

Cycles & Rhythms of Life by Neelam Bakshi

Address to Unitarian Church, Glasgow, 29 October 2017

Life journeys

In recent months my mind has turned to thinking about cycles and rhythms in my life. We are growing older – can't avoid it any more. Our daughter is a mother and the older grand-daughter is at secondary school. Our hair is greyer and our knees are weaker and we are noticeably slower. From time to time I encounter people from my past – and some are close still, and others, whom I used to know well, are mere acquaintances from some distant land and time. It is a very strange experience – beginning to reflect on one's life journey from quite far down the road – and with plenty more to go yet.

As a personal development trainer, one exercise I used was to ask people to consider their life and draw it with a few significant points – positive and negative so we could share experiences and lessons. Some drew their lifetime as a line, others as a river, or a pathway. There were even trees or houses with rooms, as people represented stages and experience in different ways. People were creative at representing their lives, and the world has not been any less creative in attempting to depict what a lifetime is like.

Models of a lifetime

Carl Jung's work has produced "The Hero's Journey" – where we can see the cycle of a quest, barriers, facing our own demons, acquiring wisdom and perhaps a mentor, and overcoming the challenges until we find our own holy grail. This journey represents both our life quest, and the individual adventures within that quest, and the format is well recognised in books and films as the epic story form – the Odyssey, the Ramayana, Star Wars.

Although I am struck by what people think a hero is. This quote from Brian Andreas brings it home.

"Anyone can slay a dragon, ... but try waking up every morning and loving the world all over again. That's what takes a real hero."

As well as the Hero's Journey, you may recognise other ways of thinking about a lifetime – the three ages of men – childhood, adulthood and older life (or for women, depicted with some stereotyping as the maiden, the woman and the crone?) or the seven ages which I describe a little later.

Numbers of Life

I considered one of the ways in which I was taught to understand numbers and the energy of their vibration– from 1 through to 10 and 0. For example #1 represents the individual, 2 represents partnership and all the numbers through to 9 – contribution and legacy and then the cycle begins again with 10. ¹

Today, science is discovering that the universe is made up of numbers – or at least can be deconstructed using numbers, and sacred geometry uses numbers to construct key shapes such as spirals which are the foundation of so many natural phenomena from shells to flowers and stars.

Ages and time

A more traditional model of a lifetime is “the seven ages of man” – Infancy, Childhood, Adolescence, Young Adulthood, Mature Adulthood, Mid-life and Older Age. These can be expanded depending on your perspective to add pre-birth, birth, dying and transitioning through death.

¹ (#1 represents the individual, 2 represents partnership, 3 is family and once there is family there is a need for a home – the number 4. With a home comes the need for communication and networks - #5, and then material success or #6. And after that the realisation that material wealth is insufficient and the search for something more begins with #7, and deeper study of the mysteries and the secrets of life and death are represented by #8, with contribution and and experience of the full journey showing up as #9. 10 is the completion of life and the beginning of the new cycle of 1 +0. 0 is the point of transition- life between lives.)

In an alternative model, a lifetime is calculated in cycles of 7 years where the formative years for values and personality are from 0-7, development of intellect and behaviours is from 7-14, and 14-21 is the age when we explore our identities. 21-28 is about and building foundations; and 28-35 is the cycle of maturity, when a household is maintained and job security is anticipated. Later years are about consolidation and harvesting the fruits of labour, and moving on to more soul-searching and seeking spirituality and inner peace – in eastern traditions, the time to leave home and search as a hermit, or in a retreat in the realisation that the answers lay beyond wealth.

The model seems not to fit so well now. Job security has gone people are living well beyond three-score years and ten. Indeed, to die at 70 is considered premature and old age has shifted into our 80s. I was startled a couple of weeks ago to hear on the radio that 80,000 carers in England are over the age of 85. I discussed this with some colleagues – some of these carers are looking after people older than themselves; others have become carers for their children who, in their 50s, have developed disabling conditions. Life is topsy turvy

External and internal rhythms

I reflected also on how we make sense of our lives. What are the cues that we have about what our lives should be like? It occurred to me that these can be neatly split into external and internal rhythms.

The external rhythms are relatively easy for us to see – the very physical ones that no-one disputes such as the weather and the seasons, night and day occurring in roughly 24 hour cycles, “clock-time” as well as the natural rhythms of the lunar calendar and the solar year, even the tides. For centuries these external cues have driven what happened day to day, indeed what was possible. The seasons – and planning for them – determined what we could eat. The importance of the seasons is such that festivals were created around them – spring festivals for planting, festivals for rain and sun, summer festivals and harvest festivals to celebrate nature’s bounty, and winter festivals to placate the gods in the fallow months.

