

Transcript
Spitzer Center Executive Director Jim Berlucchi Appearance
on *Kresta in the Afternoon* with Al Kresta

Topic: Why New Year's Resolutions Don't Work and What You Can Do About It
January 5, 2011

Al: *[Introducing topic]* Good afternoon, I'm Al Kresta. Thank you for being with me, one more hour here to talk about the things that matter most. How about New Year's resolutions? We haven't talked about them yet, but my friend, Jim Berlucchi, will be joining us. He's with the Spitzer Center for Ethical Leadership. Why New Year's resolutions don't work, for most of us and what you can do about it. ... Let's talk a little bit about the topic. New Year's resolutions, it's again a perennial topic. People generally want to be better than they are, and New Year's seems to be a time when they feel it's kind of a cultural push, and also it's got the clean slate feel to it, let me make resolutions. People also have grand lists of resolutions they haven't kept, so talk to me here, what's the psychology here behind making those resolutions to begin with.

Jim: Well, you know, about more than 50% of American's make these resolutions – and sometimes they say as high as 90% -- and by week one, about 25% have dropped off, so down to 75%. After the first month, it's down to about 60% of people who are maintaining their resolutions. But you'd have to ask yourself the question, why would people do this? And essentially, we make resolutions for the sake of happiness. We want to be happier, we want to be our better selves. ... And it's also an expression of optimism and hope, that we have the potential to be better, to be more successful in whatever way – spiritually, physically whatever. The top ones are typically about smoking, drinking, and weight loss, and exercise and money control is another one. You know, getting out of debt etc. etc. But there are also a lot of resolutions about a more meaningful life—a deeper prayer life, a better connection with family and friends, and so on. And multiple resolutions, as you know, which is one of the problems.

Al: Too many?

Jim: It's too many resolutions. So you have to be prudent about how many resolutions you make. But also, you know, I say the “terrible toos.” They're too many, too ambitious, or too vague. You know, I'll be a better person. Well, hopefully I will, that's my desire, but that's too doggone vague.

Al: Yeah, you don't know what that actually means. How will you know when you fail? When you're younger, when I was younger anyways, I felt as though I could make changes easier than I can now.

Jim: Yes.

Al: I don't know if that was just an illusion of youth, or if in fact it's true. When you're younger you're more malleable, more pliable, you can generate more energy. Is it harder to change as you get older?

Jim: Well, it depends of course on the person. If someone has regularly been self-reflective for 40 or 50 years, and very intent at making changes and resolutions and very successful at doing so, they've built that habit of positive change.

Al: So you can build a habit of change?

Jim: Absolutely, you either build a habit of not changing, or you build a habit of changing. Now the default drive is going to be to not change. That is instinctively, without the exercise of the will, and the intellect, we will always revert back to our old habits. But, essentially, making resolutions is really about habit, and if you've made that habit...you know, we are what we repeatedly do. That's what constitutes ourselves – what we do on regular basis, the collection of our habits. And the big challenge with resolutions, Al, is that we're trying to change habits. And our subconscious mind registers about 50,000 impressions and thoughts per day and stores them. So when you say, why is it that as an older person it may be harder for me to make changes, you multiply that 50,000 times 365 times 50 years or whatever it might be, you got a lot stored in that subconscious mind. And so our habits – our self image, our attitudes, many of our beliefs – are stored in the comfort zone of our subconscious mind. But we make our resolutions with our *conscious* mind. Our conscious mind does four things: It perceives, associates, evaluates and decides. But our subconscious mind is where we have our habits, our attitudes, again, and our self image. And so unless we understand and address our subconscious mind, we are doomed to failure in terms of making resolutions and changes.

Al: Well how do you address the subconscious mind, I've read on this that there's kind of a preparatory period for change that goes on which is sometimes, under the surface, a certain ferment of discontent that builds up. But talk to me, how do you address the subconscious problem?

