



## Scripts, Therapy, and the Movies

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Acceptance of affect theory requires certain shifts in our understanding of psychotherapy. If, indeed, each human must learn to live with and adjust to nine innate mechanisms that govern consciousness and are going to be triggered time and again from birth through death, and if personality itself may be defined as the biographically determined gestalt of those adjustments to innate affect, then psychotherapy must be defined in terms of both the individual affects and the patterns of affect management brought into treatment by each patient. People seek treatment when their scripted, habitual patterns of affect management prove inadequate and strand them in some noxious affective environment. The depth of therapy is roughly proportional to the centrality for each personality of the scripts that must be altered to achieve relief.

The pain of mourning, the unpleasant cascade of possible results of some anticipated action, the growing feeling of aversion for a once-loved partner, the idea that the presence of a more successful rival makes one unable to keep that cherished season ticket, or the partner whose testiness and irritability when immersed in a big case disturb the harmony of an otherwise successful marriage—the distress, fear, disgust, shame, and anger in each of these vignettes can be explained easily in terms of the gradients and densities of stimulation or interference with appetite responsible for each affect. Treatment is based on our clear understanding of affect dynamics, an understanding that we communicate with ease to the patient and that results in critical focus on causes and the development of strategies for remediation. Distress unassociated with some constant density stimulus, fear in the absence of some unfriendly gradient of information, disgust without some experience of betrayed expectation, shame where no impediment to positive affect can be determined, and anger in the absence of steady-state overload may be viewed as affects produced by errors of metabolism and treated with appropriate medication. Rarely does any of these situations require either long term therapy or careful investigation of major operating scripts.

Two of the best known and most studied examples of treatment involving scripts are found in the world of psychoanalysis. Classical theory suggests that persistent personality dysfunction may be traced to compromised transit through the oedipal phase of development, while self-psychology, the second generation of psychoanalytic theory and treatment, recognizes the importance of failures in parental attention to earlier phases of intrapsychic and interpersonal maturation. In each system of therapy, cure is achieved not by explanation of the "reasons" for the negative affects triggered so often and in such predictable situations, but through the establishment of a therapeutic relationship within which the patient experiences or lives through some approximation of an optimal nurturant sequence. The frequent success of such therapeutic approaches is undeniable. What must occupy our attention are

the equally undeniable observations that some people are unable to achieve significant personality change even when treated by acknowledged masters of these crafts, and that others may become wholly different as the result of carefully designed therapeutic experiences that incorporate none of these techniques.

Fictive depictions of such transitions are among the most popular of our entertainments. Whether in the highly condensed form of poems, the more anecdotal genre of the short story, or the broad sweep of a novel, such demonstrations of personality change allow us to savor in privacy and under strict control our affective reactions to what is written. Plays, movies, and grand opera represent a gradient of affective expression operating at a far higher level of intensity. What happens during a play is by convention limited to the architecture of the theater, in which the proscenium arch defines the boundary between spectator and player, and the limitations of the unamplified spoken voice define the boundaries of affective communication. Opera is far more grand and grabs us more deeply because the music encourages an additional depth of affective involvement and because the singers are allowed to work with an intensity of affective expression rarely allowed elsewhere; that most great operas are performed in languages with which we are not fluent forces us to react more to the affective than the literary message. But it is in the contemporary film that most non-therapists are exposed to the emotional experience of another person at levels and intensities for which they have no parallel. Group efforts based on the cooperative work of writers, directors, actors, photographers, composers, musicians, artists, costume and set designers, and production staff, movies can provide peculiarly efficient affective experience.

Just as psychotherapy may involve attention to monoaffective dysfunction, some films may be viewed as monothematic discursions on violence, sexual success, humiliation, or that border between excitement and fear we call thrilling. Some, like "Remains of the Day" or "Dangerous Liaisons" based on major novels, allow us to grasp the complexity of a character at great depth, and to understand why the individual in question is incapable of change. I wish to focus your attention on films in which character change is achieved, in which the protagonist enters as one kind of person and leaves as another. (Even the word "protagonist" is significant here--it derives simply from *protos*, for first and foremost, and *agon*, the arena within which the ancient Greek athletes competed. Agony is the emotionality associated with intense effort, explaining in large measure our millennia of cultural addiction to sports as entertainment. The protagonist is the one who endures the most affective experience on the road to change.) Two recent productions, both considered trivial by most critics and moviegoers, bear contrast and comparison to one classic. "Switch" and "Groundhog Day" demonstrate one system for character change, while every one of the several versions of "A Christmas Carol" is based on another. Both systems have much to teach us about script theory.

