

Inspire Your Best Year Yet

How to Create a Theme for a Year

© 2019, Mary Ellen Merrigan, Merrigan Group LLC dba Mary Ellen Beads, Albuquerque, NM

Who would have thought inspiration for my year themes would spin from five friends who gathered around the dining room table at my house on New Year's Day in 2000? What developed as a result of the shared experience changed my life.

In a salute to the tradition of New Year's rituals, one woman made brought black eyed peas. Another guest engaged us with vision cards that let us feast our eyes on dreamy images. Yet another who had Rune stones, ancient symbols that can provide insight, asked each of us to formulate an answer to this question: "What do I need to know for my life now?" We drew straws for the role of moderator, then began the exercises with a personal list of those things we wanted to release, including problems and failures from the past year. We placed our answers in a large bowl and burned the paper. On a separate sheet we outlined our replacement wishes.

As we worked through the afternoon's exercises, a small herd of deer gathered at the waterfall. Someone noticed and commented, "That's magical – really good luck. Quick! Pick your theme for the year."

"Think Bigger!" popped into my mind and out of my mouth. Voila! A theme for my year was born.

During the next few days I created a collage that included pictorial examples of me thinking bigger in various areas of my life: fitness, relationship, work and self-development. "Think Bigger!" served as an impetus for all manner of change during the following 12 months. I impetuously proposed to my significant other on Leap Day and he accepted. We married in August. I traveled, achieved major revenue goals with my sales staff at the radio station which I managed, spent nearly a month abroad, and managed to read and record notes on 45 books. Through all the activity, my themed collage hung in front of my desk, an ongoing reminder of my purpose.

It wasn't a miraculous shift, but I began to notice subtle differences in my world with completions, accomplishments and connections. I realized I had a new framework for focus. "Think Bigger" impacted everything shifting my 2000 world in a big way.

I continued to use my vision boards and, as a ritual, started every year with a theme. In 2002 after my layoff from the corporate world, my theme of "Live in the Joy of the Journey" seemed

really challenging. My mastermind group that consisted of two other coaches helped me make sense of the chaos. Our colleague Karen's theme, "Roots and Wings" helped her transition the wisdom she'd gained in previous careers to her newly formed coaching practice. As she explained recently, she knew *why* she wanted to coach, but not *what* to do. Her theme encouraged her direction as she 'bumbled through'.

Rachelle, the third coach in our trio, emphasized health and wellness when she left her corporate job. She reflected that her main focus was getting back to center, focusing on self. She then told the story of watching a Murphy Brown sitcom episode in which Murphy had to create a theme song. It struck a chord. What might transpire if you picked a theme for the year and just focused on it?

Today Rachelle, now a certified health coach, points out that these themes never leave. They keep manifesting in the background. She maintains that although she tweaks the theme each year basically it's centralized around certain things: health, wellness, kindness.

A theme, while not as specific as a goal, provides an overarching guideline. Nike certainly didn't choose "Just Do It" to create a theme, but the phrase serves as a theme for many as it inspires people to take action. In this way, a theme is synonymous with focus or intention. Your theme provides a reminder about what's important to *you*, what you're choosing to emphasize in the months ahead. In addition, themes let you view your goals from a different vantage point.

Consider a pilot. Without a rudder he/she cannot maintain direction. When the plane goes off course, the rudder allows for adjustment. Minor tweaking puts the flight back on course. A theme works much the same way. You have the opportunity to experience your intention all year long. As Simon Sinek says, "*When the why is clear, the how is easy.*" In other words, your theme becomes your internal GPS.

The power of a theme

"Let inspiration lead you wherever it wants. For most of history people just made things and they didn't make such a freaking deal out of it." --Elizabeth Gilbert, author of *Big Magic* and eight other books, including *Eat, Pray, Love*.

Dozens of gurus and websites tout the practice of a word, a phrase, a mantra or a theme for the year. It's an opportunity to remind yourself of a value you will embrace, an action you will take, a sense of self you will use as a guideline for the 365 days ahead. Websites www.OneWord365.com suggests it will take intentionality and commitment, but states implicitly that one word can transform your life. Similarly, www.MyOneWord.org touts the un-resolution, explaining "**My One Word** replaces broken promises with a vision for real change. When you choose a single word, you have a clarity and focus. You are moving toward the future rather than swearing off the past." Inspirational words include joy, believe, gratitude, courage, obedience, and purpose among a world of others.

