

Groundhog Day:

Breakthrough to the True Self

An example of an exceptional work of moral fiction is the apparently minor comedy, *Groundhog Day*, which shows us a character who has to be exiled from normal life so he can discover that he is in exile from himself. In the movie, actor Bill Murray plays Phil, an arrogant, Scroogelike weather forecaster who spends the night in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, where he is to do a broadcast the next day about the annual ritual of the coming out of the groundhog. He wakes up the next morning, does his story and is annoyed to discover that he is trapped in Punxsutawney for a second night because of a snowstorm that comes in after the groundhog ceremony.

When he wakes up in his guest house room the next morning, lo and behold, it is the morning of the day before all over again. Everything that happened to him the previous day -- the man trying to start a conversation at the top of the stairs; the old high school acquaintance recognizing him on the street, the ritual of groundhog day -- it all happens again.

And, once again, due to inclement weather, he is forced to spend the night. When he wakes up the next morning, it is the same day as yesterday and the day before, with the same oncoming snowstorm keeping him stuck in town and the same events repeating themselves like a broken record.

And so it goes, day after day, as this misanthrope of a human being finds himself trapped in Punxsutawney on groundhog day in what science fiction would refer to as a time loop. If he does nothing different, events will repeat themselves as they were on the original day. But if he changes his behavior, people will respond to his new actions, opening up all kinds of possibilities for playing with the unfolding of events. Either way, with each "new" day, he alone remembers what happened in previous editions of the same day.

At first Murray's character responds with bewilderment. Then he despairs and begins to treat life as a game: he risks his life and gorges on food, expressing both his sense of hopelessness and his growing recognition that, no matter what he does, time will reset itself and he will wake up as if nothing had happened.

In one scene, which turns out to be central to the movie's theme, he expresses his despair to two working class drinking buddies in a local bar.

One of his two inebriated companions then points to a beer glass and sums up the way he is responding to his situation: "You know, some guys would look at this glass and they would say, you know, 'that glass is half empty'. Other guys'd say 'that glass is half full'. I bet you is (or I peg you as) a 'the glass is half empty' kind of guy. Am I right?"

But as the days pass endlessly into the same day, this half-empty character finally finds a purpose in life: learning everything he can about his female producer, Rita, played by Andie MacDowell, so he can pretend to be her ideal man and seduce her. When that fails, and his efforts net him slap after slap, day after day, his despair deepens and he begins to spend his days killing himself. He kidnaps the groundhog and drives over a ledge into a quarry; he takes a plugged-in toaster into the bath; and he jumps off a building, always waking up whole in the morning.

In desperation, he reveals his plight to the female producer and she stays with him (without sex), in his room, through the night. Once again, he wakes up alone in the same day.

But, enriched by this experience of intimacy, and by the fact that someone actually liked him for who he is, he finally figures out a constructive response -- he begins to live his life in the day allotted to him, or, rather, he begins to live the life he never lived before. Instead of allowing circumstances to impose themselves on him, he takes control of circumstances, aided by the fact that he has all the time in the world and the safety of knowing what will happen next.

He begins to take piano lessons from a music teacher who is continuously surprised at how proficient he is, since she always believes it is his first lesson. He learns how to be an ice sculptor, which is the perfect art form for him since everything he does will have melted away when he wakes up anyway. And he becomes more generous.

Then, an encounter with death -- an old vagrant dies in his day -- has a deep effect on him. At first, he can't accept the man's death and, in at least one subsequent edition of the day, he tries to be good to the old man, taking him out to eat (for a last meal) and trying, unsuccessfully, to keep him alive.

When he stops trying to force death to relent, his final defenses fall away and his compassion for the old man transfers to the living. He begins to use his knowledge of how the day will unfold to help people. Knowing that a child will always fall

from a tree at a certain time, he makes it a point to be there and catch the child every time. Knowing that a man will choke on his meal, he is always at a nearby table in the restaurant to save him.