In the simplest of terms, Ebenezer Scrooge enters our awareness as a man apparently allergic to positive affect. He presents a perfect example of what Tomkins describes as a scarcity script in which it is taken for granted that the resources available on our planet are inadequate to take care of everybody, forcing one who intends to survive into a pattern of fearful and angry vigilance for the deadly possibility of loss. He undergoes a conversion experience when God removes him from the dimensionality of his ordinary experience to demonstrate the previously inapparent realities of his life much as a denizen of Flatland might be removed above the plane of his existence to be shown the nature of line and polygon. Sudden immersion in scenes of Christmas past, present, and future triggers negative affect at a level far greater than that controlled by his scarcity script, inducing a shift to a polar opposite abundance script. Charles Dickens informs us that for the rest of his life, nobody kept Christmas better than Ebenezer Scrooge.

But what gave the rehabilitated Scrooge the idea to send food and presents to the Cratchit family? What made him able to accept love? I suggest that a fully articulated abundance script was always latent within his personality but kept from expression by fears overridden through the dramatic action of the short story. Sudden or miraculous conversion, whether religious or financial or political or romantic and whether from bad person to good person or good person to bad person, cannot occur unless the script for the "new" personality had been stored as a reasonably complete entity, awaiting activation by a suitably intense affective experience. The explosive awakening into sexuality seen in some adolescents and young adults, the sudden shift in behavior exhibited by those who have been released from poverty into wealth, and the wanderlust gratified by the gift of a first car are not conversions but an awakening into power that demands modulation through individual and interpersonal experience. Contemporary conversion analogues include the Transformer Robots that change from quite ordinary to extraordinarily powerful beings when deformed along predetermined joints, Billy Batson, the "crippled newsboy" of an earlier generation who was empowered to cry aloud the magic word "Shazam!" in order to turn into the omnipotent Captain Marvel, and weak but brilliant Dr. David Banner who because of a "radiation accident" turns into the immensely powerful but quite infantile Incredible Hulk when angry. I recall a 1968 conversation with Jay Haley in which he commented that some people come to psychotherapists for ritual permission to become who they always wanted to be; this permission for conversion is certainly one of our roles.

Despite the attractiveness of such scenarios of conversion, and despite the reality that there may be much that is good in the worst of us and much that is bad in the best of us, most scripts for personal change are quite different. You and I did not achieve our current personalities because someone threw a switch and sent us on another track. Something like that did happen to a 24-year-old woman I met on a blind date 30 years ago in a city far from my home and to which I had traveled to report some of my research in endocrinology. A slim, pleasant person apparently blessed with a bodily contour for which she was labeled beautiful, she came alive only at the end of our evening when she asked me to switch hats and answer a medical question. Until only a year earlier, she had developed no single secondary sexual characteristic--no axillary or pubic hair, no breast enlargement, never an adolescent skin blemish, no trace of a menstrual cycle--and no experience of sexual desire. Repeated examinations had demonstrated the presence of all the internal organs necessary for these phenomena, none of which components had yet been urged into action. At 23, a gynecologist had suggested she take birth control pills to "kick start" the system. Within a month she was the confused owner of a female body the match of any Hollywood starlet. "I feel like a boy with all of these things pasted on," she said. The normal transition of a prepubertal girl is more gradual and allows her to handle both the changes in self-concept and the reactions she triggers in male and female companions. This was a conversion for which she was less well prepared than she had guessed, and she was ready to opt for a life free from the sexual wishes of men. Writing in *The First Year of Life*, Spitz noted that most of the blind born adolescents and adults whose congenital cataracts were removed by Von Senden in the 1930s regarded bright light and vivid color as an intrusion and wished for the return of their blindness.

It is true that a shame-bound adolescent or young adult may happen on alcohol as a shamolytic and feel competent when drunk and thus released into a desired constellation of attributes--this is a sham conversion with an ugly ending. Reread the short story "Flowers for Algernon" by Frances Parkinson Keyes or rent the videotape of the superb film "Charlie" made from it, in which Cliff Robertson plays a retarded baker's assistant who experiences a brief period of genius as the result of a brain graft that is later rejected. In sharp contrast is the enormous number of adults (and now children) whose innate or acquired defect in serotonin metabolism had caused a chronic shame disorder now kept in check by one of the SSRI medications, people who can now learn how to enjoy positive affect

and new levels of competence without the relatively constant experience of impediment that can be handled only by actions mediated through the scripted patterns I have described as the Compass of Shame. Here, the careful use of medication has allowed a new, stable reality quite different from that offered on a transient basis by alcohol, which acts only to tantalize and seduce. When the SSRIs work in these cases, we can guess that normal learning had earlier been prevented by biological limitation. When proper medication permits normalization of affect physiology, emotional learning can occur with or without the aid of a psychotherapist, as a generation of us have learned since the introduction of effective antimanic agents.

Charlie wanted to become smarter, just as Billy Batson wanted to become stronger and more competent. Can you imagine Ebenezer Scrooge coming into therapy asking to become more kind and loving? I suspect that many people fear psychotherapy of any sort because they do not want to be the passive recipients or "victims" of change mediated by an outside force that turns them into something or someone they might not admire or know how to handle. Robert Louis Stevenson's Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, the vampire genre, and "The Invasion of the Body Snatchers" are good examples of this culture-wide concern. Stories of sudden conversion are all the more intriguing because change is forced on one who least expected it.