As you begin to think about the upcoming year, ask yourself, *what* word resonates with *my being*? How will you expand, grow, enrich your life? Is there a word that captures your vibrancy that can become your theme?

Patanjali, the father of modern yoga puts it this way: *“When you are inspired...dormant forces, faculties, and talents become alive, and you discover yourself to be a greater person by far than you ever dreamed yourself to be.”*

For the past few years, my themes have focused inward and provided a general new direction for my life. A three-dimensional canvas displayed my theme “Shine” in 2013. This was my first venture into a mixed media beyond simple collage. Powerful maker energy emerged with beaded elements, fibers and three dimensional creations. Each year’s theme emerges stronger. My ongoing commitment to heart is one example. A theme of heART-FULL emphasized my conscious choice to see myself as a business artist first and foremost. I felted and embellished 12 hearts, one for each month and displayed them on canvas. The next year Heart and Hand captured my maker energy as well as my intention to create a loving world for myself as I lived an art-full life.

I know for a fact that a theme prepares you as nothing else does to maximize your time and expand the possibilities in your world. Are you *still* unsure about your theme?

Five Ways to Pick a Theme for a Year

Let’s examine 5 ways to pick your word or theme for the year. You can choose one or all of these ideas, in order or by preference. There is no right or wrong way to go about this. Here’s a simple list followed by a short discussion of each strategy.

1. Notice what’s around you
2. Make a values list and pick one
3. Pick your word at random
4. Make up a word
5. Journal/meditate/walk in nature

You, like me, may have so many ideas you don’t know where to begin. Start where you are. Start with the one idea that seems easiest to you. Start by stating your intention and then living into it moment by moment. Choose to set aside the noise of social media and resonate with something from within that gives you a container in which to place your goals. What we’re after here is something to bust the inertia and declare your theme. Read on to explore how this works.

1. Notice what's around you

Are there unread book titles that interest you? Is there a poster, a picture, an image that calls to you? Do you have a box of charms or trinkets to inspire? Consider your theme as something hiding in plain sight. Pick two or three words that describe your environment currently. Are those words you choose to BE with for the coming months? If not, could those same words be tweaked to a more inspiring outcome?

For example, if you notice your gym schedule, a magazine on fitness, the 'FitBit' on your arm, and you're currently wearing comfy workout clothes, then your theme might be health. So, what does excellent health look like? What would work to inspire you to look to the future and be really excited about health? Is there a color of health?

Health is an overarching word. Many people make a New Year's resolution to lose weight. One woman I know used one word to remind herself she wanted to live from a better place: nourish. Another picked a rhyme: Lean & green in 2015. Do you notice yourself responding to any part of these prompts?

You might find clues in books you've read during the past few months. See if there is a theme to the titles you've examined, music you've listened to, or workshops you've enjoyed. The examination of your past few months may cause you to think about situations or feelings you want to repeat as well as those you choose to leave behind. Those could be theme opportunities. You're bringing awareness to yourself and how you interact with your life. Instead of review, you may choose to journal to find your theme. Respond to this prompt: "I feel as if my theme is about":

Make a few notes about anything that resonates with you.

2. Make a values list. Pick one.

Values, defined as broad preferences concerning appropriate courses of action or outcomes make a good starting point. You may be familiar with the "Character Counts" campaign for elementary students and the values it incorporates: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, citizenship. James Clear, author of *Atomic Habits*, lists 50 common Personal Values at this link: www.jamesclear.com/core-values. Maybe one of these words holds the key to your theme for a year. When you look at a list of values, what stands out? Is there one value important enough to focus your attention for the year?

My friend, author and Coach Rachelle of www.CoachLee.com created a deck of value cards, the size of business cards. The small deck of cards, each with a different value, could be shuffled and re-played. Her clients receive these instructions: 1.) Select 15 values cards that speak to your heart; 2.) Narrow your selection to the top 10 values; 3.) From these cards, select your top five values. These cards represent the values that are important to you, around which you naturally orient your life. The following is a table with the values from Coach Rachelle's game. Four blanks are provided for you to customize values not found in the deck.

Now play the values game by circling those values most important to you. Could one of these BIG values provide your theme for the year?

