

Sliding into the New Year

With ever greater frequency as the end of the year approaches, people around here wish each other “e guete Rutsch,” a good slide into the New Year. I haven’t found anyone who could explain the origin of this expression, so I offer my own theory. As Switzerland is primarily an alpine country — even if we don’t notice it much in Basel — and winter is likely to involve snow, I think the New Year’s slide refers to snow and our relationship to it.

Snow seems to divide people into two categories: those who love it and those who hate it. And both for the same reason, I suspect ... because it is slippery. At the tiniest dusting, children (who all fall in the first category) dash outside and take running starts on the sidewalk to see how far they can slide, while cautious adults shuffle gingerly out to scatter gravel or salt to disarm the snow of its slipperiness.

Just about everyone likes to *look* at snow. Who can complain about that magical glittering frosting on the rooftops, those blue shadows under the trees, the luminosity of a snow-covered landscape at night? Who isn’t amazed by the thought that each snowflake, every single one that ever was and ever will be, is unique? Everyone loves the blankety cottony quiet that descends with a snowfall. But then the sand trucks and plows rumble out with the invincibility of tanks to rid the streets of the slippery foe. We are lucky here in Switzerland that we can get just about anywhere by tram or train and rails are seldom blocked by snow. We don’t actually need to drive our cars. But nevertheless, it’s easy to fall into thinking of snow as a nuisance if not an outright hazard.

When does this attitude shift occur? Is it an inevitable part of growing up? For children, snow is an invitation for sensory exploration and celebration. They can’t wait to get their hands on its cold wetness to make snowballs or snowmen, fall backwards into it to make angels and, God forbid (“you don’t know what animal may have peed in that snow!”) lick it. They delight not only in its slipperiness, but also its coldness, its wetness, its crunch underfoot, its beauty and its complete and utter, world-transforming impracticality. After all, if there’s enough of it at once, it disrupts the daily routine completely!

On our own terms some of us grown-ups share in this delight. With the right equipment and infrastructure, we can be found giggling our way along in a more or less controlled slide on skates, sleds, skis or snowboards. Most of us struggle to give ourselves over to sliding — tasting the freedom, but fearing the lack of control, imagining all of the injuries we might incur. My skiing style is characterized by this ambivalence. But ah those moments when I succeed in surrendering to the slide. Pure joy! A ski instructor once told me to embrace the slope — not facing backwards and clinging to it, which is more my natural inclination — but facing down into the unknown with open arms. Perhaps this is a metaphor for life.

Sliding into the New Year invites the same qualities of trust and openness and expectation. This has been a hard year and many of us are glad to see it end, but like each snowflake, each moment is new and if we can greet them the way children greet snow, then we will be well on our way to sliding into a happy New Year.