

Groundhog Day

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Introduction

In the years since its release the film has been taken up by Jews, Catholics, Evangelicals, Hindus, Buddhists, Wiccans, and followers of the oppressed Chinese Falun Gong movement. Meanwhile, the Internet brims with weighty philosophical treatises on the deep Platonist, Aristotelian, and existentialist themes providing the skin and bones beneath the film's clown makeup. On National Review Online's group blog, The Corner, I asked readers to send in their views on the film. Over 200 e-mails later I had learned that countless professors use it to teach ethics and a host of philosophical approaches. Several pastors sent me excerpts from sermons in which *Groundhog Day* was the central metaphor. And dozens of committed Christians of all denominations related that it was one of their most cherished movies. (Goldberg 2005)

Groundhog Day, released in 1993, reunites the comedic talents of actor-director Harold Ramis and actor Bill Murray. Their earlier work together on such films as *Meatballs* (1979), *Stripes* (1981), and *Ghostbusters* (1984) showcased a basically slapstick form of comedy featuring acerbic wit offered up by Murray in his typically deadpan style. These films were anything but subtle or philosophical; they were comedy painted with a broad brush. On one level, *Groundhog Day* is a typical Ramis-Murray comedy replete with deadpan wit, but, as Goldberg's quotation above indicates, "beneath the film's clown makeup" *Groundhog Day* is something more. It is the purpose of this paper to look beneath the clown makeup to suggest one explanation as to why this film appeals to such disparate religious/philosophical groups.

In brief, I will propose that in this film Bill Murray's character is an excellent example of the archetypal hero figure as suggested by Joseph Campbell in his classic study of comparative religion and mythology. Phil Connors is the hero in a monomyth, a universal myth. This could help explain the reaction to this film. I will begin the paper by reviewing the events in the film. Next, I will outline Campbell's concept of the monomyth. Finally, I will consider *Groundhog Day* as a monomyth.

The Story

It's February 1st and we are watching Pittsburg TV weatherman Phil Connors (Bill Murray) give the weather forecast for the Pittsburg area. On camera, Phil is witty and professional, but off camera he is rude, selfish, and egotistical. He considers himself to be a great star who is better than his current weatherman job. (He intimates, "There is a major network interested in me.") The latest indignity he must suffer is making his fourth trip to Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, to report on the annual Groundhog Day¹ festivities.

Phil, together with his producer Rita and cameraman Larry, makes his way to the quaint town of Punxsutawney. Rita is in many ways the opposite of Phil: she is fresh, genuine, and optimistic. She looks forward to the Groundhog Day merry-making with an almost childlike enthusiasm and wonder. Phil, on the other hand, considers the locals to be "hicks" and "morons".

Groundhog Day Number One

At 6 a.m. the next day Phil awakens to the sound of the clock radio blaring Sonny and Cher's "I Got You Babe" to the accompaniment of a pair of DJs: "Okay, campers, rise and shine! Don't forget your booties because it's cold out there today!" Phil sets out toward the town center, Gobbler's Knob, where the Groundhog Day ceremony will take place. Leaving his room, he meets a man on the stairs and exchanges a few banalities about the day. Downstairs, Mrs. Lancaster, the landlady, asks Phil if he slept well. His curt reply, "I slept alone." In a low voice, he makes fun of her not being familiar with the words 'cappuccino' and 'espresso'.

Walking down the street, Phil passes a homeless man and is then greeted by one of the most memorable and significant characters in the film, the saurian insurance salesman Ned Ryerson:

Here he comes, clutching a creepy-looking briefcase. Goodness knows what's inside; it suggests a euthanasia enthusiast making house calls. Ned runs inelegantly, legs shooting off in all directions, leather-gloved hands flapping like terrapin flippers. When he departs, he gives Phil a campy wave, utilizing only his fin-

¹ According to custom, on February 2nd a hibernating groundhog emerges from its winter den. If it sees its shadow, it returns to hibernation and there will be six more weeks of winter. If it doesn't see its shadow, it doesn't return to hibernation and there will be an early spring. Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania is the official home of Punxsutawney Phil and the annual Groundhog Day ceremonies.

gers, but there's no fondness there. . . . Ned represents something unbearable in the community. He corroborates Phil's contempt for Punxsutawney . . . he's hell in a camelhair coat. (Gilbey 2004, 36-37)

Upon leaving Ned, Phil steps into a deep puddle by the curb.

