

What's Your Mindset: The Groundhog Day Effect
A Sermon Offered at Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist
By Daniel R. Wiseman
February 27, 2011

Reading # 1 ~ The Summoned Self by David Brooks

Published: August 2, 2010 in The New York Times

Also online at http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/03/opinion/03brooks.html?_r=2

This is a column about two ways of thinking about your life. The first is what you might call the Well-Planned Life. It was nicely described by Clayton Christensen in the current issue of the Harvard Business Review, in an essay based on a recent commencement talk.

Christensen advised the students to invest a lot of time when they are young in finding a clear purpose for their lives. "When I was a Rhodes scholar," he recalls, "I was in a very demanding academic program, trying to cram an extra year's worth of work into my time at Oxford. I decided to spend an hour every night reading, thinking, and praying about why God put me on this earth.

"That was a very challenging commitment to keep, because every hour I spent doing that, I wasn't studying applied econometrics. I was conflicted about whether I could really afford to take that time away from my studies, but I stuck with it — and ultimately figured out the purpose of my life."

Once you have come up with an overall purpose, he continues, you have to make decisions about allocating your time, energy and talent. Christensen, who is a professor at the Harvard Business School and the author of several widely admired books, notes that people with a high need for achievement commonly misallocate their resources.

If they have a spare half-hour, they devote it to things that will yield tangible and near-term accomplishments. These almost invariably involve something at work — closing a sale, finishing a paper.

"In contrast," he adds, "investing time and energy in your relationship with your spouse and children typically doesn't offer that same immediate sense of achievement. ... It's not until 20 years down the road that you can put your hands on your hips and say, 'I raised a good son or a good daughter.' " As a result, the things that are most important often get short shrift.

Christensen is a serious Christian. At university, he was the starting center on his basketball team and refused to play in the championship game of an important tournament because it was scheduled for a Sunday. But he combines a Christian spirit with business methodology. In plotting out a personal and spiritual life, he applies the models and theories he developed as a strategist. He emphasizes finding the right metrics, efficiently allocating resources and thinking about marginal costs.

When he is done, life comes to appear as a well-designed project, carefully conceived in the beginning, reviewed and adjusted along the way and brought toward a well-rounded fruition.

The second way of thinking about your life might be called the Summoned Life. This mode of thinking starts from an entirely different perspective. Life isn't a project to be completed; it is an unknowable landscape to be explored. A 24-year-old can't sit down and define the purpose of life in the manner of a

school exercise because she is not yet deep enough into the landscape to know herself or her purpose. That young person — or any person — can't see into the future to know what wars, loves, diseases and chances may loom. She may know concepts, like parenthood or old age, but she doesn't really understand their meanings until she is engaged in them.

Moreover, people who think in this mode are skeptical that business models can be applied to other realms of life. Business is about making choices that maximize utility. But the most important features of the human landscape are commitments that precede choice — commitments to family, nation, faith or some cause. These commitments defy the logic of cost and benefit, investment and return.

The person leading the Well-Planned Life emphasizes individual agency, and asks, "What should I do?" The person leading the Summoned Life emphasizes the context, and asks, "What are my circumstances asking me to do?"

The person leading the Summoned Life starts with a very concrete situation: I'm living in a specific year in a specific place facing specific problems and needs. At this moment in my life, I am confronted with specific job opportunities and specific options. The important questions are: What are these circumstances summoning me to do? What is needed in this place? What is the most useful social role before me?

These are questions answered primarily by sensitive observation and situational awareness, not calculation and long-range planning.

In America, we have been taught to admire the lone free agent who creates new worlds. But for the person leading the Summoned Life, the individual is small and the context is large. Life comes to a point not when the individual project is complete but when the self dissolves into a larger purpose and cause.

The first vision is more American. The second vision is more common elsewhere. But they are both probably useful for a person trying to live a well-considered life.

Reading # 2 ~ Just for Today

Just for Today, I will live through this day only. I will not brood about yesterday or obsess about tomorrow. I will not set far-reaching goals or try to overcome all of my problems at once. I know that I can do something for 24 hours that would overwhelm me if I had to keep it up for a lifetime.

Just for Today, I will be happy. I will not dwell on thoughts that depress me. If my mind fills with clouds, I will chase them away and fill it with sunshine.

Just for Today, I will accept what is. I will face reality. I will correct those things that I can correct and accept those I cannot.

Just for Today: I will improve my mind. I will read something that requires effort, thought and concentration. I will not be a mental loafer.

Just for Today: I will make a conscious effort to be agreeable. I will be kind and courteous to those who cross my path and I will not speak ill of others. I'll improve my appearance, speak softly, and not interrupt when someone else is talking.

Just for Today I'll refrain from improving anybody but myself.

Just for Today, I will gather courage to do what is right and take responsibly for my own actions.

