

GROUNDHOG DAY

Repetition, Cycles and Seasons, Regrets and Possibilities

*If Candlemas be fair and bright,
Winter has another flight.
If Candlemas brings clouds and rain,
Winter will not come again.*

OK, so who checked on the forecast by Punxsutawney Phil this morning? Are we going to get any winter this year? Or does it really depend on whether the Broncos win the Super Bowl?

As Lisa discovered and shared with me, a few years ago, my colleague Doug Kraft, now retired from Sacramento, wrote a sermon, *Of Sisyphus and Groundhogs*, which compared the experience of Bill Murray in the movie *Groundhog Day* with the Sisyphus myth. If you recall the movie, Bill Murray's character, weatherman Phil Connors, sent to do a story on the groundhog, repeats the same day again and again. Like Sisyphus rolling the boulder up the hill each day, only to have to start again at the bottom, Phil wakes up at 6 a.m. each morning to the same initial scenario. After a long series of episodes in which Phil attempts to take advantage of others, do harm to himself or others, and eventually do some good for others, the story winds to its conclusion. Finally Phil is honest and respectful to his producer Rita, with whom he has fallen in love. She spends the night with him and they wake up together to a new day and reality. In contrast with the Sisyphus myth, we thus have the requisite happy ending for any American Romance, but also the argument that change is possible for even the most deeply entrenched personality defects!

There are some other interesting possibilities for exploring *Groundhog Day*, which I should acknowledge that I probably wouldn't have taken up as a topic if Cindy Milford hadn't almost insisted upon it at the last Worship Associates meeting! In any case, it is not a topic I recall ever preaching upon before even though I do recall occasionally having experienced periods in which days have seemed awfully similar!

Groundhog Day, President's Day, Valentine's Day, along with the start of Lent which often falls during February do not provide the significant breaks from routine that holidays in a number of other months provide. When I lived in cold country, most of the first 40 years of my life, I recall a lot of January and most of February being a cold wet dreary gray time only broken occasionally by a really bright sunny day or a storm bringing a fresh new layer of snow! In the cycle of the seasons, it is a good time for introverted meditation, but the days can be terribly, oppressively, repetitive. Day after dreary gray day, there is nothing new, not enough warmth to spend much time outside, not enough light to do much after school or work. For those with seasonal affective disorders it can be deathly depressing.

For those in certain warmer climes it should at least be the wet season, when reservoirs, rivers, and surrounding mountain ranges are recharging with moisture or snowpack. Until we received all of .11 inches of rain this week, we had been reliving our own dry Groundhog Day for 53 days. Not that the daytime temperatures weren't pleasant, but so much repetition of that same dry theme can be almost as painful and may be far more problematic long term than the extra six weeks of winter that supposedly follow a shadow sighting by Punxsutawney Phil! The responsibility for the current global climactic changes currently underway lies with us at least as much as much as the responsibility for the purgatory experienced by Bill Murray lay with his arrogant insensitive out-of-touch character in the movie. What lessons will we need to learn to break the spell and free us and the environment from the current cycle of drought?

What regrets do we have as individuals and as communities to try to make right? As Unitarian Universalists we tend to not talk about individual sins as much as corporate or community sins. We do still expect a pretty high level of personal integrity and responsibility generally, though there are some areas in which we tend to not be as exercised as some of our Christian brothers and sisters. There are a number of things that they would consider sins that we would not. There are also a few things that we might consider sins that they would not recognize as such.

Most of us would not consider most things that consenting adults do within their own bedrooms to be sins no matter whether they are legally married nor what gender each might be. Nor would most of us consider it sin for a woman to make her own decisions about her own body and reproductive rights. Many of us would be concerned about murder and the free access of even mentally ill and unstable persons to high power and automatic weapons. Though most of us would support the Constitution, we would recognize that the 2nd Amendment did not contemplate currently available weapons, nor any part of the Constitution foresee the global digital age nor life beyond the surface of the earth. Many of us would also be concerned about corporate citizenship and the extent to which unfettered capitalism has allowed the gaping chasm between rich and poor.