Arriving at Gobbler's Knob, Phil sees people dancing in the gazebo to the strains of the "Pennsylvania Polka":

Rita: *You're missing all the fun. These people are great. Some have been partying all night. They sing until they get too cold . . . then they sit by the fire, get warm and sing some more.*

Phil: *They're hicks, Rita.*

Behind Phil, Buster, the town mayor, takes the groundhog (also named Phil!?) from his bunker and announces, "Six more weeks of winter."

Phil: *Television really fails to capture the true excitement . . . of a large squirrel predicting the weather. I, for one, am very grateful to have been here. From Punxsutawney, this is Phil Connors. So long.*

Rita: *Want to try it again without the sarcasm?*

Phil: *We got it. I'm out of here.*

Phil, Rita, and Larry leave in the van for the return trip to Pittsburg. A sudden blizzard—one that Phil had forecast would go east and miss the Punxsutawney-Pittsburg area—forces them to return to Punxsutawney for one more night.

So ends the first Groundhog Day in this film. The events of this first day provide the basic template for the days to come. Variations in these events will serve to indicate both the passage of time and the changes that take place in Phil.

Groundhog Days Number Two to _____?

At 6 a.m. the next day Phil awakens to the sound of the clock radio blaring Sonny and Cher's "I Got You Babe" to the accompaniment of a pair of DJs: "Okay, campers, rise and shine! Don't forget your booties because it's cold out there today!" At first Phil thinks that the radio station is mistakenly playing the tape from yesterday's show, but as the day's events unfold, he realizes that he is reliving the

previous day. Everyone he meets is unaware that anything is amiss. Phil alone knows that the day is repeating. Other people repeat the same actions and words from the day before unless Phil interacts with them differently. In this world Phil is the only being with awareness and free will.

So begins Phil's adventure. Each day he wakes up to relive Groundhog Day. How many times he actually relives the day during the events of the movie is unclear,² but what is clear is that Phil changes over time as he relives the day. He goes through a series of stages roughly modeled on Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's classic Five Stages of Grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.³ In Phil's case, the stages are:

- **Denial/Disbelief.** Phil can't believe what's happening to him. Phil to Rita: "Rita, do me a favor. I need someone to give me a good hard slap in the face."
- **Search for a Logical Answer.** Phil visits both a doctor and a psychologist in an attempt to find a logical explanation for his condition.
- **Elation/Freedom.** "What if there were no tomorrow?" "No tomorrow? That would mean there would be no consequences." Phil realizes that he is no longer responsible for his actions. He steals money, buys expensive cars, and tricks women into sleeping with him.
- **Megomania/Controller of the Universe.** Phil begins to feel that he can control everything and everyone in his universe. When he tires of easy one-night stands, he determines to bed Rita. He meticulously goes about creating the perfect seduction. Day by day, by trial and error, he learns all he can about Rita's past, her dreams, her ideal man, her taste in food, etc. He uses this knowledge to try to create a perfect day in order to seduce her. Time and again, he almost succeeds, but each time the day ends with Rita slapping him.
- **Depression/Suicide.** Unsuccessful in his attempt to seduce Rita and sensing that he is doomed to repeat this day for as long as he lives, Phil tries to kill himself. Phil to Rita: "I have been stabbed, shot, poisoned . . . frozen, hung, electrocuted . . . and burned." All to no avail. After each suicide attempt, he awakens the next morning to the sound of the radio playing Sonny and Cher

² Danny Rubin, the writer of the original screenplay, supposedly envisioned Phil living through the day for ten thousand years. In an interview in the Special Edition DVD, writer/director Harold Ramis has suggested that Phil relived the day for "about ten years."

³ For details, see Kübler-Ross 1997.

and the DJs intoning, “Okay, campers, rise and shine! Don’t forget your booties because it’s cold out there today!”

- **Acceptance.** Finally, Phil accepts his fate and decides to make the best of it. He begins to better himself. He learns how to play the piano, takes up ice sculpting, and begins to take a genuine interest in the people around him.

