

From the Kitchen

17 November 2010



Life can be like a series of film clips which repeat in changing permutations and which themselves have changed each time they run, or which can seem the same each time through. I'm in an aeroplane again, on my way to Sydney, again, to exhibit nutritional products at an ACNEM¹ training event, again. For any of you not aware of it, I was, until a little over three years ago, CEO of ACNEM. My time with the college represented, when I left, over one quarter of my life.

Life has been described by some as occurring in cycles. Another way of viewing it is as a spiral – when a spiral is seen from above, it can appear as a circle or a series of circles; seen from the side, the 'circles' are still there but each is at a different level and is connected to the one above and below it. That is how I experience the recurring film clips. I could be lazy and merely see each as a repeat of the previous. That would be such a waste, as each 'repeat' offers an opportunity for a new experience, a fresh perspective. Life is more interesting when I look for the novel in everything that comes along, or if I create the unexpected. This creation is a function of tweaking my state of mind. It can be a small adjustment from "here we go again" to "what did I miss in this last time?" I have learned over the years that this requires a mindfulness of what is happening externally (the events and circumstances) and of what is happening internally (my thoughts, feelings and emotions). As these internal factors are continually changing, my attention to them will alter my experience of each repeated external event.

Expectations play a critical role. If every time I have to fly somewhere or stay in a hotel I say "here we go again", I am closing myself off from the possibility of experiencing something new; I will be looking for those elements that reinforce that this is, indeed, the same as last time. But each time I fly there are different passengers next to me and around me and different cabin crew. There may even be different food choices. At the destination the luggage may come quickly or only after a long wait or not at all. The flight may be cancelled and a hotel room offered for the night.

On the days I drive to an office to work, I usually use the same route. When three days in a row I end up on the freeway behind the same car (at slightly different times of the day) I could take it as 'the same again' or as a novel experience. And what are the possibilities when someone phones me and he has dialled the wrong number and an hour later another person phones me and asks for the first man (whose name I know because I chatted with him for a while about chance meetings and coincidences)?

Interruptions to what I am doing can be just that (interruptions), or opportunities for new experiences. It is also possible to have interruptions take over from intended activities – it comes back to mindfulness and choice.

We are in the habit of looking for patterns in things – maybe we are hard-wired that way for survival, because a tiger is a tiger is a tiger and if you walk off the edge of a cliff you will fall, every time. We can train ourselves to look into the spaces in these patterns to discover new things. Props can help, such as carrying a camera, wearing different sunglasses or having the dog walk on my right side instead of the left. This last one may create new possibilities and

experiences for the dog as well. Driving a car in a country where they drive on the other side of the road can do it; so can walking down the road with my eyes closed ... ouch!

It can be difficult to treat every moment as an opportunity to experience something I have never experienced before. To do so, I need to resist the easy option of assuming how it is likely to be and what I am likely to feel. Laziness kicks in readily and I can go through life in a dream. John Lennon sang that “life is what happens to you while you’re busy making other plans.”² and in some spiritual traditions it is believed that we dream our lives and only truly live when we awake from that dream. Changing my point of view to see the spiral rather than the recurring circles may be one way of waking up. Walking down the road with my eyes closed may be another. We can all find ways to wake up, however briefly and however infrequently.

1. [Australasian College of Nutritional and Environmental Medicine](#).
2. *Beautiful Boy (Darling Boy)*, 1980