Goodbye Year of the Rabbit, hello Year of the Dragon! And Happy New Year to everyone!

What a year we’ve had! Last year was, you might say, unseasonably full of seasons. First the world went atwitter over the Arab Spring, which ushered in the dramatic downfall of at least four dictators, and then British citizens faced arson and looting in the hot London summer while Scotland Yard booked rioters. (Please excuse my puns.) With the New York autumn we witnessed the Occupy Wall Street movement, spreading from a single street to hundreds of metropolitan areas across the world. Finally, tension between social media–using protestors and Russia’s political leaders set off a few sparks in the cold Moscow winter. In China, the year 2011 was declared the 微博政务元年 (Weibo Zheng Wu Yuan Nian), or, clumsily translated: “The First Year of Microblogging-based Governmental Affairs.”

Personally, this was a very special year. My birthday was a palindrome, which I thought was a fortuitous sign of sorts. I wholeheartedly believed that 2011 would be a year full of wonderful happenings. Well, I was almost right. It has certainly been a year of happenings. Last month marked the first time I have ever stayed overnight for several days in a hospital. It was my first call for an ambulance, my first visit to the emergency room, and then my first stay at the intensive care unit. I was stressed. But the doctors and nurses took great care of me, their skill and attention gave me much comfort, and I was impressed with their state-of-the-art medical facilities and my experience of health care in China. Although, I have to say, welcoming the Dragon in a hospital bed was not the best start to a new year. My New Year’s resolution? 戒急从容, or simply, “No hurry, take it easy.”

This is a wake-up call. Obviously I need to be more concerned with my personal health, but while lying there, I started thinking about how intelligent systems could help improve the healthcare system further. I imagine a system that could provide better medical service to the general population with the “three Ps”: personal attention, proactive care, and precision. The creation of virtual patients and doctors, operating in parallel with the real-life patient-doctor dynamic, could prove to be a powerful tool in supplementing the healthcare system; it could help relieve some of the cost and pressure placed on society. Something like this has already started taking place in the US, where websites such as WebMD have started offering users online advice from actual medical personnel, and some therapy practices have starting using Skype and other social media to confer with patients long-distance.
My original plan for this column was to write a letter titled “From Piecemeal Engineering to Twitter Technology: Moving toward Computational Societies.” That letter was meant to be a brief review of three books I’ve often read and reread over the past 30 years, Max Born’s My Life and My Views, Karl Popper’s Open Society and Its Enemies, and Hunter Crowther-Heyck’s Herbert A. Simon: The Bounds of Reason in Modern America. My hospital stay has interrupted my original efforts, but I hope to finish that letter for our next issue.

I wish all of you a happy and healthy new year!