Phil’s last Groundhog Day is a showcase of the new Phil. Rather than the self-centered, misanthropic Phil of the first Groundhog Day, we see a cultured but selfless man who takes pleasure in art and in making others happy. Highlights of the day: he saves a boy as he falls from a tree, changes a tire for three older women, performs the Heimlich maneuver on the town mayor, plays jazz piano at a town charity event, and even buys insurance from Ned the insurance salesman. Rita is naturally drawn to this Phil and places the winning bid for Phil at a charity bachelor auction. They spend the evening and night together,⁴ and wake up next to each other the next morning—February 3rd.

Campbell’s Monomyth

Joseph Campbell was an American professor, writer, and orator, who lived from 1904 to 1987. He is best known for his work in the fields of comparative mythology and comparative religion. Influenced by Carl Jung’s view of psychological phenomena as experienced through archetypes, Campbell wrote extensively on what he believed to be the underlying unity of religions.

Heroes played a crucial role in his comparative studies. In 1949 *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* introduced his idea of the monomyth . . . which outlined the archetypal patterns Campbell recognized. Heroes were important to Campbell because, to him, they conveyed universal truths about how one should live one’s life and about an individual’s role in society. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Campbell)

The monomyth that Campbell describes consists of a set pattern of events. The following gives an outline of the events in a representative monomyth.⁵

⁴ It’s important to note that, although they spend the night together, they do not have sex.

⁵ Many examples given in this outline are taken from the Wikipedia article “Monomyth”. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monomyth>)

- **Introduction of Hero.** Although most monomyths take place in a special ‘mythical’ world, the story normally begins by introducing the hero in his or her normal, ordinary life and world. While it is true that many heroes in monomyths come from ‘heroic’ stock (kings, princes, generals, etc.), many also come from less noble blood. For instance, in *Lord of the Rings*, Frodo Baggins is introduced as an ordinary hobbit, living a normal hobbit life in the shire.
- **The Call to Adventure/Quest.** Next comes some event that summons or challenges the hero to embark on a journey or quest. This event can take many forms: a distress call, being thrust into a difficult or dangerous situation or world, meeting with an object of desire, etc. Often there is a herald for the adventure. For example, in *Lord of the Rings*, Gandolph is the herald who summons Frodo to his quest to destroy the One Ring. In *Star Wars*, the two droids bring Luke Skywalker the distress call from Princess Leia.
- **Reluctance.** Very often the hero hesitates on the threshold of the quest or adventure. The cause of the hesitation can be fear, lack of confidence, or a disbelief/denial that the adventure actually beckons him. Indeed, Frodo is reluctant to set out and is almost killed by the Ringwraiths.
- **Encouragement/Mentor.** Frequently, at this point, a wise old person appears to encourage the hero to take up the challenge or quest. In the case of *Lord of the Rings*, Gandolph fulfills this function as well. In *Star Wars*, Luke encounters Jedi master Obi-Wan Kenobi.
- **Acceptance and the Threshold.** The hero accepts the challenge and steps over into the special world where the quest will take place. In *The Matrix*, Neo swallows the “red pill.”
- **Tests and Helpers.** The hero then goes through a series of trials or tests, often with the aid of others. The tests can be physical and/or psychological/spiritual. The aid as well can be direct physical aid, such as the aid offered Frodo by Sam. It can also be spiritual or psychological. The hero often encounters a **muse or goddess**. In *The Matrix*, Neo confronts the Oracle; in *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo meets Galadriel.⁶
- **Supreme Ordeal.** The hero must face a final, supreme ordeal. This is the ultimate challenge in the quest—the final deed that must be accomplished:

⁶ In addition to being a muse or goddess, a woman can also be a temptress. In *Lord of the Rings*, Galadriel is also a temptress in that Frodo is tempted forsake his mission and give the Ring to her.

. . . there are two types of deeds. One is the physical deed, in which the hero performs a courageous act in battle or saves a life. The other kind is the spiritual deed, in which the hero learns to experience the supernormal range of human spiritual life and comes back with a message. (Campbell 1991, 152)

Very often the supreme ordeal is a combination of a physical and spiritual deed. Frodo, for example, must overcome both his own desire to possess the power of the Ring and the physical resistance of Golem.

