

What would you do if I you had to live the exact same day over and over on an endless loop for thousands of times?

This is exactly what happens to the lead character in the film, *Groundhog Day*, starring Bill Murray and Andie MacDowell. In *Groundhog Day*, Phil Connors is a television weatherman who is arrogant, nasty, and utterly self-absorbed. Phil spends February 2nd covering the Groundhog Day festivities in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, a place he despises. But when he wakes up the following morning, he discovers that it is February 2nd in Punxsutawney all over again. To his horror, this day continues to repeat itself, and Phil is trapped in Punxsutawney in a seemingly endless time loop.

At first, Phil uses the repetition of the day to steal money and to manipulate women to go out with him. He lives life to the fullest with no consequences to his actions. Whatever he does is undone the next day, and everyone but he forgets as time is reset once again to February 2nd. Along the way, however, he grows to really love one woman, his producer Rita, but she won't give in to his advances. Phil realizes that he is stuck in the same rut, trying over and over to change the outcome and wake up in a new day, but having no success. After a while, Phil becomes depressed because he realizes that his methods will never allow him to achieve real intimacy with Rita, or anyone else for that matter. He becomes suicidal, believing he is stuck, alone forever, in a dull town on an endlessly cold winter day.

In the clip we watched a few minutes ago, we glimpse Phil's point of view. He has in a sense been gifted immortality, but it comes at a high price—a life that is meaningless, without intimacy, without connection, without hope of achieving something bigger or greater, without leaving any kind of legacy.

In some ways, *Groundhog Day* is like other movies where supernatural intervention is used as the device to teach someone how they are squandering their lives by forcing them to look at how their lives could be different if they made different choices. *Groundhog Day* reminds me in that sense of other stories about redemption: *A Christmas Carol*, for example, where the mean-hearted Ebenezer Scrooge is visited by ghosts who show him how things will turn out if he doesn't change his ways, or *It's A Wonderful life*, where the kind and generous George Bailey gets to see how the world would be different if he'd never been born.

In *Groundhog Day*, Phil Connors' road to redemption begins when he honestly explains to Rita what is happening to him. She has great compassion for him and shows him great empathy, suggests that his plight may actually be a gift, and for the first time spends the entire day with him. When Connors awakes to repeat yet another February 2nd, he is a changed man. Phil begins to take an interest in others. He realizes his own mortality when he discovers an elderly homeless man has died. Phil tries to save him but fails. He then decides to do what he can to help others.

He catches a kid falling out of tree. He buys coffee and doughnuts for coworkers. He changes a tire when a car full of elderly women gets a flat. He saves the mayor from choking, and helps a young couple unsure about getting married affirm their love for each other.

And in case you are wondering how he can afford to do all of these things, Phil figures out he can easily rob an armored car, so money is never a problem for him! Overtime, Phil's philanthropy and random acts of kindness shape him into a different kind of person—one who cares, one who gives, one who lives for others.

Rita witnesses change in Phil and falls in love with him, and from her perspective this change was sudden, a light switch, overnight. But the truth is, Phil changed gradually, slowly, painfully from a self-centered jerk to a genuinely decent human being. Though the film never explicitly says how many times Phil repeats February 2nd, we can estimate it was somewhere between 10 to 30 years' worth of days, because of the skills Phil acquires: he masters the piano, for example, learns to carve ice sculptures, and gets to know the entire life story of every single inhabitant of Punxsutawney.

And over those 10 to 30 years, Phil becomes enlightened, moving from selfish to selfless, from being motivated by his own ambitions to being motivated by the needs and plights of other people. The arrogance and selfishness that once characterized him have been replaced by kindness and a drive to make the best out of his circumstances. At the end of this particular day when Rita finally discovers a Phil she can connect with, they fall asleep, in love and together. And when Phil wakes up, he is overjoyed to find that she is still there, it is finally February 3rd, and the cycle has been broken. Phil's long redemptive journey has been completed.

Through supernatural means, Scrooge and George Bailey and Phil Connors learn the value of a day, the power of relationships, and that the secret of life is true happiness is found not in what we can get out of it for ourselves but in how we connect to others and through giving, service, and sacrifice. By practicing acts of mercy, grace, and generosity, Phil Connors discovers that his life had meaning and purpose.

Obviously, our own understanding of the way life works teaches us that things like this only happen in stories. But we can relate, can't we? How many of us feel like we are living the same day over and over on repeat? How often do we get depressed by unrealized hopes or unfulfilled intentions? Life without purpose is draining, exhausting, and without hope. It is almost like being stuck in the exact same day over and over.

In fact in one scene in the movie, Phil asks another character, Ralph: What would you do if you were stuck in one place and every day was exactly the same, and nothing that you did mattered? Ralph's response is actually profound: That about sums it up for me.

