

The Mormon Review



Books and culture from an LDS perspective

Groundhog Day

Harold Ramis, et al.,
Groundhog Day (Columbia
Pictures, 1993).

By Adam Miller

It's Groundhog Day again. Will Phil see his shadow?

Either way, no one is coming to save you from the grace of the mundane.

Either way, there is no help on the way. Eternity is all just more of the same. Novelty is a red herring: the last refuge of that dream that is your ego.

Today, wet or dry, the world will rain down its weather on you.

In Punxsutawney, weathermen are redundant. Bill Murray's weatherman, Phil Connors, is doubly so: not only do his days loop endlessly back to that same February 2 wake-up call, but the groundhog – that other meteorologist, that other Phil – has already got the job.

As a would-be weatherman, Phil makes his living by betting on what will happen next. His life is indexed to swings in the

futures market. Today's value is a function of its consequences.

When Phil finds himself stripped of tomorrow, of a day *after* Groundhog Day, he is left with no future to ratify the value of the present. He is left with nothing but the “work” in his commonplace workaday. Without the hope of consequence, he is left with things just as they are.

Initially giddy, Phil's freedom quickly sours into nihilism. He indulges a parade of violence, gluttony, and lust, but still wakes up alone and hungry. He can no longer pretend that things will turn out differently with the next victory, the next treat, the next fling. The world has nothing more to offer than what it has already given. There is no front on the horizon promising a low pressure system and the advent of heaven.

Phil now sees what should have been obvious all along: there is no escaping the minute specificity of repetition

required for anything to be what it is.

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Again and again you must reach for the alarm, roll out of bed, straighten the sheets, and stretch your arms wide. Again and again you must wash your hair, rinse the conditioner, adjust the hot water, and reach for the towel. Again and again you must eat your lunch, pause at the water fountain, stop at the restroom, and wipe sauce from your chin. Again and again you must breathe in and breathe out, breathe in and breathe out.

Breath is the raw iteration of life itself.

Congratulations, you've just done the dishes – do it again! Congratulations, you've just run ten miles – do it again! Congratulations, you've managed a good night's sleep – do it again!

Phil's pockets are full. Life is all nickels and dimes. Every moment, ten thousand points of resistance, ten thousand paper cuts, ten thousand irritations, ten thousand pleasures and ten thousand pains.

While you may yet dream of the frictionless, of floating in zero-G, Phil has no place to go. While you may yet dream of that symmetry-breaking moment when everything will shift into the adjacent possible, when your tax refund will finally (and definitively)

arrive, Phil—even if the mail comes – will still have to file his claim again tomorrow.

Don't mistake me – novelty can and does come. (In some ways, there is nothing but. And in some ways, it is desperately needed.) Phil, after all, *does* do something new every day. But that novelty, even while freshly salted, will not bring what you hoped. It won't bring an end to the resistance and repetition. It won't scare the groundhog back into his hole.

You want a new job. You get it. But the commute will still kill you. You'll still have to fill up the car and sit on the seat and buckle your belt and turn the wheel and let off the gas and check your mirrors and scan the radio.

You want to fall in love. You get it. But the paper cuts don't end. How could love, however fresh, be anything other than the buttoning and unbuttoning of a shirt, the dampness of socks, the asynchronicity of libido, the cough of a child from the other room, the bruise of a height differential?

You want to be rich and famous. You get it. But now there is nothing but the scrupulous repetition of waiting for *others* to do things for you. You'll still

have to flick through the channels, be tangled in late morning sheets, cross and uncross your legs, stop at stop signs, check your mirrors, unbutton your shirt, stop at the restroom, etc. This particular plane of possibilities, like *all* other planes of possibility, is just as definitively mundane as any other.

Novelty is a red herring. There is no place to go. Settle in with Phil. You won't find what you want over there. You're still going to have to breathe.

At every step in the problem, life demands that you show all of your work. No credit is given just for getting the right answer.

Can you bear it?

Phil cannot bear it. He drives off a cliff to end it. He drops a toaster in the bathtub to end it. He jumps off a six-story building to end it. He steps in front of a delivery truck to end it. Even death repeats.

But can *you* bear it?

Can you root out your hope for the banality to end? Can you cut the cord to this secret wish of yours, this secret wish that animates your basest fantasies, your most ordinary chores, *and* your most authentic spiritual longings? How many disguises does this wish –

this wish for the paper cuts to end – have? How many faces does it wear?

If you think I'm being bitter, you've misunderstood. I'm being compassionate. And I'm trying to be Mormon.

In general, the complaint about Mormonism is that it is all too mundane.

God, for Mormons, is not supra-mundane.

God has a body? Fingers and toes? He's married? He must, every day, tie the sash on his white robe? His immortal lungs perpetually expand and contract?

Heaven, too, for Mormons, is not supra-mundane.

Heaven? Where people are still married, still work, still have children, still change diapers, still share casseroles?

Heaven, for Mormons, is what *seals* our union with the mundane rather than terminates it.

Leave it to Mormonism to see the nihilistic claim that there is nothing but the aching specificity of this repetition and raise it to the power of infinity. Leave it to Mormonism to claim that, even in heaven, we'll have to button and unbutton our shirts, show all our work, suffer paper

cuts, and – of course, forever and ever again – breathe.

In the end, Phil Connor turns out to be the Mormon hero *par excellence*.

Let it snow, Phil finally says. Let the weather rain down. Shucked bare of hope for something else, he is able to invert the nihilism of life's repetition into compassion only after its rough-edged iteration has worn his heart smooth of any claim on the future. Deprived of reward and consequence – of any hope that his works could save (or damn) him – he, in the end, comes back to the work for its own sake. He attends. And by the time February 3 arrives, it is clear that Phil has not been saved *from* the mundane but *for* it.

“If we go to hell,” Joseph Smith claimed, “we will turn the devils out of doors and make a heaven of it.”¹

If life is repetition, I am claiming, then we must turn our daydreams out of doors and fashion a heaven from it.

There is no help on the way. Eternity is all just more of the same. Novelty is a

red herring: the last refuge of that dream that is your ego.

No one is coming to save you from the grace of the mundane.

Jesus came to *give* this grace not take it away.

Breathe.

Nothing could be more merciful.

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¹ Joseph Fielding Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1976), 316.

