

Zen Lawyer

CHAPTER 18



Author's note: Thank you for reading this column. After three decades as a professional writer, the most face-to-face feedback I've ever received was from this column. I appreciated hearing that fellow lawyers began meditating, or started a gratitude exercise, or somehow evolved, or were simply entertained. I love writing, but the time I can devote to it is late at night and limited. I wrote enough columns to compile a suitably short book, and now it is time to move on to another literary endeavor. Meanwhile, I saved these stories for last. Gratefully yours, Mark

“What if there is no tomorrow,” Bill Murray’s character asks. “There wasn’t one today.” In “Groundhog Day,” Bill Murray plays a self-centered, sarcastic TV weatherman. Through a high-concept movie conceit, he is stuck living the same day over and over.

Initially flummoxed, he goes through stages of frustration, suicidal tendencies, and finally acceptance. Then, his work starts.

In the Zen story “Practice,” a small boy was playing near the river when he saw an old man with a long beard seated in the sand. The boy moved closer and watched as the old man drew a perfect circle into the sand.

“Hey, old man, how did you draw such a perfect circle?” asked the boy.

The old man looked at the boy and said, “I don’t know, I just tried, and tried again. Here, you try.”

The old man handed the stick to the boy and walked away. The boy began drawing circles in the sand. At first his circles came out too wide, or too long, or too crooked, but as time went by the circles began to look better and better.

He kept practicing until, one bright morning, he drew a perfect circle into the sand.

Then he heard a small voice behind him. “Hey old man, how did you draw such a perfect circle?”

On the Internet, I read that Danny Rubin, the writer of “Groundhog Day,” was a Zen Buddhist. He is not. Still, he wrote the perfect Zen movie. One critic called it “the most spiritual movie of all time.” Rubin and Harold Ramis, the director, heard from Christians, Jews, Buddhists and others who saw their own credo in this classic story of enlightenment.

Bill Murray’s character is drinking in a bowling alley when he asks a couple of locals, “What would you do if you were stuck in one place and every day was exactly the same, and nothing that you did mattered?”

One local responds, “That about sums it up for me.”

I’ve heard similar sentiments in the courthouse. “Same stories, different names,” as a lawyer once told me. Sometimes people just feel stuck. So what to do?

Well, what does Bill Murray do?

He begins practicing life. He gets to know himself, the world around him, and, since he’s in a Hollywood comedy, a beautiful woman. She helps him see that what he initially thought was a curse is actually a gift.

As he practices, compassion replaces self-centeredness, gratitude replaces cynicism. He realizes we are all in this miracle of life to help one another. People he once scorned, he begins assisting. He finds love. He becomes unstuck.

When your focus shifts from criticizing others to improving yourself, life improves, and so does the world.

As a Zen lawyer, practice, evolve, become the best version of yourself.



Mark Lindquist is our Pierce County Prosecutor. Copyright 2017 Mark Lindquist.