It is so easy for us humans to get stuck in a rut and live a life without purpose or meaning. 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. Like many of us, Phil finds himself in an inexplicable situation, every piece of it outside of his control. But, unlike us, he gets the luxury of being stuck in the same day until he gets it right.

Most of us go semi-automatically through most of our (very similar) days, without appreciating or understanding the whys or the hows. But Phil 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 personal 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 forcing him to dissect each and every moment of his life looking for purpose.

Phil's experience in Punxsutawney teaches us that when we get beyond denial and resentment over the conditions of our life and stop blaming others for our defeats and challenges and accept our situation, then life ceases to be a burden and we can become authentically joy filled and compassionate.

The screenplay was written by Danny Rubin who teaches screenplay at Harvard University. When interviewed about his story, Rubin said:

"The movie shows that it is the repetition of days itself which pushes us forward in our own maturation as we start to encounter the same things over and over again. And so, there's an element of truth to the fact that we [ordinary human beings] are repeating the same day over and over again. ... Phil is presented with the exact same day and the very first time he's presented with it, it's probably the worst day of his life. But by the end of the movie, we see that it's the exact same day but somehow this is probably the best day of his life..." because of his own personal journey of enlightenment.

As Christians, this message should resonate deeply with us. We of all people know that life is a journey and that each moment matters deeply. Our scripture lesson today from Philippians urges us to do nothing from selfish ambition but to be humble and consider others more significant than ourselves and to look to the interests of others. Verse 7 says that Jesus modeled this for us, emptying himself for us so that we would find hope and life in his sacrifice. Throughout his life on earth, Jesus both taught his disciples and provided the example for us a life of service, revealing that real happiness comes not in what we can acquire for ourselves, but in how we serve, love, sacrifice and offer hope to other people.

The whole of the Christian experience is to turn our focus outside of ourselves and to teach us to embrace suffering, trials and testing as means to strength and patience even as we learn to practice the golden rule and consider how our actions affect other people. Even when we feel as though we are stuck, our faith provides opportunity for growing closer to God and others despite the lack of forward motion in our own lives.

Jesus preaches a message of selfless love from the moment he rises from his own baptismal waters. He says in Matthew 6 to not worry about what we will wear or eat or drink, for life is more than food or clothing. Instead of worrying about our own needs, Jesus says to think of how we can for others. Instead of hoarding for ourselves, we are to store up treasure in heaven, manifested here by how we treat others.

In Luke 18 he tells the rich young ruler that all he needs to do to find life is sell all he has and give the money to the poor, then follow Jesus.

In John 4 Jesus reminds us that the only way the world will see God is through our love—by our loving actions—not warm, fuzzy love but selfless, self-sacrificing love—by our love, we will reveal God to others.

And in Matthew 25 Jesus reminds us that where we spend eternity—our share of life everlasting—is determined not by how good we are or how right our beliefs are, but by how well we care for the least, the last and the lost.

And the examples are endless...

When we begin to practice these kinds of acts of selfless love, we will find ourselves growing to be more like the Christ we seek to emulate, and as we become more like Christ, we find our hearts and minds gradually able to more fully recognize God's presence in our lives and experience the joy, peace and assurance that a relationship with our Creator promises. Love is the means by which we are transformed, and love is the very thing that brings purpose and meaning to our lives.

Life's seemingly endless loop of days aren't meant to bore or burden, but rather provide opportunities for us to learn about God, ourselves, and others through a whole lot of ordinary with little pieces of the extraordinary sprinkled in.

A compassionate conversation, a tiny act of kindness, a small gesture of generosity, a decisive step towards justice, a willingness to be second so someone else can be first, a meaningful moment of connection with another human being.... All of these things move us along our own paths of enlightenment, help us discover that the only thing that really matters is love, and that our purpose is to be agents of God's love. We begin to see ourselves as pieces of the whole, small and insignificant and yet uniquely designed to fill a purpose only we can fill.

When we truly get that, we realize that no moment is really insignificant, no day is drudgery, no action is without some kind of consequence. That is the power of a day, and the lesson of Groundhog Day. Phil's transformation happened over many years of living the same day over and over. Our transformation happens over many years of living day after day of painful moments, triumphant moments, relational moments, creative moments, and God-moments.

We need the endless loop of days because we cannot become our true selves... we cannot find true beauty in the ordinary... we cannot truly appreciate the beauty and wonder and value of others... we cannot become truly enlightened... in a day, or a week, or even a year of days and weeks. Enlightenment and realization takes years and years and years, and every moment along the way deserves intention and our attention.

Life is a gift, this movie says. You can choose to use it selfishly for personal gain, or you can use it to help others.

Faith is a gift, scripture says. You can close your heart off to the Spiritual and stay locked inside an endless loop of dark and hopeless days, or you can open yourself up to the inexplicable and

mysterious, and allow God's spirit to permeate every part of every day, transforming you, sanctifying you, and leading you to real peace and total enlightenment.

The choice is up to you.

Amen.