Slowly, he goes through a transformation. Having suffered himself, he is able to empathize with other people's suffering. Having been isolated from society, he becomes a local hero in Punxsutawney.

Now, he sees the glass as half full, and the day as a form of freedom. As he expresses it in a corny TV speech about the weather that he gives for the camera, at the umpteenth ceremony he has covered of the coming out of the groundhog:

"When Chekhov saw the long winter, he saw a winter bleak and dark and bereft of hope. Yet we know that winter is just another step in the cycle of life. But standing here among the people of Punxsutawney and basking in the of warmth of their hearths and hearts, I couldn't imagine a better fate than a long and lustrous winter."

In other words, having accepted the conditions of life and learned the pleasures afforded by human companionship, he is no longer like all those people who fear life's travails, and try to use the weather forecast, by human or groundhog, to control events. He accepts "winter" as an opportunity.

Finally, the female producer falls in love with the good person he has become and she again spends the night (although he falls asleep so, again, there is no sex.) They wake up in the morning. She is still there and it is the next day.

In a last bit of irony, the couple, (who get to know each other, in the Biblical sense, once the new day begins), decide to settle down in Punxsutawney. Like Maxwell Klinger in the last episode of MASH, Murray's character will end up living in the one place he couldn't wait to escape.

What is so powerful about Groundhog Day is the way it lets us experience what it would be like to make a breakthrough like this in our own lives. The movie shows us a character who is like the worst in ourselves. He is arrogant and sarcastic, absorbed in his own discomforts, without hope, and cut off from other people. Like us, he finds himself in an inexplicable situation, seemingly a plaything of fate. But, unlike us, he gets the luxury of being stuck in the same day until he gets it right. Whereas most of us go semi-automatically through most of our (very similar) days, he is forced to stop and treat each day like a world onto itself, and decide how to use it. In the end, he undergoes a breakthrough to a more authentic self in which intimacy, creativity and compassion come naturally - a self that was trapped inside him and that could only be freed by trapping him. Like many of the heroes of fiction, he can only escape his exile from himself by being exiled in a situation not of his choosing.

In telling this story, the movie hits on a message that is commonly found elsewhere and that appears to express an essential truth. When we get beyond denial and resentment over the conditions of life and death, and accept our situation, it tells us, then life ceases to be a problem and we can become authentic and compassionate. Murray's character makes two such breakthroughs: first he accepts being condemned to being stuck in the same day, then he accepts the fact that everyone else is condemned to die.

Inevitably, the movie also has mythic resonances and literary counterparts. Murray's character is like all kinds of saviors and heroes in well-known stories, secular and religious, who experience some combination of suffering and courage, until they go through a transformation to a new state of knowledge. Among the religious and mythic elements we can recognize in the story: he fights off his demons; he is changed by an encounter with death; he experiences a kind of rebirth; he appears to people to exist in time but he also exists outside of normal time; he manifests deep compassion; he is in the world but not of it, suffering with a special knowledge that he uses to save those around him; and he is given a second chance in life by the love of a beautiful woman. He condenses images of Buddha and the Beast, Scrooge and Jesus.

But the movie keeps myth and archetype, as well as message, blessedly in the background. It also employs only a little visual spectacle and only the barest minimum of fantasy, in the form of the ever-repeating day, to tell the story. It is effective because it is understated, allowing Murray and the theme to engage us.

Perhaps it gets a little too sweet as it moves toward a conclusion, but that is forgivable. At the end, it saves itself from going over the top by revealing that Murray's character still has some of the old, calculating, self inside him. As he and his new mate walk out of the guest house into the new, snow-covered day, he exclaims, with his new enthusiastic wonder at life: "Its so beautiful -- Lets live here."

Then, after the obligatory kiss, he adds: "We'll rent to start."

Happily-ever-after is very nice, the character slyly tells us. But in the real world it's important to keep your options open, just in case you need to beat a quick retreat.