you can confer value on it.

Of course, this isn't to say that you should commit to being a first-class jerk, pedophile or murderer. That's because being a jerk is not on a par with being a good person.

When we choose between options that are on a par, we make ourselves the authors of our own lives. Instead of being led by the nose by what we imagine to be facts of the world, we should instead recognize that sometimes the world is silent about what we should do. In those cases, we can create value for ourselves by committing to an option. By doing so, we not only create value for ourselves but we also (re)create ourselves. Eve might resolve to make her life in Boston. Someone else, in her shoes, might resolve to start a new life in California. There is no error here, only different resolutions that create different sorts of people.

So Eve, faced with her choice, should reflect on what kind of person she can be. Can she be someone who abandons a contented life for a new adventure? A choice between alternatives that are on a par is a precious opportunity to create the sort of person she can commit to being, by committing to being that sort of person.

Many of the choices we face in the new year will be between alternatives that are on a par. Our task then is to reflect on what kind of person we can commit to being when making those choices. Can we commit to forgoing a

much-needed new car and give the money to charity instead? Can we commit to staying in a secure 9-to-5 job rather than starting the business we've always dreamed of? Can we commit to having a parent with Alzheimer's move in with us, rather than paying to put her in a nursing home?

So in this new year, let's not do the same old, same old; let's not resolve to work harder at being the selves that we already are. Instead, let's resolve to make ourselves into the selves that we can commit to being.

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