

The Life Coach

Francine Campone

Dances with Squirrels

What to do while waiting for routine life to begin again

THE HOLIDAY DECORATIONS ARE GONE, THE GIFTS UNWRAPPED AND PUT AWAY, THE TRAVEL IS DONE AND THE FEASTING IS OVER FOR ANOTHER YEAR. This is when I start to get squirrely. The old year is done, loose threads tied up like boxes of Christmas ornaments. Yet I don't feel as if the new year has fully started. The first weeks of January are, for many, a slow start. There's a foggy mix of post-holiday relief and perhaps a little sadness that the good times are over. Maybe there's a bit of guilt about having overspent or overindulged. Some people extend their holiday vacations, delaying the return home or to work until all reminders of holiday traditions, celebrations and obligations have been tucked away. Old contracts ended at the stroke of midnight at the turn of the year, yet no one is answering the phone to discuss something new. Classes don't resume until the end of the month. I have my goals for the year, both personal and professional, yet I'm not quite sure where to begin. When I wake up in the morning, I feel as if I've started the car engine and am sitting in the driveway trying to figure out a destination. A multitude of possibilities clatter around in my head, my own squirrels in the attic.

Some people might say I should just go on doing what I've been doing, that 2006 can be the same as 2005 but hopefully without hurricanes, tsunamis and wildfires. It's a nice idea but the reality is that nothing stays the same, least of all us. This person's body and mind ended 2005 quite differently than they began it. Barring some unforeseeable cataclysmic event in 2006, I have no reason to think the coming year would be different in this respect. The physical self is constantly changing, old cells dying out, new ones growing. In the course of a mere 365 days, thousands of new connections were forged among the cells of the brain and old ones weakened or reconfigured. Any doubts I may have had about this constantly transforming state of mind and body were settled last week when I went to a water exercise class for the first time. The very helpful and kind instructors were probably bewildered trying to read the expression on my face, a mixture of nervousness, bewilderment and frustration with the limitations of my aging self. At the same time, a feeling of enjoyment and a sense of fun figure somewhere in the mix.

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What a mix it is! With all of this coming and going, it's amazing that one can find any solid ground on which to stand before taking a step. One of those neural connections that has been strengthened over the years is the one that registers as a particular thought: go with what is going on right now. Direction will emerge when I fully engage with the experience of feeling in flux, having a head full of skittering squirrelly thoughts and a heart full of squirrelly emotions. Moods, feelings and amorphous experiences all offer useful information. Yet a sense of discomfort and the desire to just feel good draw attention away from what we need to see. So the first challenge is to figure out how to let the squirrels roam a bit and still keep them from spreading beyond the confines of the mental attic.

A useful first strategy is structure. When experiencing the rootless ness of transitional times, I find it helpful to pay particular attention to constructive habits and routines. This may mean getting up at a regular time each day, whether I have an early appointment or not. It means setting up to-do lists and focus themes for each unscheduled day on the calendar. Structure includes making and keeping exercise dates with myself and others. My desk calendar gets more of a workout in January than at any other time of year. I know that, at the least, I can rely on it to tell me the day and date and offer some anchor in a free-floating environment.

The second strategy is to listen closely to the noise in my head and to track the sounds, listening for a rhythm that I know will emerge. Like many of my colleagues and my clients, I tend to work on several different projects at once. In these liminal or transitional times, I notice a tendency to want to think about all of them at the same time, resulting in a lot of tangled, half-developed ideas. Tracking the sparks from the mental fireworks can be as simple as jotting them down on index cards or a note pad or making verbal notes on a Palm or cell phone. Periodically, I gather and sort, discarding old stuff and the ideas that, on second reading, leave me cold. I've had clients who use large white boards to play with the resulting material. Others create walls of post-its; journals stuffed with words and drawings. What's important to this process is recognizing and honoring the value of what emerges. In ancient Rome and Egypt, these transition times were honored as sacred. There was a shared recognition that when things are topsy-turvy or uprooted, intuition and the deeper currents of insight are freed from the constraints of habits and routines and compete for attention at the surface of consciousness. The task of the moment, then, is simply to have some kind of "net" in which to hold them. When the turbulence clears, it's possible to sort through and mine

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for the ones that are truly contributions. I imagine myself as a crazy squirrel, digging frantically and haphazardly all over the yard and leaving the ground littered with the disgorged findings. If I gather these kernels into a single heap somewhere, I can sort them at my leisure and determine which ones are worth keeping. I also know, in my squirrel-mind, that there will be a few kernels which stay forgotten and buried, potential trees in some distant future.

A change of calendar year is a funny thing, a human-created construct that is a tiny and imperfect reflection of the constantly-changing universe. All of the hoopla that surrounds the business of new year serves a purpose, however, insofar as it upsets the little routine revolutions of our personal worlds and causes us, at least for a brief moment, to acknowledge the gravitational pull of the moon, the stars, the wider cosmos. And, if we pay close attention, we might be able to pick up a bit of cosmic dust to take into the new year.

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