Remember the day of the big blizzard? It was a found day, an unexpected time I did not plan. Time to do something unexpected. I was creating the sermon (actually agonizing). I turned on the TV. Suddenly, I came across one of my favorite movies, *Groundhog Day*, starring Bill Murray and Andie MacDowell. The movie tells the story of Phil Connors (Murray) as a talented but self-centered and immature Weatherman from Pittsburgh. He and a crew led by Rita (MacDowell) were sent to cover the Groundhog Day festivities in Punxsutawney, PA. Phil really hated this assignment of watching his namesake (Punxsutawney Phil) see his shadow or not and determine the course of winter. Phil saw himself as the talent and the rest of his crew as servants.

Phil goes through the motions of his broadcast and then attempts to drive back to Pittsburgh. A blizzard forces them to return to the town for another day. Phil wakes up the next morning to discover that time has not advanced. Over a period of days Phil awakes to Sonny and Cher singing "I got you Babe" on the Radio precisely at 6:00 am. While confused at first, he realizes overtime that life has no consequences. He learns the town's secrets, has affairs, takes advantage of people, steals money, drives recklessly, and get thrown in jail only to wake up in the morning to the same music and events. He tries to woo Rita but fails. In despair he tried multiple ways to kill himself and even Hognap Punxsutawney Phil. Rita begins the **mindset** change for Phil by suggesting that he change and improve himself. He begins to create a growth mindset in himself by building on his knowledge of the town for positive rather than devious purposes. He begins to help people, learn to play the piano, speak French, and become an ice sculptor. Each day he gets closer to Rita. He even creates a very moving and articulate Groundhog Day celebration that turns all the others attention to him. He and Rita retire to his room afterwards. They awake in the morning with the spell broken. They even talk about living in Punxsutawney together.

Psychologist Carol Dweck from Stanford University has recently published book discussing long term research on the impact of people's mindsets. I have to give credit to Bruce Bendix initially and later on Ken Sepos for bringing this book to my attention helping me see its power. What Dweck proposes is that over time people for a variety of reasons tend to fall into two distinct mindsets. The first one she calls the Fixed mindset. This mindset sees their basic qualities and intelligences or talents as being fixed. Fixed mindset people spend a lot of time focusing on documenting their successes, skills and attributes but not much time developing them. If they have lots of talent they can be quite success in their school days and often in the early stages of their careers. They believe that talent alone is the key to success. Effort is overrated according to this worldview. This mindset is not necessarily wrong from a moral point of view but it is quite frequently very limiting especially when it comes to dealing with the challenges of life which we all have.

Let's contrast this with the opposite belief, what Dweck calls the Growth Mindset. In the Growth mindset, people believe that their most basic abilities can be developed through dedication, continuous learning, and effort. Brains and talent are just the starting point. This viewpoint or belief system leads to people having just as much talent as the fixed mindset believers but instead using their intelligence or personal capabilities are just the starting point. In reality most of us are not purely one way or the other but on a continuum. All of us can change at least somewhat.

Here are some questions:

1. Is it enough to be just smart to get along in your life or career or as a parent?
2. Do smart people always succeed (beyond the short or midterm)? Think Enron (smartest kids in the room)
3. Why is change so hard even if you are smart?
4. How do smart people manage to make themselves and others miserable
5. Why is dealing with difficulties the deal breaker or what really differentiates fixed from growth mindsets?
6. Can people change? (yes). But remember the only ones who like change are babies.

The inventor of the Intelligence Test, Alfred Binet never intended for his test to lock people into the idea that IQ is a static measure that is unchangeable. He believed that it measured merely a point in time and that with education and tutoring IQ's of children would change. In another related book, the How of Happiness, the author Sonja Lyubomirsky, after reviewing thousands of studies concluded that happiness is impacted by situational factors about 10%, by physical or mental capability 50%, but that 40% of our happiness is caused by our personal decision-making and beliefs. Most neuroscientists explain it as a constant give and take between heredity and our environment. Our genes and our environment are in a constant give and take as we develop but genes require input from the environment to work properly. Robert Sternberg, the present-day IQ guru, writes that the major factor in whether people achieve expertise "is not some fixed prior ability but their purposeful engagement. Or as Binet says, it's not usually the people who start out the smartest who end up the smartest.

Let's explore these mindsets more deeply. First, **the fixed mindset**. They have an urgency to prove themselves over and over. They have a need to display their capabilities. They need constant confirmation and affirmation. They are surprisingly fragile both work, in school and often in relationships. They spend lots of time evaluating their situation. Will I be accepted or rejected? Will I feel like or be a loser if things don't turn out well? They have a feeling of entitlement that rails at society for not valuing their smarts, good looks, or character. Because they are often unsure of themselves in spite of their capabilities, taking risks is often hard because to the possibility of failure and their difficulties in dealing with losses and as a result feeling stupid. Failure becomes very personal with no opportunity to regroup and start over. They frequently would rather not even try or get started at something new or risky because to fail or not succeed would mean they would be seen as a loser.

