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Routines: Every Day a Groundhog Day?

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The film Groundhog Day (1993) puts the protagonist, Phil Connors, in a time warp. Nothing that he does matters because he is stuck in February 2, Groundhog Day, in a small rural town. For most of the film he seems doomed to repeat this day forever.

Even without the help of a time warp, are we all involved in repetitive routines? Speaking mostly about myself, I seem to have been in routine most of my life, as the examples below suggest.

Towards the middle of Groundhog Day, a scene in a bar suggests that the film is not just science fiction. Phil describes his situation to two local men sitting next to him along the bar:

> Phil: What would you do if you were stuck in one place, and everyday was exactly the same, and nothing you did mattered?
>
> Ralph: That about sums it up for me.

Like me, Ralph is not subject to a time warp, but he seems stuck in routines.

There are many moments in other kinds of popular culture that suggest being stuck in routines. One of my favorites is a pop song from the 40's, when I must have had the radio on all day and into the night:

> If I love again, though it's someone new.
>
> If I love again, it will still be you.

I thought of this song when I read the headlines about Paul McCartney's divorce from his second wife. Certain elements in the story suggest that the main reason he married her was that she reminded him of his first wife.

The idea of routines also occurs in literature and poetry. One example is the magnificent last line from Dylan Thomas's poem about the death of a child in the WWII bombing of London (1957):

> After the first death, there is no other.

He seems to be alluding to the idea that since we usually are unable to complete the mourning of the first death that is important to us, we are compelled to repeat it with each subsequent one.

Perhaps it's different for the reader, but I often feel like Ralph in Groundhog Day. There have been, and still are, many routines in my life that seem to be repetitive and virtually unchanging. Without going into great detail, much of my eating, sleeping, working, quarreling, and indeed, thinking and feeling, are mostly routine.

Escape from Routine

Not that all routines are bad. We need routines to live, else we would drown in details. But the question arises, who is master, me or routine? Probably the latter, because when I escape routine, it is almost always an accident. Here are two examples of accidental escape, the first from my own life.

My wife Suzanne and I made a trip to a conference in Atlanta in August 2003. Since my routine for most of my career has been to fly to conferences, I assumed that we would make a roundtrip flight. Since Suzanne had never been in the South, she wanted to drive both ways. We compromised by flying there, but returning in a rental car. We stayed only two days at the conference, then drove back in 6 days. The South that we drove thru was hot as Hades, but we had one helluva good time.

Until this event, we both had the conceit that we talk frequently, often at length, and on occasion, in depth. Of course, we are one or both of us often out of the house. Still we thought that at least at home, we were communicating.

In Atlanta, our communication didn't change because we both busy with the conference. The change in routine occurred during the drive back to California, when we were together all the time, with no escape, for six days. Since it would have been difficult, if not impossible to do anything else, we talked.

Much of the first day was spent by my complaints. Why were we doing this? Why had I allowed myself to be roped in, etc. Late in the day, however, I said "At least I am out of my usual routine." We both laughed.

Since Suzanne is a grief counselor at the local Hospice, she talks a lot about death. So I asked her what was for me an unusual question: how would you feel if I were to die? At first she spoke about what she would do, her actions. When I repeated the question, she talked at some length about her feelings. She asked me the same question about my feelings in the case of her death. Then we spoke about asking our children a similar question. (As it turned out, the

question didn't work with them). But it worked with us. We were off to the races.

That was the beginning of a five-day torrent of conversation, as if the floodgates had burst. We talked, laughed, and cried our way virtually non-stop thru Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and southern California.

After this experience, we realized that we have so many routines in our everyday life that we rarely talk about anything but our immediate business. There is work outside and at home, food preparation, repairs, garden, cleaning, etc. There are also many other routines. We had the practice, for example of watching TV or DVDs together from 8pm to our usual bedtime, 10pm. This two-hour period is never devoid of talk, but only pedestrian talk. We complain about the waste of time, but often one or both of us is so pooped that TV is all we can manage. The experience of the long drive had accidentally broken our communication routines.

