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**OUR LIVES AS A COMPLEX OF RHYTHMS**

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In our everyday activities and relationships, we often think and act as if things don’t change. We think of ‘things’ as staying basically the same, not as ‘objects,’ ‘things,’ ‘situations,’ and ‘persons’ at a date, as stages in a process, etc. General semantics postulates that we live in a world of continuous change. If we accept this, it seems to me that using the notion of rhythms to transform our ‘thinking’ can lead to a more accurate, useful, and satisfying approach to life.

Developing a sensitivity to rhythms, our own, those of others, the rhythms of our immediate surroundings, and rhythms of the universe can help us be more in touch with more of what’s going on. Sensitivity to rhythms can help us recognize trends; anticipate and better manage change; improve the quality of our judgment, planning, and decisions; minimize anxiety and stress; and live more rewarding lives.

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We usually think of “rhythms” as mostly to do with music. But rhythms can be associated with many things, with almost everything we do. We live in a universe of rhythms. Rhythms measure structural transformation. Related terms include frequency, oscillation, vibration, pitch, cycle, wave, recurrence, periodicity, pulsation, beat, drumming, variation, rate of change, fluctuation, pace, and speed (change of position with respect to time). In describing rhythms, we use such expressions as “how often,” “ups and downs,” “going with the flow,” “to everything a season,” and “comings and goings.”

Our communication with others, our efforts to abandon a habit, our striving toward self-development and self-improvement, our progress and degree of satisfaction in many areas — these depend greatly on the rhythms of our awareness, that is, how often we can catch ourselves doing habitual and familiar things. To make corrections and improvements, we need these mindful rhythmic moments of awareness.

As far as we know, everything has a structure. Different structures express different rhythms. Tuning a guitar, piano, drum, or other musical instrument, involves structural changes. These structural changes will result in different tones. (Try this structural change: While singing a very low tone, move your head up and slowly stretch your neck upwards. Next, sing the highest note you can while slowly moving your chin down to your chest. Notice the difference in sound and increasing discomfort.) We can think of rhythms as “patterns of change,” as “a measure of structural transformation,” as “how systems change with respect to times.”

Our individual rhythms, and rhythms in general, clash with, merge with, and influence others, sometimes reinforcing, sometimes diminishing, sometimes augmenting, sometimes fragmenting, and sometimes destroying other rhythms.

As individuals, we influence or disturb each other’s rhythms. We cannot avoid this. As we interact with each other, we affect each other’s rhythms to varying degrees. We sometimes react strongly or violently to such disturbances. (Notice your own internal reactions and the behavior of others on a crowded downtown sidewalk.) On the roads and highways, accidents occur when drivers slow down or stop suddenly, or change lanes without timely warnings to others. When drivers react violently, we call it “road-rage.” In general, sudden changes in one’s rhythms that do not give others sufficient adjustment time often create problems. Ignoring this factor of differences in rhythms is often a source of conflict — personal, societal, and international.

Our personal and more easily observable rhythms involve our swing, sway, and other adjustments as we move, and even when we are “not moving.” When we travel abroad, we are recognized as different by the way we talk, walk, look
around, gesture, and so on. At ‘home’ we recognize friends, acquaintances, and others, from a distance and in poor lighting, by the rhythm of their movements. The pitch of our voice, our intonation, our speaking speed, when we are affectionate, angry, distressed, or impatient, show variations in rhythms. We move differently when we feel good, compared to when we feel bad. We talk, eat, sleep, listen, learn, understand, and do a variety of things at our own pace. (Many educational systems ignore differences in students’ learning and comprehension in different areas.) As individuals, we recover from physiological and psycho-logical injuries at our own pace. In terms of perceived insults, some of us may be quick to forgive, others may hold a grudge for a lifetime. Some groups hold grudges for centuries.

Our personal, domestic, social, work-related, and other habits and activities, age differences, social standing, moods, and so on, are expressed in our rhythms. In our many relationships, whether, intimate, social, cultural, political, international, etc., a variety of problems, conflicts, disagreeableness, and violence can be attributed to our insensitivity to our own rhythms, and to the rhythms of others. How often do we write, telephone, or visit a relative or friend? How often do we expect them to write, telephone, or visit us? In conversations, how often do we stop to listen and allow others to speak?

The rhythms of adults are usually different from the rhythms of little children.