Look next at the other group of stories of personal change as exemplified by the films "Switched" and "Groundhog Day." The protagonist in "Switched" is a callous seducer of women who is murdered equally callously by a trio of his targets and sent prematurely to Judgement where he is informed that he can avoid being sent to Hell if he can prove that any creature loved him. In order to fulfil this quest he is returned to life on earth, but as the kind of gorgeous blonde he used to seduce with gusto. Ellen Barkin gives a perfect performance as a man who awakens into female form, forced thereby to understand how a woman feels when she is valued for little more than her bodily contours and sexual availability. By the end of the movie, the protagonist has learned how to love both self and others--and, because of this new understanding of humanity, finds great difficulty choosing a final gender identity. The film suggests that only through the operation of a supernal force capable of fostering a new kind of evolution can so dramatic a personality transformation be mediated.

But it is to "Groundhog Day" that I wish to call your attention at greater length, for it offers much to anyone who is interested in the process of personal change. Bill Murray plays television weatherman Phil Connors, a nasty, heartless, cynical, misanthrope sent with his crew to record yet again the witless spectacle at Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, a town made famous by its devotion to the legend that one can predict the length of winter from the behavior of a groundhog on a particular morning in February. The town itself seems more like a tape recording configured as an endless loop, for it is organized around the yearly repetition of this festival perpetuated by the broadcast media, and is as much slave to this flimsy set of scenes as the helpless groundhog, also named Phil. To the extent that Phil Connors is a godless man constrained to seduce, insult, and humiliate any man or woman in his path, his producer, Rita, as played by Andie MacDowell, is set up as an angelic force incapable of being fooled by evil. Just as the unwitting groundhog has been trapped into a yearly ritual in which he is surrounded by fools, Phil finds himself trapped in a time warp of a Groundhog Day that he is forced to relive without relief. No matter what he does, no matter who he seduces, no matter what he steals or gives or tries, even if he engineers his own death, he is forced to awaken each morning to Groundhog Day in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania. Nothing within the range of personal scripts that form his personality can release him from a Hell that has surely been devised by the same God who showed Ebenezer Scrooge the meaning of his life.

Slowly, carefully, Phil tries one strategy after another. Do you remember that wonderful scene in Eugen Herrigel's *Zen and the Art of Archery* in which the author tries to fool the Zen Master by releasing the arrow just as he used to squeeze the trigger of a rifle instead of learning what the Master was trying to teach? Phil begins to get the idea that Rita is the test of his salvation, and tries to achieve her love through the tricks he knows best. On occasion, she is taken in for a moment or even for a few hours, but always she rejects him for cause. The curse placed on him is also a blessing, for as each day dawns, only he will remember what happened before. To the extent that he is capable of change, he can grow in an environment that will be forgiving simply because it cannot assemble memories of his actions and share our disgust for his character.

He has entered a peculiar analogue of childhood, in which the optimal parent forgives our errors and encourages our attempts to learn. Day after day, Phil takes on one discipline after another, much in the way an adept is trained by a Zen Master in the ways of kendo, ikibana, archery, or any martial art while learning the spirit of Zen. Our heartless weatherman takes up jazz piano and ice sculpture, becoming a master of both. We are left to wonder how many years, perhaps decades of immersion were required to achieve such facility and depth of character. Nothing that happens in Punxsutawney can occur without his knowledge. No child may fall from a tree, no street person die, no accident occur, no old lady become stuck in traffic by a flat tire but what he will know and thereby be forced to decide on some plan of action. Through his years of involvement in a single day he is like God for this island in time even though trapped as the most helpless of God's creatures. Phil, as protagonist, and we as viewers are released to the real world when he has evolved to the point where Rita sees him as he has become--a deeply loving and immensely talented man ready to take his place with a loving life partner. Nothing in the behavior of the character we met at the beginning of this film prepares us for this fully realized human. From the standpoint of script theory, Phil is the antithesis of Ebenezer Scrooge and forces us to recognize that some people know nothing about a potential that can only be made real through a lifetime of struggle.

Your own practice of psychotherapy will reveal many examples of each of these patterns of change. There are many times that you have acted to limit the affect that precipitated someone into patient status, just as there are situations in which you have given someone permission to make the transition to some much desired and well understood but deeply feared novel persona. Some who remain with us in long term therapy may be blocked from change by what are in this era undiagnosable biological interferences with the normal plasticity of the affect system, while others find change difficult or impossible because of certain core scripts that have never been studied enough for us to devise adequate techniques for their alteration. But the struggle that makes up the real grunt work of day-to-day psychotherapy is the job of detecting the affect of the moment, determining the script within which it is being expressed, and designing systems for the alteration of those scripts that lock people within a character structure that prevents optimal growth through life.