Trade with overseas partners introduced a variety of foods, unseasonal to us and disrupting our natural rhythms. I’m all for being able to have a

mango in Britain, or a strawberry in December. But I need to remember that the folks who advocate salads all year round probably live in California and not Glasgow, and a good scotch broth is more useful to me as we approach winter – and, surprisingly enough, the ingredients are those in season in late autumn and winter in Scotland.

I will skip lightly past the notion of energies as the planets shift gear since folk who are very scientifically oriented might get restless if I venture into areas that are more controversial. However, it might be useful to point out that we celebrate our birthday each year – which is simply the date on which the sun moves into the same astrological position in our charts as when we were born. There are many planetary anniversaries – and folk may well come across one called “the Saturn return” Astrologically, it is a period around 27-30 when many folk hit massive life changes and it has been blamed for many “seven year itches” in marriages.

Internal Rhythms

I wonder if we are as familiar with the internal rhythms that give us cues. We’re familiar with the saying “gut-feeling”. But did you know science has been discovering that the heart and the gut seem to have their own brain type cells and when making a decision, it really is valuable to check that you’ve got an ok from all three brains – the ones in your head, your heart and your gut. It’s as simple as focusing on your heart, and then your gut and checking how you feel along with checking what your logic says.

Our bodies have different rhythms. Circadian rhythms are the ones that occur once in a 24 hour cycle and there are Infradian cycles lasting more than one day such as the menstrual cycle, or the cycle of pregnancy lasting 40 weeks. Ultradian rhythms occur more than once in a day.

So it won’t be a surprise if I suggest that bodily organs also have their own cycles. A report in the news this week suggest that research shows heart surgery is more successful if carried out in the afternoon. That is both interesting and alarming. Our NHS cannot function on pm only heart surgery, and I don’t want any suggestion that the best surgeons should be allowed to work in the private sector in the afternoon.

We are familiar with the heart-beat and the pulse. In the west, we know of one pulse and several pulse points such as the wrist, or the finger-tip, or behind the ear, or the temple. However, eastern traditions consider there are many pulses. Both the Chinese and Indian systems use 3 pulses on each wrist, and they measure the strength and regularity at superficial and deep levels along with the number of beats. In these traditions the pulses alone can give guidance on what kind of illness may be expected, and the nature of the remedy.

In both systems, the time of day and night is pertinent in relation to our internal rhythms. In the Chinese system each time span relates to a different organ and meridian, and to a different element and season. In the Indian Ayurvedic system, the time spans are related to the seasons and the doshas or humours – kapha, pitta and vata. So, for example, waking up regularly at a particular time of night will point to the system that is out of balance, and getting sleep during certain hours is necessary to build strength in the relevant organ or humour.

Western science is catching up. Regeneration of cells happens in the early hours of sleep – not according to when you go to sleep, but by the clock. Going to bed early for your beauty sleep may not be a myth.

Circadian Rhythms

Circadian rhythms have been explored increasingly by scientists. I've drawn from research reports by the National Institute of Health. There is a system of biological clocks that control the body's daily rhythms – controlled by a master body clock located in the hypothalamus in the brain. These circadian rhythms determine sleep patterns and how jet lag affects you – even the changing of the clocks this morning. They also influence hormone production, hunger, cell regeneration, DNA repair systems, body temperature and are associated with weight, and disorders such as diabetes, depression, and bipolar and seasonal affective disorders (or SAD). There are both internal factors such as genes and proteins, and external factors such as the amount of daylight or blue light coming in such as from a mobile phone or television– which affects the production of melatonin and that affects the sleep-wake cycle including how quickly you fall asleep and the quality of your sleep. Researchers have been looking at the effect of shift work on body

rhythms– and it's not positive. In mice that had normal amounts of sleep, but light misaligned to their cycles, their ability to learn and remember was affected adversely.

These circadian rhythms are not unique to humans. Apparently, we are similar to fruit flies. Flowering plants need light and sunshine and if these are reduced in the afternoon, they won't flower. This kind of information might give clues in the future to crop behaviour and to animal behaviour such as egg-laying. The big clue here is the type and timing of light as an environment factor so we might well be advised to start thinking about how we interact with light in our own lives. Do we get enough daylight or do we work in artificial light all day long and go home to little light or blue light? Is our blue light (or television or mobile or laptop) on near bedtime – and even in the bedroom? Such simple things may have dramatic effects on our health.

Maybe, like me, you wish someone had told me earlier.