We live in a complicated world in which many of us have regrets for things done and things not done along the paths of our life journeys. Few of us have an unblotched record of personal relationships with others. We are as likely as anyone to have hurt others along the way, though the wounds may have been more likely emotional than physical. Probably we, like Bill Murray's character, have learned enough to escape the cycles of drama and trauma (Karma?) and risen to a higher level of awareness, but we are not immune to any of the vicissitudes of our kind! We all have clay feet, as it were!

As a community, as a society, we ought to have more regrets about certain wars fought for oil and for the consumerism which has fueled the factories and power plants and vehicles that have done so much damage to the environment. These may turn out to be the sins that the earth will not forgive, even if we repent and change our evil ways. Have the cycles and seasons already been so damaged that a new day will never come for life on earth? How many years, decades, centuries, millennia, will it take for the earth to recover? What will happen if human population reaches 8 billion?

In the grand scheme of things, if there is a scheme, what will happen to the groundhogs, the deer, the bear, the whales, the birds of the air and the fish of the sea? There are some things for which I would like a do-over personally and as a society! I think I might live a few days differently knowing what I do now! I think the earth might appreciate a do-over covering the last couple hundred years of people-time!

In my experience, Groundhog Day only comes once a year whether winter continues to the edge of spring at the Vernal Equinox or slips out unnoticed and often un-mourned as Spring arrives early! What then might we change for our latter years, knowing that the past remains what it is? It is said that peace of mind and spirit comes with acceptance, with the recognition that we cannot finally change the past, but must rather come to terms with it and let it go. Though it may be hard to detach from the triumphs and defeats of our personal history, it is in letting go that we are able to live in this moment, to be fully present for what is currently ongoing in our lives and open to what may yet come to pass. There is no magic formula for letting go, we each must find our own pathway up the mountain of truth, but enlightenment eventually comes to those who seek it. So run the good race, meditate under the Bodhi Tree, do all the good you can, find yourself, be one with the universe, receive and share the blessings of your life!

Change is the natural order of things, so repeating Groundhog Day may not be such a pleasant nor natural experience. For Phil Connors it may be the lesson that was needed, but the universe may teach us in different ways. Coming to awareness may be a gift or a hard won triumph, an aha moment or a mountain-top experience, but it is probably better than winning the lottery and perhaps even more world-changing! It is in learning to truly let go that we may find the most satisfying wealth. It may be that in freeing ourselves from the cycles of consumerism and capitalism that we will discover the blessings of community and self-actualization. The journey may be hard, but if we survive to find the true but unexpected goal of our quest that we may return as wise men and women who can lead the community to new understandings and to a new prosperity. As a wanderer who knows the pain of letting go, I also have discovered the joy of new possibilities and new challenges!

Today is Groundhog Day and tomorrow, February 3rd 2014, the Super Bowl will be history. This is the way of the human world, at least in our country. In places it will snow, in others rain, and in yet others the sun will shine. Dogs will be walked, cats will turn up their noses at the food they greedily ate yesterday, and life will go on, barring any almost unimaginable cataclysm. And though the days may be similar, they will also be different from each other in ways small or large. And life will go on, hopefully world without end!

And what will we have learned from this Groundhog Day? Will we have found the wherewithal to be more honest, loving, and generous? Will we have discovered the wisdom of letting go, detaching from all those attachments of our lives? Will we have learned to be humble and genuine rather than arrogant and obnoxious? Will our days have become a blessing to all we know, or will we just repeat the patterns of the past? When will we ever learn, when will we ever learn?

The attitude with which we approach life may be a key factor in receiving the greatest blessings from life. If our hearts and minds are open to the wonders of the day and the world and the people we meet, we may gain and grow and learn in each new day. If we approach each day as a battlefield in which we expect to conquer all those with inferior views to our own, we may lose the war of our lives even if we win the battle of the day. To be a seeker is a blessing that offers its own rewards of wisdom, appreciation, and love. Whoever dares to accept the title of master is surely not the master of many hearts or minds. He or she who is a servant of others has much to teach, while he or she who claims to be a great teacher or guru is always suspect.

I close this time with part of Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr's **Serenity Prayer** as used by many twelve-step programs:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
The courage to change the things I can,
And wisdom to know the difference.

Amen!