Self-Reliance	Responsibility	Independence	Connections
Persistence	Modesty	Travel	Religion
Commitment	Advancement	Education	Cooperation
Respect	Exciting Life	Free Time	Order
Money	Honesty	Environmental	Beauty
Belonging	Control	Risk	Enjoyment
Inner Harmony	Humility	External Life	Close Friends
Individualism	Metaphysical	Discipline	Fame
Happiness	Stability	Adventure	Intimacy
Career	Power	Challenge	Mentoring
Psychic Power	Imagination	Equal Opportunity	Mastery
Accomplishments	Peacefulness	Self-Expression	Entrepreneurship
Joy	Health	Loyalty	Love

Humor	Creativity	Trust	Integrity

Make a note about the thoughts you now have regarding your values or your theme.

3. Pick your word at random

Our family plays with words. We love games like Scrabble. Growing up on the farm we fought over the rural newspaper’s crossword puzzle. Let yourself revel in the power of words. Open a dictionary at random and pick a word. Run your finger down the column until you find one that appeals to you. Read its definition. Follow the clues. Check the synonyms. Pick a word and live with it for a day. Write it on a piece of paper and slip it in your pocket. How does that word feel? Could it be your theme for year?

Try picking your word at random from a book that inspires you. Although this exercise is similar to browsing the dictionary, it can be helpful to use a special book. For example, I chose “*The Artists Way*” The headline on the first page I turned to was “Buried Dreams.” Could Dream be a theme? Certainly. Or, it could spark another exercise. When I read about dreams, I followed author Julia Cameron’s advice, “...be sure to write your answers out quickly. Speed kills the Censor.” Quickly. What will you choose as your theme?

If you have several words and not a clue about which is most important, just have fun with it. Place your chosen words on a dartboard. Now, without glancing at specifics, step back and toss a dart. Or, alternatively, list your words on slips of paper and draw one from a bowl. What you will have is your theme for the year! A list of inspiring words from the front page of www.OneWord365 gives us the chance to scout words perfect for us:

”Create, Balance, Write, Possibility, Finish, Faith, Relax, Present, Reduce, Unstoppable, Direction, Generous, Transformation, Battle, Strength, Minimize, Change, Ambition, Grace, Stewardship, Imagine, Relentless, Risk, Brave, Dare, Transition, Pause, Joy, Revel, Focus, Determined, Together, Be, Love, Celebrate, Empower, Curious, New, Opportunity, Adapt, Confidence, Silence, No, Freedom, Uplift, Choose, Ignite, Persistence, Mindfulness, Open, Trust, Live, Learn, Today, Growth, Thrive, Momentum, Different, Connect, Organize, Shine, Commit, Sacrifice, Purpose, Peace, Truth, Discover, Selah, Forward, Slow, Believe, Invest, Breathe, Integrity, Reflection, More, Embrace, Release, Rebuilding, Soar, Awake, Push, Courage, Adventure, Perspective,

Diligence, Listen, Simplify, Fortitude, Appreciate, Resolve, Optimism, Enjoy, Progress, Action, Health” -suggested words from OneWord365

Or, you might relate to a purpose you already embrace, such as an ongoing commitment to a cleaner planet or to mindfulness. How will you use a theme to make the coming year different? Purposeful? When you ask that question of yourself, do you immediately focus on your mission to save animals from cruelty and decide to take more of an activist role? Perhaps your theme is ending hunger, or simply being present. Your theme will ensure you do something every day towards that mission. Make notes of words that might provide a meaningful theme for the year.

4. Make up a word

Social media has generated dozens of new words like selfie, phablet, unlike, srsly and fomo. It could be time to design your own word. If you're considering a theme of several words, see if there is an acronym to hold everything front and center.

I attempted this idea one year when I chose the theme of CAP: Create, Amaze, Play. Overall, I found the single word I'd created to be less effective than the phrase. My experience may not be the same as yours, however. When you're searching for clues, it helps to experiment with different exercises.

In the process, **play**. Have a bit of fun as you search for your theme.

5. Journal/meditate/walk in nature

Maybe you keep a gratitude journal, a dream journal, a quote book, or even an art journal. Look through pages for phrases that appear often. Is there a quality you've been seeking? What do you want to celebrate? How would you describe your experience with this activity?