Ultradian Rhythms

The Ultradian rhythm refers to a cycle of around 90 to 120 minutes which occurs more than once in a day. It was discovered in the 1950s by Nathaniel Kleitman. During sleep, these cycles correspond to different stages of sleep and alertness – and we have become familiar with light sleep, REM or dream sleep and deep sleep. Less familiar is that the cycles also operate during the day and is known as the basic rest activity cycle. During the first 90 minutes or so, energy increases and reaches a peak, and then begins to ebb, and will need rest and recovery.

Somewhere within the 90-120 minutes, we start to get cues about fatigue. It's been discovered that a 20 minute break or rest is ideal.

We all know about recharging. What's surprising is that so few of us know we should be taking a break within every 1 ½ to 2 hours – whether it's a nap, a rest, a tea break, a change of activity, or just getting away from the screen for a while. And it's also valuable to learn how our energy flows within the cycle so we know how to recognise our peak activity time, and when the energy is diminishing. This one cycle can be the difference between good health and ill-health, between concentrating and having an accident, and between growing older gracefully or fading. For us older folk, there's a wee extra bit. A bit of aerobic activity to

maximise the peak energy! So if you're planning exercise, think about this rest-activity cycle. If you're working, consider how to build in breaks.

Personal Story and Impacts

In the last few months, the need to downsize has become more pressing. Health issues have surfaced and internal stairs and an over-abundant garden are showing us that we are not as fit or as young as we used to be. It's the darndest thing - I've had the book on Ultradian Rhythms for about 10 years. Preparing today's address had me look it out and do some research. Guess what's now a priority on my agenda as I begin to plan my week.

Clearing out things collected with pleasure over many years has become quite challenging – physically and emotionally. Books I have loved must go. Clothes that will never fit must go. Old memories that have been stored in things and in my body are also ready for release – and I have the tools to let them go. My memories are not in things. They are in me.

Lessons

A couple of very powerful lessons have come from Scandinavia – the concepts of Hygge and of death de-cluttering. Hygge is about what makes a “comfortable” environment and ambience. I don't know how to sum it up other than to say cosy log fires, woolly oversized jumpers, mugs of hot chocolate, books, relaxing, and work-life balance, with life spilling over into work rather than work into life.

Death de-cluttering sounds ominous. It is - but not for the reasons you might think. There has been a bit of a revelation as folk have tried to part with some precious possessions – only to discover that they are not antiques but anachronisms. Who, these days, wants the hardback Children's Britannica when Google is up to date and often wrong? That Children's Britannica that I turned to as a child whenever I went to visit my grandparents, and which I bought for my own daughter some 30 years ago. Who wants the full china tea-set – a wedding gift to me by my best friend at school - when there are cheap mugs and afternoon tea is a quaint pastime? And who wants the drawers full of bedding and linen collected to use for us and our visitors - when duvets are disposable and

cheap? The traditional brown furniture –desks, tables, chairs sideboards don't belong in the tiny new flats our children inhabit. They're not portable for people who will have portfolio careers. Death de-cluttering is about taking responsibility. It's my clutter not my daughter's. And it is for me to deal with it while I'm alive – not for her to wade through on my death. If it's important for her to have it – why wait? If it's usable she should get the use of it now. And if it's something I'd like her to have, I can explain why and she can choose. I need to remember not to be offended. My memories and attachments are not in her mind-body system (although memories carried in the DNA would be a tangent to explore another day).

It's been a time to review life lessons and I hope it's ok to share some of mine with you.

Personal Lessons about health

- Living more in harmony with nature. Eating more naturally, and more in line with seasons.
- Noticing and being in harmony with my own body signals. Relaxation, activity, sleep and creativity are all needs and the 90-120 minute rest activity cycle is important.
- Paying attention in relation to mind and heart and also the gut. Being mindful.
- Noticing the way my body is incorporating habits and tension – and taking steps to reverse those. Stretching, walking, postural exercises, sitting properly at the computer – whatever I need to do. Habits change. Body impacts are reversible.
- Thinking long-term and not just about short-term gratification – “ a moment on the lips, a lifetime on the hips”. Well, I might want to change that message because it's not a lifetime. “a moment on the lips, consequences for the hips”.

Personal Lessons about holding on/letting go.

- Taking responsibility for cleaning up what is mine to clean up.

- Things and people come into my life for a purpose. When they have served that purpose, let them go. Someone else may be in need of what I am holding onto.
- That applies equally to skills, experiences, memories – even houses and trees.
- Gifts are not the people who gave me the gifts. The emotion is in me – not in the item. A photograph is enough for some things. It's not enough for chocolate or velvet – I have to taste or feel some things. Memories are multi-sensory not just visual so photos may not be enough.

Lessons about purpose and the future .