Jim: Well, this is an insight that has been developing over the last 30 years, 35 years in psychology and cognitive psychology. What is used is a method of composing or writing affirmations. What is an affirmation? An affirmation is a positive statement about myself, about my future self, written in the present tense. So it's a positive statement about myself and my future self, but written in the present tense. Now why is that the case? It's because I have an accrued self image, and beliefs and habits over many, many years. Unless I address that subconscious part, with a statement about myself – my identity – change is going to be very, very hard. In other words, just addressing behavior, and not who I am, it's going to be much tougher. So, let's say I'm instinctively or habitually

impatient. So, my resolution is to be more patient this next year. The affirmation that would be appropriate is, “I am a very patient person, and I always enjoy forbearing situations.” Now, that goes against everything in my subconscious mind. But as I muse on that, as I write that, as I think about that – the words, and then the picture and then the emotions – this actually begins to lodge in my subconscious mind. And so I start defaulting then to an image of myself that is actually more powerful than just saying I am not going to be impatient.

Al: It seems to be that this makes sense with Saint Paul’s telling us we’re saints. Calling us saints in anticipation of this. He addresses us as saints in the present even though he’s as aware as anybody that we’ve got a ways to go.

Jim: Exactly, and look at King David in the Psalms – “I am confident and unafraid” – his incredible affirmations that King David had. And you see it in Saint Paul, sprinkled all over: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” ... “It’s no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me.”

Interview No. 2

Topic: Willpower is Not Enough. How to Help Yourself and Others Make a Positive Change January 21, 2011

Al: Well Jim, good to have you. Talk to us about this because people want change. I don’t know anyone who thinks they are all God created them to be and that they are experiencing all that God intended for them.

Jim: Well you and I are pretty close Al.

Al: Haha, thank you, Jim, I didn’t realize you had that kind of admiration.

Jim: Well you’re exactly right, you know we do have this clear sense for things we don’t want in our life and we have aspirations for things we do want. We have these desires for virtues and for greater self control, greater happiness, greater thankfulness, greater gratitude, whatever it might be. And when we embark on these changes we often find ourselves quickly frustrated.

Al: New Year’s resolutions.

Jim: New Year’s resolutions. We talked last time that about 50% of the resolutions are cancelled out within 2 months of making them in the new year. So we focus a little about why that’s the case in particular – how the mind works, the subconscious mind, where a

lot of our habits, our attitudes are lodged. It really works against us when we try to make change because our subconscious mind – that’s our comfort zone, that’s where we go when...

Al: It’s our default.

Jim: Yeah, it’s our default. So when we try to make a change we’re going to hit tension because our subconscious mind, our default, is going to say, “You’re not like that. You know, Al, you can’t make that change, you’ve never been like that, you’ve been this other way for 20 years, you can’t do this.” Now it doesn’t say that quite explicitly, but rumbling up within us are these strong notions of who we are. So therefore, we have to address that subconscious mind. You know, we have to take that into account when we try to make changes.

Al: That’s resistance, right?

Jim: Very much so. Yeah, the subconscious mind likes things as they are. It likes you as you are. It likes me, with all of our faults and problems it just is accustomed and does not like change. We talked about this, that people don’t like change. We really do like *positive* change, but our subconscious mind is very, very comfortable.

Al: Kind of like concupiscence.

Jim: That’s interesting, yeah.

Al: Cause it weighs you down.

Jim: Yeah, it does weigh you down.

Al: In that sense, it’s not necessarily immoral, like concupiscence tends to assume immorality. But what we’re talking about here does weigh one down and offer resistance to positive change.

Jim: Exactly, it’s like gravity. And whenever you try to change anything, even how you clap your hands, we do things so instinctively. I changed a file in my office recently which I’d had on my left-hand side for 10 years, I can’t tell you how many times I’ve thrust my left hand into air, looking for a stapler or whatever, probably hundreds of times now and now my subconscious... you know our habits are there, our attitudes, our self image.

Al: So where does the desire to change come from? That kind of resistance is weighing us down at the bottom so to speak, where does the energy for change come?

Jim: Well those are two very good questions. The desire for change comes, I think from the desire for happiness. We all want to be happy, and anything that we don’t want we desire to move out of so that we can have greater fulfillment. So we desire virtue in a real way

because it will make us happy. Virtue is human excellence, so we desire to be self controlled. We want to have fortitude, we want to be fair, we want to be wise. So we want good habits because we want to be happy, because God has made us for happiness. But you asked another interesting question, where does the energy come from?