“Your vision will become clear only when you look into your heart. Who looks outside, dreams. Who looks inside, awakens.” — Carl Jung

Review your journal and note patterns, shapes, repetitions, pictures collected. I write three pages daily in my plain-Jane composition book. Often I doodle in the margins of my morning pages. One year I noticed dozens of hearts in my doodles. My theme for 2010: “Heart Vision.” A journal offers insight into how we think.

Meditate, stating your intention to find a theme

If you have a meditation practice, you already work with your subconscious. State your intention, then ask for a sign to be given to you. Next, relax. Your theme may come to you during a walk in nature, or you may notice clues in your environment. Meditation enhances the right side of the brain which communicates with your subconscious. Thus, meditation is a powerful way to guide your energies. Set aside a specific amount of time and meditate, stating your intention to find a theme. What did you notice?

Ask a loved one to name your theme for you.

You may experience another “reading your thoughts.” This happens when a spouse, best friend or family member knows you so well they nearly finish your sentences. Explain to this person your desire to establish a theme for the year. Ask them what comes to mind. Even if you don’t get a perfect answer, you may find a clue you’d otherwise have overlooked. One of my friends, a sensitive soul, describes questions she asks of her animals. She swears she can “hear” their response. The exercises suggested here are experimental. Experiment. Use them accordingly. You may find as you treat yourself like a science project, your theme will surface.

Honor your inner knowing

Sometimes a theme wells up inside us. Many people acknowledge gratitude as a theme. A gratitude journal emphasizes writing three elements morning and night. An iOS app, “The 5 Minute Journal” refers to this as “a toothbrush for your mind. Do it every morning and every night to have a clear and positive mind.” Organizing is another theme which gets a lot of press. Author Marie Kondo made an impact with her book, *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*, in which she detailed the benefits of removing clutter and carefully folding items you keep. When such a theme stays with you for several days or weeks, it may be vying for consideration as your theme for the year. Is there something you have considered for some time? The Asaro Tribe of Indonesia has a saying: “*knowledge is only a rumor until it lives in the muscle.*” What are your muscles saying? Write what immediately comes to mind.

Conclusion

"We will open the book. Its pages are blank. We are going to put words on them ourselves. The book is called Opportunity and its first chapter is New Year's Day. - Edith Lovejoy Pierce

Since your theme will be with you for the next year, you may find it helpful to "bring it to life." Embody the theme by placing it on a creation of your choosing. My friends and I discovered the joy of creating a mixed media piece to keep our theme front and center. Although we made individual pieces in a group setting, you could easily create such a project on your own. In addition to joy in the process, the tactile activity will cause you to translate your theme to your heART.

Social scientist Brené Brown, PHD, LMSW, best-selling author of *Rising Strong*, and *Dare to Lead* says, "We are born makers. We move what we're learning from our heads to our hearts through our hands." Brown's 2010 TEDx Houston talk, "The Power of Vulnerability" is one of the top five most-viewed TED talks in the world.

There is no prescribed path. There are multiple ways to illustrate your theme for a year. You may choose a font you like, print your theme on paper and doodle around it with colored pencil. Or, add beauty with calligraphy to your word. Make your word visible over an image you love. Go beyond with a collage. Add embellishment to paper or canvas or fabric. The list is endless. Trust me. You will have so much fun with this portion of your theme for a year it will quickly become one of your year-end rituals. My thank you for your attention to this e-book is a bonus section, a maker project that I designed to indulge your inner artist. Your theme, in whatever way you choose to illustrate it will inspire your heart.

"Whatever controls your focus controls your life." — Maria Salomão-Smith

Congratulations on your choice of a theme for your year. Place it where you will see it every day and challenge yourself to live into it.

Here's a project outline for you, a path to showcase your theme for the year.

Bonus: Theme for a Year

A Mixed Media Project

Premise: What IF you showcased your theme for the year in an artful way that inspired you each time it caught your eye?

Description: In this three-hour workshop we'll focus on the words of your theme for the year: one to three words, or a phrase which will become your central embellishment for your piece. To do this, we will begin with an audio centering from my good friend and poet of pure potentiality, Bobbye Middendorf.

Here is a link to the streaming audio, a great beginning for this self-paced workshop:
<http://www.audioacrobat.com/email/ERkQcBHZ2>.

You may download the centering at this link:
<https://bjmiddendorf.audioacrobat.com/download/CenteringMedit-InspireBestYrYet.mp3>

Materials:

6x6 fabric, canvas or watercolor paper piece for your foundational element.

