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Groundhog Day Is An Absurd Tradition — And My Kids Want Answers

BY JOSEPH WILSON

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The other day I tried to explain to my kids the meaning of Groundhog Day. It got weird.

I tried to explain the facts as I understand them: that on February 2nd, if the groundhog emerges from its burrow and sees its shadow, there will be six more weeks of winter.

But my kids raised valid questions about every single word in that sentence.

Like, why February 2nd? Why a groundhog? How do they know when it sees its shadow? Doesn't winter always end on the same day? What's the difference between a groundhog and a marmot? The answer to them all: I have no idea.

It's only when I tried to explain our traditions to the uninitiated that I realized how absurd they are.

Side Bar for Parents

For sake of completeness and so you don't look as dumb as I did at the dinner table trying to explain Groundhog Day, here are the answers to their questions (<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/groundhog-day>):

- February 2nd was the old date for Candlemas, the Christian holiday upon which Groundhog Day is (veeery loosely) based.
- They used to use a hedgehog but that changed in 1887.
- Technically, the date upon which winter ends is always the same (March 20) but winter-like weather is not bound by the constraints of the calendar.
- The groundhog doesn't actually react to its shadow.
- The six-week forecast depends on whether or not it is sunny that day.
- A groundhog is the common name for a type of marmot that lives in Eastern North America.

But these are just facts.

It doesn't answer the question of how such strange traditions came to feel normal.

Symbols Of Significance

A few years ago a friend invited our family over to celebrate the Jewish holiday of Sukkot, a harvest festival held in a *sukkah*, a hut he constructed on his back deck with sheets for walls.

The kids decorated gourds with markers and googly eyes and he explained the importance of the holiday in Judaism.

"Wait, that's the *etrog*!" he said to one of my kids who was trying to attach googly eyes to what she thought was a yellow gourd.

The *etrog*, as we quickly discovered, was not a gourd, but a kind of lemon, one of the four species of plants mentioned in the Torah as ceremonially significant for Sukkot.

My daughter was basically trying to draw a smiley face on a sacred object.

I apologized profusely and directed her attention back to the gourds.

Later when my daughter was puzzling over the lemon and why it was so important, I reminded her that a giant bunny appears every spring to leave them chocolate eggs in an act that is somehow construed as a celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

A Child's Imagination

"The Easter Bunny isn't giant," she said. "He's a regular-sized bunny."

“Really?” I said, looking at my wife for confirmation. She shrugged. “But how does he carry all those eggs?” I said, in a response that can only serve to confirm the absurdity of the debate.

Traditions like this become second-nature as we experience them as kids, believing whatever hand-wavy explanations our parents throw at us.

We grow up accepting them not because they make sense, but because we understand how important they are socially.

“But how does he carry all those eggs?”

Traditions like these are almost always accompanied by family gatherings, food and music, and that’s what we fall in love with as kids.

That is, except for Groundhog Day.

The Bill Murray movie of the same name is probably as close to a shared social experience that most of us have on February 2nd.

So why does it endure?

Rob Thomas once flipped the script on the tooth fairy, and a lot of neighbouring parents weren't too thrilled about it.

(<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/how-i-became-the-tooth-fairy-other-parents-werent-too-fond-of>)

A Theory And A Commitment

It might be that in the darkest days of winter we’re desperate for a distraction, even if it means we have to wake up a grumpy marmot to entertain us.

So on February 2nd I’ll show my kids the picture of Wiarton Willie (the marmot meteorologist closest to Toronto) that will invariably appear in the “news,” and will pass on his prediction, just like my father did when I was a child.

They’ll skip off to school just as I did, accepting the fact that they live in a world of clairvoyant groundhogs, until they have to explain it to their own children one day and realize how strange it all is.

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