

Three Steps to Make the Best of 2023

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.”

So begins [*A Tale of Two Cities*](#), Charles Dickens’ novel set during the French Revolution.

After three years of pandemic, lockdowns, riots, two disputed elections, a war in Europe, skyrocketing inflation, cultural earthquakes, and other tribulations, it’s no wonder many Americans [believe](#) we are living in the worst of times.

Even the arrival of a new year, normally greeted with joy and optimism, promises little relief from the trials and divisiveness that plague our country. Traditionally depicted as a gleeful toddler in a diaper and top hat, 2023’s Baby New Year seems more likely to be dragged onto the national stage bawling, red-faced, and wearing a construction worker’s helmet for protection against today’s political and cultural brickbats.

No—popping open a bottle of champagne, dropping a ball into Times Square, or singing “Auld Lang Syne” won’t magically erase our troubles.

But here’s some happier news: There are plenty of other ways 2023 can be “the best of times.”

And here’s some even better news: Those ways begin and end with each of us.

Step One: Appreciate What We Have

Some of us are wealthy in material goods: a fine home, money in the bank, and stocks. Others are gifted by less tangible treasures: a dream job, a loving husband or wife, wonderful

children, loyal friends, or good health.

If we sift a bit more through our personal trove of riches, we unearth our talents: the ability to belt out show tunes like a professional, to teach calculus, to put strangers at ease, to bake a chocolate soufflé that is out of this world. Even our small pleasures—an evening walk around the neighborhood, a glass of wine on the back deck, shared laughter—belong in this box of silver and gold.

To count our blessings, to pause and remember what we possess rather than what we lack, means beginning the new year with a sense of gratitude. What's more, this inventory of our talents and treasures puts a curb on our apprehensions regarding the future. "Gratitude looks to the past and love to the present," wrote C.S. Lewis in [*The Screwtape Letters*](#), "fear, avarice, lust, and ambition look ahead."

Step Two: Focus on the Essentials

We live in a [world of distractions](#) and are bombarded with news, noise, and advertisements. Daily, we also find ourselves swamped with activities, many of them trivial in the larger scheme of things. Moreover, some of us have buried ourselves in physical clutter, goods and chattels, dust-collectors and doodads, hindrances to a meaningful life rather than helps.

By taking inventory this new year, we can identify what is truly most important to us and focus our energies on those things. If we realize, for example, that the love of our spouse is a key ingredient in our happiness, we'll want to put more into that relationship. If physical strength and weight control top the list, we'll join a gym and eat healthy foods.

Focusing on what matters gives us a guiding star for 2023.

Step Three: Choose Responsibility

In a sense, life is a measuring stick of priorities and morality, and each new day gives us a chance to inch closer to one end of that stick or the other, to choose the essentials over the nonessentials, good over evil, right over wrong.

This right to choose—this natural, God-given right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—brings with it those two sidekicks who ride alongside freedom: control and responsibility. We can't lower the prices at the gas pump or the cost of beef in the grocery store, but we can otherwise control where and how we spend our money. We can't control what our relatives and neighbors teach their children, but we can control what we teach our own.

And whether we meet with success or failure in the choices we make—switching jobs, buying a house, taking out a loan to start a business—the proper use and care of this freedom requires taking responsibility for our decisions and actions. It's what separates the grownups from the adult children.

Onward and Upward

“Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way,” wrote concentration camp survivor Viktor E. Frankl in [*Man's Search for Meaning*](#).

Despite the current mess in our country, 2023 affords us as individuals yet another opportunity to choose our own way and what we wish to do with our lives. To choose, to take control of our circumstances, and to accept responsibility for those choices may not always yield success and happiness, but failing to do so guarantees defeat and misery.

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