Letting go isn't about giving up. Space allows new purposes or new expressions of a purpose. I was singularly unsuccessful at university – and left without completing either a medical or a psychology degree, and without ever getting into law. I've been on two health boards, a judicial appointments board and two tribunals. The purpose didn't get diluted but the expression was unexpected.

- In a couple of years I'll reach my 60s. That's when Louise Hay started her life's work – and that's pretty well when Jimmy Carter moved into politics and into his real life's work of being a peace negotiator. Being a peanut farmer was his schooling.
- My mental, physical and emotional ages are not necessarily the same and certainly don't need to be the same or more than my biological age. I can do something about all except my biological age and will look at new habits. Small changes that make a difference.
- New research, and quantum physics in particular, is showing me that much less in the universe is fixed than we thought. Einstein told us about relativity. We have to learn to apply that to age and not just time. So at my age, I'm working with new ideas and research to learn how to live in the 21st century – the 19th and 20th century models don't work so well here. And so I work with new types of healing along with my GP; new ways of organising my day taking account of

ultradian rhythms and choosing health over the television. I have a daylight lamp in what I call the computer cupboard because I spend a lot of time there. But it doesn't have trees and water and hills and peace to soothe my soul. I'm not a walker, but I still need nature so in moving to a new home, where will I find all the elements I need?.

So I hope my meander through science, and Chinese, Indian and western philosophy, and my life and lessons have given you some food for thought, and some ideas about ways to adapt as your life evolves.

RESOURCE LIST FOR RHYTHMS OF LIFE ADDRESS 29 OCTOBER 2017
- NEELAM BAKSHI

A number of ideas and concepts were introduced in the address. Here are some links to background information on the various topic areas. Some are scientific resources. Others are traditional or modern interpretations of these.

Feel free to dip in, pay attention or ignore.

Whatever you read or listen to be mindful of your truth and what will serve you best.

GENERAL
https://publications.nigms.nih.gov/insidelifescience/rhythms_life.html
SLEEP
https://www.ninds.nih.gov/Disorders/Patient-Caregiver-Education/Understanding-Sleep
https://www.theguardian.com/science/2017/oct/06/western-society-is-chronically-sleep-deprived-the-importance-of-the-bodys-clock
BODY CLOCKS
Heart Surgery
http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-41763958
BODY CLOCK QUIZ
http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-27161671
DEPRESSION AND SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER
https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/oct/30/sad-winter-depression-seasonal-affective-disorder
CIRCADIAN RHYTHMS
https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/oct/30/listen-ticking-body-clock-circadian-physical-mental-wellbeing
Of owls larks and alarm clocks
http://www.nature.com/news/2009/090311/pdf/458142a.pdf
CHINESE BODY CLOCK
https://yinyanghouse.com/lifestyle/circadian-rhythms-the-chinese-clock-and-how-to-live-in-sync
https://www.lifecoachcode.com/2017/05/07/chinese-organ-body-clock/
AYURVEDIC BODY CLOCK
http://svasthaayurveda.com/the-ayurvedic-body-clock-organs-and-dosha-alignment-with-time/
http://www.shareayurveda.com/ayurveda-blogs/organize-your-day-according-to-

your-ayurvedic-body-clock/

ULTRADIAN RHYTHMS – REST BREAKS

<http://www.ernestrossi.com/interviews/ultradia.htm>

<https://experiencelife.com/article/give-yourself-a-break/>

<https://pilargerasimo.com/2016/08/28/all-about-ultradian-rhythms/>

3 BRAINS

<https://spinalresearch.com.au/three-brains-head-heart-gut-sometimes-conflict/>

<https://mrsmindfulness.com/head-heart-gut-check/>

PULSE READING

Ayurvedic Pulse Reading

<https://lifespaspa.com/ancient-pulse-reading-made-easy/>

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) Pulse Reading

<https://www.sacredlotus.com/go/diagnosis-chinese-medicine/get/4-pillars-pulse-palpation-tcm-diagnosis>

EATING SEASONALLY

<https://yogainternational.com/article/view/ayurvedas-guide-to-health-in-every-season>

<http://www.eattheseasons.co.uk/>

HYGGE

<https://happybodyformula.com/hygge-danish-art-happiness/>

<https://howtohyggethebritishway.com/2017/02/10/the-hygge-manifesto-and-random-thoughts/>

DEATH DE-CLUTTERING

<http://uk.businessinsider.com/swedish-death-cleaning-2017-10?r=US&IR=T>

<http://www.news.com.au/lifestyle/home/interiors/the-new-decluttering-trend-is-called-swedish-death-cleaning-and-we-tried-it/news-story/de55f607f2bf8e487116c1cf33ef3d7e>