

The Circle Game

Some of the most interesting articles I've ever read are in *The New Yorker*. The depth of the stories and the attention required to read them means I don't always keep up with my weekly subscription. I save every one until I've had a chance to at least scan the pages, stashing a couple in my bag for every airline trip or anticipated long wait at some service provider. I've been captured by many a story in its pages.

The latest one that has me lying awake thinking about the mysteries of the universe is a piece on cycle theory. "The Secret Cycle" (October 12, 2009) details the way men and women (mostly men) have sought to divine the hidden patterns of financial markets and predict the ups and downs that, analyzed skillfully, can make people very, very rich. One man with an obsession with how the number π (which, you may remember from high school, is 3.141, the number of infinity) predicts financial panics built a forecasting fortune on it and ended up in prison for . . . well, it's hard to explain briefly, but it has to do with the fact that some people assert he absolutely cannot be as accurate as he's been without some sort of illegal insider knowledge.

While the article begins with the phenomena of cycles in the financial world, it plunges into an explanation of the fascination—yea, obsession—yea, almost insane addiction—some have for seeing cycles in just about anything that can be historically tracked. Sometimes related to the number π , sometimes the number ϕ (1.618, known as "the golden ratio"), the truth is an astonishing plethora of events move in identifiable cycles that are oblivious to societal trends or cultural change. We prefer to believe there are better reasons for what we do than the sterile overlay of mathematical principles. "And yet," writes the author of the article, Nick Paumgarten, "patterns exist, and we slowly discover them. Seasons, migrations, moons: the template is there. Consciously or unconsciously, most people accept certain components of cycle theory. We seek and see patterns in things. It is the way our minds work, presumably for the purpose of survival."

I look for patterns, particularly in my decision-making, because I know

decisions result in a pattern of truths about our lives that can be observed from a distance. As clearly as some have seen cycles when gathering information on droughts in Oklahoma, of heart disease rates in various populations, of market crashes or plane crashes, of tree rings or crop yields, I see in our own cycles a way of providing illumination.

What would yours reveal? That you crash and burn every 12.3 years? That you change jobs in leap years or make the most important life choices during periods of heightened sunspot activity? What patterns in your life would make you step back in a "whoa, wait a minute" flash of incredulity? Why do you keep going through the same old changes? Why do you keep ending up with women who use you or men who take advantage of your nurturing ways or bosses who never see your value? Why do you keep throwing money away or failing to plan for your future? Is it because every time you have the opportunity to move forward, you kill your desire out of a fear of winning, afraid to stand out? Conversely, why do you always seem to be in the right place at the right time, or take leaps of faith that always seem to work out, or always land on your feet when trouble sweeps everyone else away? Did someone instill in you that you were worth success? What are your patterns? What's the secret of you that, were it to be revealed, would show that golden ratio of disaster or achievement or consistent mediocrity?

"Given a certain set of circumstances, people do the same thing over and over again," says the main character in Mr. Paumgarten's article. "There aren't many options." How have we wed ourselves to our cycles? Can we unhook? Transcend the destructive ones? Truly change? Do we



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Quick Links

[The Secret Cycle \(New Yorker Abstract\)](#)
[Adopt-A-Greyhound](#)

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even want to? Did someone plant a seed of cyclical doom within us that we refuse to expose and eradicate?

Ask yourself if you adhere to a pattern that needs breaking. Do you have the courage to break it? To leave behind those who would have you remain in ineffective sequences of decision and behavior? To sever your ties to people who do you no good, offer you no love, and do not encourage your progress? Do you have the foresight and courage to catch yourself doing the same dull things you've always done? Is it time to retool inevitable, consistent, worthless plans of action?

Lots of questions to think about. Quiz later. 🍷

Teddy Bear Says...



Recently, someone asked what constituted a "fine" dining restaurant and why silly rules of etiquette applied to them. To be fair, I once wondered myself. I wasn't sure why "fine" was an important distinction, since I always dine well. Good food is good food, after all.

Here's the thing: fine dining has to do with quality, cost, and atmosphere. Usually a "higher end" restaurant that will not allow jeans or t-shirts and may even require a jacket and tie for men (although things are a bit more relaxed in some places), there is an attention to structure and detail

by a chef who oversees the meals and is recognized as an expert. The food is of a higher quality than a local neighborhood eatery like Applebee's and the goal is to produce unique and delicious tastes with the best of ingredients. Portion size is often small because the idea is not to stuff one's gut, but to taste and savor. Presenting the food as a veritable work of art is expected and appreciated. It's not about having the Big Bonanza portion cooked to crispy goodness, but about enjoying the artfulness of a chef and the food combinations he or she uses to get you to truly *taste* and *experience* the flavors. It is about the joy of food.

Prior to the Industrial Revolution, the poor regularly ate with their hands (or with a knife only) from "plates" that were large pieces of dried bread, called *trenchers*, or from crude wooden vessels. As a middle class began to form, people sought a way to separate themselves from the unrefined manners they had once used. As purchasing power increased along with the ability to climb the social

Quotable

It is difficult to explain the beauty of ritual to people who don't even agree that they should learn to take sustenance without revolting or insulting anyone trying to do the same in their vicinity.

Judith Martin
"Miss Manners"

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ladder a bit, the unrefined ways just didn't fit with nicer surroundings.

So rather elaborate rules for dining were developed. This allowed the Victorians a way to distinguish themselves from the lower class but also gave them a method of "vetting" their children's suitors. Wanting their sons and daughters to marry into refinement and avoid the rigors

of poverty, they observed how potential in-laws presented themselves at the table. Someone with refined manners was more likely to enter into a middleclass, white-collar profession. It showed you were seeking higher things.

"The rules" went through a few changes over the years until settling into fairly standard operation for American and European dining. What may seem to be perfectionist, prim, snooty standards of conduct are, in the end, adherence to manageable dictates that prevent you from offending people with whom you're eating.

You may have grown up spearing a side of beef on the common plate with your knife and eating it with your hands. It may have been okay in your home to sit back and grab your stomach and loudly proclaim your state of satiation. (In fact, this may sound like your house at Thanksgiving!) But everyone has *not* been reared as you have and rules of etiquette are nothing more than the simple guidelines for conduct that prevent us from being perceived as unkind, thoughtless, rude, or selfish. It makes life easier that everyone does not decide on his or her own that they don't feel like engaging in any sort of social contract, such as being quiet in the movie theater and, instead, getting on a cell phone and talking loudly as though sitting in a living room. What, you say? You run into that a lot? And what do you think to yourself? *That is so rude.*

This is why etiquette is important. We do what makes for good interactions. We all generally employ the same actions that make for compatibility and goodwill.

If you never, ever want to be in a fine restaurant and are certain you never will be, then disregard the fundamental behaviors for dining. But if it's possible you might find yourself at a formal banquet someday, or a potential employer asks you to dinner at a fancy restaurant, or you're invited to dine at the captain's table on a cruise—you'll want to know what the rules are so you don't have to think twice and wonder if you're showing how backwards you are. Learn so the food is experienced, the company is enjoyed, and a good time is had by all.

If you're still hungry afterwards, go grab a hot dog, which is acceptably eaten with the hands. Or a bowl of kibble. No utensils necessary! 🐾