

The first of January brings a sense of renewal and resolve to conquer challenges—some perennial in nature and others totally unexpected. 2016 is no exception.

On the global front, a landmark climate accord has just been signed. There is a glimmer of hope for families who must raise their children in unbearable smog and for those who live at sea level. Time will tell if corporate or individual greed will give way to a more responsible business ethic. However, to paraphrase Shakespeare, the dogs of war are rampaging in parts of the world, creating an unbelievable carnage and loss of life affecting men, women and many children. It is no wonder that people risk everything to escape this horrific life. At present, the path to peace is murky and involves the prospect of even more loss of life.

Domestically, we are hearing expressions of prejudice and contempt in both elected officials and those seeking office toward those that most need our protection. Women, the disabled, and especially Mexicans and Muslims are targeted. The slow healing of our economy brought back from the brink, while easing the lives of many families, has not erased poverty and hunger. In 2014, 16 % of single parent families with no wife and 31% of single parent families with no husband lived below the poverty level in the United States. 21% of children and 14 % of seniors live in poverty. The poverty rate is greater in rural areas (17%) than in metropolitan areas (15%). 29% of disabled people live in poverty. The highest poverty rate by race is found among Blacks (26%), with Hispanics (of any race) having the second highest poverty rate (24%). Whites had a poverty rate of 10%, while Asians had a poverty rate at 12%. (2014, U.S. Census Bureau)

Individually, each of us has goals regarding health, relationships, spiritual and intellectual growth. We learned from Dr. Christina Williams at our December meeting that it was important to keep moving, continue to learn new skills, and eat foods that promote good health. Some of us (or our partners) are dealing with health issues that require embracing a new reality, and optimism requires more effort. This month, we will learn how to deal with some of these issues and find balance.

In challenging times, it helps to recall the words of Michelle Obama, "You may not always have a comfortable life and you will not always be able to solve all of the world's problems at once but don't ever underestimate the importance you can have because history has shown us that courage can be contagious and hope can take on a life of its own." All of us can be the voices of tolerance, of equality, of justice—we can work to make our communities, our nation, and our world a better place for all to live.

I wish all of you a healthy and happy 2016! I hope to see you January 14 at noon in room A at the Chapel Hill Library. —Bea Keller