In the workplace, some employers are beginning to recognize that some individuals do not easily adjust from night shift to day shift. While some individuals can easily move from one workstation or job assignment to another, others do not adjust easily. We recognize this kind of situation when we talk about “changing gears.” Difficulties experienced in introducing operational changes can often be attributed to resistance to changes in rhythms. Many employee and departmental conflicts arise because departments in an organization operate at different rhythms. Sales agents for instance, anxious to please their clients with fast delivery, might be insensitive to rhythmic factors and become impatient, forgetting that the production department might be unable to meet demands due to late deliveries, unexpected changes in the weather, machinery breakdown, and so on. In hospitals, doctors are beginning to recognize that some medications, treatments, and operations, are more effective at certain times of the day.

The rhythms of adults are usually different from the rhythms of little children. Adults walking with little children may forget this and drag toddlers along
with their feet barely touching the ground. (I once silently cheered a toddler who refused to encourage this continuing abuse and simply sat down.) Notice the rhythms of grandparents with their grandchildren. Do they seem much more adaptable to the rhythms of little children, more so than the mothers and fathers?

In terms of rhythms, one could say a ‘good’ house guest does not disturb things, leave clothes lying around, or otherwise require a host to tidy up. In other words, such a guest is sensitive to the host’s rhythms and does not unduly disturb them.

We notice that rhythms have rhythms.

Sometimes, we disturb our own rhythms when we push ourselves too fast or too much. We distress ourselves by taking on more than our psycho-physiological systems can adapt to in a given time period. When things don’t go the way we expect or want them to, we can look for differences in rhythms as a possible source of our problems. When we are waiting impatiently for someone or for something to happen (an important phone call, or letter, for instance), we can be sure we are experiencing a difference in rhythms — a difference between our expectations, and the way others or things work. We often create problems for ourselves as individuals and as a species when we attempt to hurry the universe, or “push the river,” or when we attempt to hold things back or “dam up the river.” Through awareness of rhythms, we can create a harmony of rhythms, at least for a while. We notice that rhythms have rhythms. Rhythms, like other ‘things,’ also change.

Laws, rules, regulations, legal contracts, clocks, etc., can be thought of as ways we have invented to help us cope with the diversity of our individual rhythms. Imagine a city without traffic lights, or a business organization where workers come and go as they please, or libraries, stores, and gas stations that opened unpredictably, etc.

‘Nations’ have their own unique constellation of rhythms. This can be observed in the pace of economic, political, and other activities. We could define cultures in terms of patterns of behavior, rhythms of a ‘people,’ in terms of their speech patterns, beliefs, values, goals, social activities, movements, music, dance, and so on. In international affairs, many politicians, lacking knowledge of differences, or not caring about differences in rhythms, often create political-social-cultural-economic and other problems that may persist for years. This often occurs when certain practices or policies are imposed on another culture without recognizing or addressing that culture’s rhythms. Colonial empires have
provided the grounds for many present-day bloody conflicts by ignoring the rhythmic differences of the tribes they forced to live together.

Here is another way to get a ‘feel’ of rhythms. Look at a tree with lots of branches and leaves. Observe their variety of movements and rhythms. If there is a light breeze, the leaves might be doing a fluttering dance like the leaves of an aspen. This will be different from the rhythms of the smaller branches, which will be different from the rhythms of the bigger branches. If it is a very big tree, the trunk may not show much movement, or any movement, but it also has its complex of rhythms. Think about these complexities. Is there any structure that does not change? Compare the rhythms of a tree to the rhythms of different human beings, or the rhythms of different societies.

I propose that we can think of anything in terms of rhythms. Thinking in terms of rhythms is not just a philosophical exercise, it also has many benefits. Thinking in terms of rhythms can be very helpful in improving our personal and other relationships. Including rhythms as one of our self-management or management tools can help us better avoid and manage stress, become more patient with ourselves, and develop more patience, sympathy, and understanding in our interacting with others. Including ‘rhythms’ as a variable can help us solve problems and improve decision making. We can ask, “Could a major difference in rhythms be a source of the problem? What patterns of change are involved? How do the rhythms disturb one another? Is this clash of rhythms likely to happen again?”

You may recall such folk sayings as “You can take a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink,” or “Don’t cross the bridge ’til you come to it.” These sayings are about living with rhythms. We can ask ourselves, how can we modify our usual ways of ‘seeing’ and doing things using the notion of rhythms?

According to general semantics, we live in a world of continual change. Thinking in terms of rhythms can help recognize and adapt to such change. Developing sensitivity to our own rhythms, those of others, and the rhythms of our surroundings can help us be more in touch with what’s going on, improve our judgment, minimize anxiety and stress, and therefore live more satisfying lives.