- **Reward.** Having overcome the final challenge, the hero then receives his/her reward. The reward can take many forms: a marriage, atonement with father or god, apotheosis, fire, self-knowledge/illumination, etc. In *Star Wars*, Luke confronts his father Darth Vader. In *The Matrix*, Neo faces off against Agent Smith. This eventually leads to Neo's initiation as The One.
- **Return.** The hero leaves the world of his/her adventure and returns to his/her former world. In *Lord of the Rings*, Frodo returns to the shire.
- **Elixir.** The hero brings back something to his ordinary world. Sometimes it's a boon to mankind—the world is saved or returned to rights. Sometimes it's just knowledge or experience. At the end of *Lord of the Rings*, the shire is at peace, no longer threatened from without.

The above is an outline of a monomyth, but variations in the details are endless:

The changes rung on the simple scale of the monomyth defy description. Many tales isolate and greatly enlarge upon one or two of the typical elements of the full cycle (test motif, flight motif, abduction of the bride), others string a number of independent cycles into a single series (as in the *Odyssey*). Differing characters or episodes can become fused, or a single element can reduplicate itself and reappear under many changes. (Campbell 1993, 246)

It's quite easy to see how such films as *Star Wars*⁷, *Lord of the Rings*, and *The Matrix* are variations of Campbell's monomyth. Each of them is set in a grandly

⁷ Of course, it is widely known that Campbell's writing, especially *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, was one of the primary inspirations for George Lucas as he worked on *Star Wars* in the 1970s.

mythic world inhabited by grandly mythic creatures. Luke Skywalker, Frodo Baggins, and Neo are clearly heroes in the monomythic mold. But Phil Connors? In the final section, I'd like to look at *Groundhog Day* with reference to the monomyth model outlined above.

Groundhog Day as a Monomyth

If we summarize Phil Connors' experiences in *Groundhog Day* with reference to the above outline of Campbell's monomyth, this is what we have:

Phil Connors is **introduced** as an **ordinary** modern day Everyman—an unhappy, jaded misanthrope stuck in a dead-end career. One day he awakes to find himself in a **mythic world** in which he is reliving the same day, February 2nd, Groundhog Day. His **adventure/quest** is basically this: to do what is necessary to get him to February 3rd. At first, he doesn't understand his situation and is **reluctant** to **accept** it.

With time, he begins to understand the nature of the world he has been thrust into, and when he realizes the power he wields in this new world, he embraces it. In other words, just as Frodo is tempted by the power of the Ring, Phil is **tempted** by the unique power he has in his mythic world. He sets about to selfishly shape this world to his own ends. He goes through a series of **tests** to his power as he sets about to manipulate both people and events.

Ultimately, he finds that his near godlike powers are not enough for him to be happy. He becomes despondent and seeks to escape his situation by suicide. He finds, though, that even suicide provides no escape. Under these circumstances, the **supreme ordeal** requires of him a **spiritual deed**: he must overcome his selfishness, his desire to control people and events for his own purposes. Throughout the time leading up to Phil's **spiritual deed**, Rita has served as a **muse** to Phil's better nature. Phil finally emulates Rita and gives up trying to control. He learns to take joy in those people and things around him rather than forcefully extracting joy from them. Through doing this, he gets his **reward** and **returns** to the ordinary world: he wakes up on February 3rd.

The **elixir** that Phil brings is the **example** and **message** that his actions imply: happiness is not attained by pursuing selfish material goals but by taking joy in helping those around you.

Conclusion

Groundhog Day is first of all a comedy. It is a truly funny movie full of the deadpan wit that Bill Murray is noted for. Compared to the mythic worlds in such movies as *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars*, the world of *Groundhog Day* is quite ordinary, inhabited by normal people in an apparently non-mythic modern day setting. In spite of that, the story of Phil Connors' experiences and final spiritual change comprises a true monomyth. Phil, the misanthropic curmudgeon—through a series of psychological/spiritual trials—changes to become Phil, the selfless saint. Phil becomes a monomythic hero. He passes his supreme ordeal—his ultimate trial—when he gives up his own self-centeredness:

If you realize what the real problem is—losing yourself, giving yourself up to some higher end, or to another—you realize that this itself is the ultimate trial. When we quit thinking primarily about ourselves and our own self-preservation, we undergo a truly heroic transformation of consciousness. (Campbell 1991, 154-55)

It is just this kind of transformation of consciousness that most religions seek and many philosophies try to understand. Perhaps in this lies the key to *Groundhog Day's* widespread appeal.

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