Once home, we vowed never again to lapse back. We agreed that if necessary, we would just drive in circles around Santa Barbara for at least one weekend a month. Nevertheless, there were too many pulls from our old routines. Within two or three weeks, we were back in to our old shallow talk routine, and continue with it today. (But we haven't given up, since we are planning 12 days of driving and railroading across Canada).

Emmy Rainwater led me to a somewhat parallel story from her life (Rainwater 2000). A single mother, she describes an accidental breaking of talk routines with her teenage son. When her best friend died unexpectedly, she vowed a three-day period of silence to honor her friend. She told her son that he could talk to her as much as he wished, but during the three days she wouldn't reply.

To her surprise, the son, usually laconic, talked her head off. He told her about his thoughts, feeling, hopes and dreams, indeed, the very kinds of things that she had always wanted to know. However, because he always replied with an argument or with silence, she had given up. One can surmise that before the three-day silence, they were deeply enmeshed in routines in which the mom did most of the talking, and/or was directive, distracted or critical.

Intentional Breaks from Routine

To find breaks from routine that were not completely accidental, I have had to search my memory many years back. One occurred that changed my routine suppression of fear during the period when I protesting the Vietnam War. Since I usually didn't feel fear at all, I was somewhat reckless. Being also the chair of

my university department at the time, these activities attracted the attention of the media. For that reason I drew considerable criticism, both from other professors and from members of the public. The idea then was that professors are allowed free speech, but administrators, even temporary ones like chairpersons, are not.

I was awakened by a phone call early in the morning of a speech I was to make to a very large meeting protesting the Cambodian incursion. The caller refused to identify himself, threatening to kill me and my family for "stirring the students up." I tried to keep him on the line, reasoning with him, but he was suspicious and hung up after some fifteen minutes of relentless threats.

Rather than being upset, I felt blank. I knew I would be unable to speak effectively unless I snapped out of it. Having just joined a self-help psychotherapy group, I used one of their devices. I guessed that it might be fear causing my blankness, so I said to myself "I am afraid," a sentence that I had neither said nor thought in perhaps 25 years. Nothing happened at first, so I kept repeating that line.

After many repetitions, my body went into what might be described as a seizure of fear. Falling to the floor, I involuntarily shook and sweated in what felt like a hurricane of emotion. It was quite enjoyable, like a roller coaster ride, even though there were no accompanying thoughts. After some fifteen minutes of a tremor and sweat bath, my body stopped of its own accord. I was no longer blank. In fact, my mind was clear to the point that I gave a poetic speech without notes. This incident involved a break out of my routine suppression of fear, the kind of suppression that most men do for all their lives (This and other examples of catharsis are described in Scheff 1979).

A second incident that was not quite accidental occurred a week after, showing me a way to deal with anger without shouting, my usual routine. On a flight from the local airport, I chanced to be sitting next to a colleague from another department in my university. I had always been intimidated by this man because of his sharp tongue. However, I was still in a good mood from the incident above, so I tried to tell him about it. He didn't allow me to finish my story, interrupting me with an "objective" analysis of what happened to me. In the language my students use, he was "psychoanalyzing" me. But I in turn didn't let him finish.

Without thinking about what I was going to say, and without raising my voice, I interrupted him after only a few sentences: "David _____, you are trying to reduce my experience to an abstraction with no remainder. I won't have it." To my surprise, he began to apologize, and continued for the rest of the flight. He

even related an incident similar to mine from his own life. From this confrontation, I learned how I might make inroads into my routine acting out of anger, but I still haven't stopped it completely.

I say that these two incidents are not completely accidental, but I should also add that they are not completely intended either. I hardly understood what I was doing in both cases: my liberating responses were more like shots in the dark that turned out well. What about you, the reader? What are your major routines? Have you ever escaped intentionally, or by accident? I would like to know your stories.

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