On the other hand, **the growth mindset** sees the hand we are dealt with as merely the starting point of development and adaptation. I have a personal history of taking jobs and assignments that on the surface I was minimally capable of succeeding. I am almost never hired for my technical or content skills. My first real job was as the director of the first Employee Assistance Programs at Ft. Benjamin Harrison in Indianapolis IN. I was so over my head. I had no idea how to write a memo, dealing with the hospital or army bureaucracy or understanding substance abuse. But overtime I build relationships, learned like crazy, was a bit creative and was willing to make mistakes and recover or ask for forgiveness. I wound up creating an extremely successful program that was often cited as a model program. I even helped found a new statewide association of EAP leaders.

Did you know that famous golfer Ben Hogan and Russian Author Tolstoy were considered very ordinary as children. Geraldine Page one of our greatest actresses was told she had no talent. When we have a growth

mindset, we cultivate a passion for learning. You don't need to keep proving yourself. You chose experience that stretch you, challenge your, appeal to your core values. Isn't that what we signed up for as UU's? We don't need to hide our deficiencies but explore how we can become better or seek out ways to growth and serve. Or as I say, anything worth doing is worth doing badly? Don't worry about competency but doing things because they are fun, worthwhile, unknown, or just plain interesting.

Let's examine some proven fixed mindset strategies or beliefs that would confirm that you really are a loser or are miserable and undeserving. Have you done any of these?

The Fixed Mindset Manifesto
(Adapted from Dan Greenberg, *How to Make yourself Miserable*)

1. Make people reject you by being mean, arrogant, uncaring, and gossiping about others. A good thing to do is to constantly focus on how much smarter, wealthier, or better looking you are than others. Also you focus on how grateful others should be that you are there to save them or show them how to do things.
2. Constantly put yourself in situations that you know will make you uncomfortable or unhappy
3. Worry about things you can't control or even influence which have only limited passion about (how to solve world hunger, find Osama Bin Laden, grow your hair back, figure out why the Cubs can't win, win the lottery etc.)
4. Hang around with nasty, negative people and attempt to change them (or as the long running play says "I love you you're perfect now change")
5. Cultivate negative attitudes about the place you work, your marriage (or lack of), or your community) and focus on its potential problems all the time. Ruminates on how much better others have it.
6. Spent most of your time blaming others for why you are not doing better.
7. Think of everything or everyone who is smarter , wealthier, better looking, or better connected than you
8. Reject any help from others because you are smart and should have figured this out on your own.
9. Plan your retirement 20 years from now and think of all the things you can't do now because you have to work or take care of children or parents.
10. Insist that you are no good, unskilled, unlovable, and incapable
11. Think of all the things you used to do but can't do any more
12. Make a list of everyone who is out to get you and those who might be after you (but just because you're not paranoid does not mean they are not out to get you)
13. Review every mistake you have made in your life and speculate how the errors have irreparably harmed your life.
14. Be constantly dieting, saving money, and waiting to have fun until things are perfect or the situation is right.

Well, what can we do to become more growth mindset oriented? Here are some of my thoughts as Dr. Dweck does say much. So here goes. She should thank me.

- Monitor and be aware of your mindset when you face challenges. Be kind to yourself. Give yourself amnesty for the past (you mostly likely never intended to screw things up) Learn from the things that did not work.
- Change the chatter in your mind from how you're good your performance is to what your purpose is or where your passions might take you. Performance follows passion and purpose. To quote Stuart Smalley (Al Franken) "I'm good enough, I'm smart enough, and dog-gone it, people like me." Or "It's easier to put on slippers than to carpet the whole world." Remember we can start anywhere in the cycle of change (Beliefs, words, behavior, and actions)
- Focus more on the process for getting things done than the product especially when it's hard.
- Fail fast. Give yourself permission to experiment and then move on. As I say anything worth doing is worth doing badly. Learn to play the oboe, fix computers, give a sermon etc.
- Learn to live with ambiguity and transitions. Give yourself permission to feel uncomfortable during in-between periods of your life. Most of your life is one big transition anyhow.

- It's all about baby steps-keep moving. Just get started/
- Don't try to go it alone. Ask for help and use your friends, family, church networks or social networks (god forbid). Finding kindred spirits who will support you and walk with you are worth their weight in gold.
- Remember the 40% solution (Happiness Formula).

And now lets say our Growth Cheer—Yabba Dabba UU! One more time Yabba Dabba UU.

References

1. **Mindset: The New Psychology of Success.** Carol S. Dweck, Ph.D., Ballantine Books, 2006.
2. **The How of Happiness: A New Approach to Getting the Life You Want.** Sonja Lyubomirsky. Penguin Books, 2008.