Al: Because there's a gap between my aspirations and my performance.

Jim: Well you're exactly right, and I think one of the things we make note of in this Spitzer Center workshop is that if you are in a state of life where your energy is low, where you're in some trauma or you're physically very, very weak and traumatized, that's not the time to try to make positive changes. You know, you have to have enough psychic energy to even embark on the change. So we have to be discerning in terms of good seasons in our lives to make change. Sometimes it's not a good time, so we should suggest stay the course and kind of be content to hold our ground instead of advancing. But other times, we will have a lot more energy and that's why I think New Year's Day or New Year's Eve provides a kind of psychological turning point for people, and it actually stirs up energy. And the other thing to note is that we do have a great goal. A great goal will trigger great energy. So small goals trigger small energy, but great goals animate great, superior, strong energy. So having large goals will correspondingly energize us. And you know that in your own life, when you're trying to achieve something that's in front of you and it's a great and good thing, you find unbounded energy to do it. Whereas, when you don't have a goal or very small goals, you just kind of live. It's like *Groundhog Day*; you just don't have a lot of energy. So energy and goals have a corresponding relationship.

Al: *Groundhog Day* is a good analogy.

Jim: Yeah, I feel like that sometimes, like I'm living in *Groundhog Day*, hopefully not most days, but some days I feel that way.

Al: You mention a hierarchy of happiness, I see in your notes here. Give me some idea of what that means.

Jim: Well we all desire happiness in and for itself. Everything we do – the clothes we wear, the car we drive, the spouse we marry, the job we take, the neighborhood we live in, everything is driven by a desire to be happy. But there is a hierarchy of four levels, and as you go up the scale – 1,2,3,4 – the happiness lasts longer, it affects more people, and it's a deeper kind of happiness. So, happiness Level 1, what would you imagine the lowest level would be? I'm interviewing you now.

Al: The most basic...it has to be satisfying physical needs.

Jim: There you go. Yeah, so simply pleasure. You know, physical satisfaction comes from the senses. When you go up from happiness Level 1, happiness Level 2 is ego satisfaction. It comes from your achievement, popularity, respect etc. This is a psychological kind of happiness, with self-esteem. And that's good as well, just as much as happiness Level 1, and it lasts longer. Level 3 is what in Latin we call *beatitude*, or doing good for others, making contribution, or love of other people. That's where I experience making the world a better place. And that gives me a longer, deeper, more pervasive kind of happiness and it affects more people too. 1 and 2 are just about me, but Level 3 starts with others. And Level 4 is...interestingly, St. Augustine talks about "made for thee" and "my heart is restless until I rest in thee" It is a desire for perfect, complete, unrestricted transcendent happiness, eternal happiness. And that's a desire for God, and we're ultimately made for that. Now all four of these desires are good, but they only work well when the lower ones are pointed up towards the higher ones. And just like we talked about the default drive, the default drive for us will tend to go down. You know, I will definitely go for the pizza and beer before I'm going to go into my prayer time. Well, I don't necessarily do it in that sequence in the morning. In the morning I'd rather not.

Al: So these lower goals need to be in some way instrumental to attaining the higher?

Jim: Well, you can actually have the higher goals without real satisfaction of the lower goals in a certain way, particularly happiness Level 1. People will give up food and drink, fast for Level 4, Level 1 for Level 4. But you have to be psychically alive, and the better health you have at Level 1, the better the other three levels will likely work. So there's a kind of dependency and flow with them, and all of them are good. Now, in what we talk about in regards to habits, it's important to know, at which of these levels may I want or desire another or a new habit? You know, is it renewal – Level 1? Is it new achievement – Level 2? Is it doing good deeds and helping others – Level 3. Or is it my spiritual life – Level 4? So we have desires and we have habits on all four of those levels, and so understanding how our habits connect to those levels gives us a little bit of a grid or a framework for looking at our whole person.

Al: ...so the seven deadly sins work into this whole question of effective change.

Jim: Well that's right, because these things work against us. They come with our human nature, and we want to move from the deadly habits to the life-giving habits.