

“Don’t Wait too Long”, Listening to Frank Sinatra on New Year’s Day

By [Edward Curtin](#)

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Theme: [History](#)

Like many people, when the New Year rolls around, I think of turning over a new leaf. The problem with doing that, especially in New England, is that it's hard to find one. Nothing grows in this cold climate at this time of year, except old habits. You can turn them over but they're still aged without a bit of green newness anywhere.

Do people fly south in the winter time to find new leaves, only to find their old selves when they get there? Is that what leaving gets you? Is that why winter in Florida resembles a geriatric ward, a place for reminiscing and Auld Lang Syne?

Stuck in old habits and wanting to throw off the old for the new, we tend to do strange things like buy new clothes, get a haircut, or resolve to form new habits that we think are good for us. But these resolutions, as the word implies, are a re-solving of what we resolved to make new last New Year's. So many solutions to so many old habits over so many years are still habits. And we end up being stuck in a double-bind of our own making, anchored in the past. Habits, by definition, are what hold us back in our conditions.

Yet little else is so settled, least of all our lives, and this we sense. We may be stuck, but time passes and we will die chained to our routines unless we change. So we reach for new beginnings every chance we can get: New Year's and birthdays being the most popular – arbitrary constructs used to propel us into what we think will be new lives.

New is easier said than done, of course. How to change? Change to what? Do we really want to change, or are all these habitual resolutions our solutions to the threat that real change entails? If we truly changed, could we change the world? And if we don't, will we have a world to change?

New Year's brings to mind what everyone knows: that the years come and go, they turn, we get older; we seek at every age to be transformed into new people – somehow freed from something, some inexpressible lonely burden, some guilty sense that time will devour us before we make amends. The desire for transformation is universal. So too is the often unacknowledged awareness, that like the years that pass, we too shall “pass” – to use that evasive euphemism. Doesn't anyone fail or die anymore? Or is that for the poor and out-of-sight, the disappeared victims of oppressive injustice and violence? Is it that the conquerors pass and others fail?

“Don't wait too long,” sang Frank Sinatra fifty years ago when he was struggling with aging and the thought of being over the hill, his end coming. “Why must the moments go by with such haste? Don't wait too long.”

Much has been written about Frank, and rightly so. These commentaries have been elicited by the universally acknowledged genius of his singing, especially for his gift of soulfully expressing the deepest human emotions of love and loss and longing. I would suggest that Frank Sinatra, and in particular his great album, *September of My Years*, be requisite listening for anyone interested in real change for the New Year. In the midst of the revelry and fireworks, the old year and the new, the resolutions and irresolutions, looking back and looking forward – here is Sinatra singing of the deepest core of the year’s turning – human loneliness. And how, despite it, to love and connect. How to embrace seeming contradiction. How to change.

I never met Sinatra, but he was my mentor in this process, one that has no ending. It’s transformative work. Ephemeral, yet realer than real.

When I was young, he taught me to be old. Now that I’m old, he’s taught me to be young. How? By listening to the singing, the words that fly from his mouth come from the heart’s desires, the hunger of the soul. They pierce to the core of all our longings for change within permanence. He didn’t write the words, but he had a genius for articulating them. As Bob Dylan said of Sinatra, “Right from the beginning, he was there with the truth of things in his voice.”

In his voice, yes. I am not speaking of the man about whom so much has been written, good and bad. I am not speaking of his politics or his personal life. I never knew the man, just the voice. That’s enough. From his voice comes truth of a very deep nature.

Listen, you older folks. “When the wind was green at the start of the spring....” “When I was seventeen....” “I know how it feels to have wings on your heels”

Youngsters, listen. “When you’re all alone, all the children grown, and like starlings flown away, it gets lonely early, doesn’t it, every single endless day.”

“Once upon a time....” Everyone, listen. Connect.

Perhaps only songs can change us. Arguments so often seem to fall on deaf ears. Could it be that songs are the expression in sound of the dual nature of our New Year’s longings for newness amidst the old?

John Berger, a master political writer no matter what his ostensible subject matter – a portrait, a landscape, a singing performance – put it perfectly shortly before he died in an article in Harper’s magazine. “A song, as distinct from the bodies it takes over, is unfixed in time and place. A song narrates a past experience. While it is being sung it fills the present. Stories do the same. But songs have another dimension, which is uniquely theirs. A song fills the present while it hopes to reach a listening ear in some future somewhere. It leans forward, farther and farther. Without the persistence of this hope, songs would not exist. Songs lean forward.”

So lean forward and listen. It’s a new year. There is hope. If we change.

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Edward Curtin is a writer whose work has appeared widely. He teaches sociology at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts. His website is <http://edwardcurtin.com/>

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