Resolute in my stance
A new year is no time to change feelings about resolutions
By Rex W. Huppke
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I'm not sure precisely when I started hating New Year's resolutions, but I'd guess it began in late childhood when I realized "turn into Spider-Man" was an unattainable goal.

Such crushing disappointment led me to steer clear of wide-eyed promises of self-improvement and bad-habit cessation. I felt I'd been burned enough when June rolled around and I still couldn't shoot webbing from my wrists. No reason to set myself up for additional failure.

Yet despite my long-standing, Grinch-esque opposition to New Year's resolutions, the practice seems to continue. Here and around the world, right now, people are busily concocting grandiose plans for fresh starts and thinner thighs and less gluten consumption, leading me once again to wonder: Why?

For enlightenment, I turned to the Internet, an infallible source of historical information and videos of cats looking adorable. The unofficial consensus seems to be that the practice of making resolutions began in ancient Babylon.

Because Hallmark had not yet invented calendars, the Babylonians' New Year began on March 23, and most of them would resolve to return any farming equipment they had borrowed. (If I ever do make another New Year's resolution, that's going to be it.)

In Roman times, Julius Caesar came along and declared that the new year officially begins Jan. 1, a date with no actual astrological or agricultural significance, but, hey, when you're Caesar you do as you please.

That date stuck and here we are today, viewing Jan. 1 as the perfect time to stop doing all the bad things we do and start doing all the good things we don't do.

I turned to an actual person who knows stuff, Barbara Newman, a professor of English and religious studies at Northwestern University, and she said: "I think the need to celebrate new beginnings is something very human, very deep. It allows us to say, 'This is when I can make a new beginning in my life.'"

OK, I'll buy the "new beginnings" thing. I generally find it necessary to start any form of self-improvement on a Monday. And if I start on a Monday and screw up, I immediately decide to wait until the following Monday to start again. The same applies to screwing up on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays. And of course the weekends don't count.

I don't do much self-improving.

Anyway, going back to resolutions for the new year, even if I accept that it's a good time for people to make a change, why the need to trumpet the plans? Why let everyone on Twitter, on Facebook and within shouting distance know that THIS is the year you're going to stop eating cupcakes at midnight? I
doubt the Babylonians ran around hollering, "Darn it, this time I really am going to return that scythe I borrowed!"

Fred Bryant, a psychology professor at Loyola University, said the keys to success when it comes to New Year's resolutions are having a true commitment and a belief that success is inevitable.

"You have to have commitment to change," he said. "Unless you have that view, you're less likely to achieve success."

People have actually studied how well New Year's resolvers do in keeping their resolves. The results do little to bolster my pessimism.

"I found a dozen or so studies, starting in the 1950s, that have focused specifically on New Year's resolutions," Bryant said. "And the research shows that about half of people who make new year's resolutions are successful after one year. I was kind of startled, but overall about half stick to it."

I hate it when the facts get in the way of a good grousing.

One study, published in 2002 in the Journal of Clinical Psychology, noted that "resolutions provide a naturalistic window into the genesis and the maintenance of self-initiated behavior change." I'm not sure what that means, but it certainly sounds more convincing than my hypothesis that "resolutions are dumb."

So, it appears once again I've been outflanked by science. Had I resolved at the start of 2010 to be a more decent fellow, I'd probably step down from my perch of negativity and wish all you reveling resolvers well in the coming year.

But then I'd be untrue to myself. I'd be accepting that my opinion isn't always right.

And I don't plan on doing that until Jan. 1, at the earliest.