*Bead Soup** in your hue of choice

charms (including charms to swap with fellow participants)

fiber scraps

roving

tulle, scraps of different colors

Rub-a-Dub laundry marker or permanent fabric marker of choice Thread – (Silamide or other beading thread), embroidery floss, needle, beading needle

**Bead soup ingredients:* You may find it easier to list what NOT to bring. Sort by hue, not size.

Use beads, bugles, buttons, jewelry, found objects, Austrian crystals, bulk embellishments, game pieces, plastic bottlecaps, guitar picks, findings, refrigerator magnets, metallic brads, tags, etc. Bring stencils if you like.

Process:

In a three-hour workshop, we will prepare your word to become a 6" x 6" focal for your year exploring the following three structures:

1. Free-hand draw your word (you may find it easier to use fabric with a tight weave such as cotton quilting material if you have not tried this before)
2. Paint your word using freehand techniques or a stencil
3. Bead your word after you have stenciled it onto the material

Next begin the embellishment of your word using needle and thread (embroidery floss and/or pearle cotton #5 are recommended).

Once the wording is complete, you will decorate the piece with your Bead Soup concoction to beautify your appliqué. (Samples will be available in the workshop.) Elements can be embellished individually then secured to the background. Depending on the weight of your embellishments, you may have to use strong backing materials, such as heavy-weight interfacing or fabric.

Best practice tips:

- Baste items in place using needle and thread. You can also use fusible web or glue to anchor your fabric pieces
- Add hand/machine stitching for effect
- Use this fabric creation as part of a larger collage of fabrics, papers, or other materials bits to enhance the message you've chosen. Have fun!
- Fuse or glue fabric and ribbon remnants to the canvas
- Using contrasting colors of buttons, beads or sequins, add embellishments to the cut pieces. I embellish each cut piece separately and add it to my piece, thus controlling the positioning of elements
- When using paints, make sure the fabric is nicely covered with paint, but not so overly saturated that the fabric is dripping wet
- On color: the eye sees warm colors as advancing toward us and cool colors as receding. Objects get lighter in value and duller in color as they recede into the distance. Place your strongest value and color contrasts on important objects.

Finishing

Once you have completed your facade, there are a number of different ways to finish your work:

- Apply black gesso to hide the stitches, threads and backside of your theme
- Fuse a backing to your fabric
- Add a heavyweight paper to the back of your frame with glue or staples
- Add a picture hanger at the top center

Be sure to sign and date your art. Hang your art where you will enjoy it and be inspired by it throughout the year.

About the Contributors:

Audio Link, Centering:

Bobbye Middendorf, MA, award-winning writer and editor, gives voice to Yin Arising as poet, inner wisdom guide, collage artist, and sovereignty alchemist for creators and evolving souls. Connect with Bobbye where Write Synergies intersects with the perspectives of Yin Arising at: <https://www.facebook.com/WriteSynergiesCircle> and <http://www.writesynergies.com>.

Editing:

Evelyn Asher, loves to co-create with authors ensuring their message is written from the reader's perspective. She lives in North Georgia where her small forest of pines frame exquisite sunsets. "Even a short conversation with you brings a shift. You have the gift of perspective!" www.evelynasher.com

About Your Author:

Mary Ellen Merrigan frames her life perspective like a string of colorful beads. Every bead, every day contributes to the whole.

Her passion for all things bead-related ignited in 2007 when she made her first treasure necklace. Until beads called out her soul she used needlepoint, embroidery, dressmaking and crochet for relaxation. Now design, color embellishments, shapes, detailed stitching and all things bead-related influence her work.

She credits her influx of creativity in other aspects of her life to beads, refers to beads as "magic" and looks for any excuse to hang out in the studio.

Mary Ellen built a career in the implausible world of selling air. Her years of experience in the competitive world of broadcast advertising launched a consulting practice that emphasized public relations and social media.

Today she emphasizes teaching and learning. Her study of bead history, bead techniques and women artists continues to weave its way through her creative works.

To no one's surprise, Mary Ellen claims to never meet a bead she doesn't like and encourages everyone to play beads. Learn more at <http://www.MaryEllenBeads.com>.

For more information, email me@maryellenbeads.com or call Mary Ellen at 505-280-9772.
Merrigan Group LLC, dba Mary Ellen Beads
P.O. Box 3523
Albuquerque, NM. 87190-3523