HASLAM'S VIEW



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Santa Claus requests an urgent house call

IT'S A FUNNY OLD TIME OF YEAR. WHETHER YOU ARE RELIGIOUS OR NOT, AND irrespective of the faith that you may or may not hold, the Christmas holiday break followed by the arrival of the New Year gives everyone a chance to ponder on the year that has gone and the year that is yet to come.

Your New Year celebrations may be massive or minimal. You may hold a riotous party or a sedate dinner. You may join the crowds in city centres or a few friends in a local restaurant. You may simply stay at home with a good book or wait for Jools Holland on the television, but you can't escape the fireworks at midnight, and the deep symbolism of the new number on the calendar.

The belief that next year will somehow be an improvement on the one that is ending seems to be hard wired into almost everyone.

It's often little more than wishful thinking. Patients who have had a wretched year coloured by sickness or bereavement all too often look at the upcoming year with hope. 'Well, at least it can't be any worse,' they say, a statement that is as evidence free as crystal therapy.

How often do people say to us: 'I can't wait for this year to end,' as if the passing of the year somehow wipes the slate of fate clean?

But then logic never comes into any questions of hope and belief. And believing that the calendar can influence life, health, and happiness is wonderfully illogical. It is no more logical to choose January 1st as the starting date for the next phase of your life, than it is to select March 27th or October 9th. But that doesn't stop us all doing it.

I have to admit I gave up proper New Year resolutions a long time ago. Pledges to get fit, or to practise a musical instrument every day, or to complete the novel that has been half-written for the past twenty years, or to learn French, or countless other good intentions, never ever seem to make it into the second week of January.

'I know that it is deeply unprofessional even to feel like laughing in the face of pain'

The only resolution that did survive was the decision not to make any more resolutions – but that's probably a cheat. I hope I'm not being negative – just appropriately realistic.

It's a while since I've done out-of-hours duties over Christmas and New Year, but I did them for a quarter of a century which felt like a fair share, and a rather complex working week now makes them impractical – but I well remember one particularly intriguing home visit on Christmas Day – a call to Father Christmas himself.

The call had been to visit a man in his early forties with agonising back pain, and when I arrived I found a whimpering Father Christmas, lying on the living room floor holding his back in agony, and surrounded by concerned looking children. The poor father of the family – for it was he – had dressed up in a Santa Claus outfit, swung a bag of gifts onto his back, and experienced that sudden prang in the back that so many back pain sufferers report.

Now, I know that it is deeply unprofessional even to feel like laughing in the face of pain and adversity, but this was so like a scene from a TV sit com that it was hard to disguise my emotions.

And I'll also never forget the visit to a newborn baby on the first day of the New Year. Or, at least, I'll never forget the greeting I received at the door. 'Oh, Dr Haslam,' the excited new dad said. 'You've arrived just in time. We've just opened the champagne to toast the new arrival. Maybe you can join us – can I offer you tea, or would you just prefer some water.'

As I said, it's a funny old time of year. Enjoy it!

Tell us what you think?

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