

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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Squirrel Tales: Old Habits Can Be Lethal

by Dr. Mike Armour

I live in the Lakewood area of Dallas, just west of White Rock Lake. It's a long-established neighborhood, with massive oak and pecan trees that spread from the water's edge through all the surrounding environs.

Needless to say, the lake and the nearby neighborhoods are a haven for squirrels. There's food aplenty, and the aging oaks offer thousands of hollows for dens.

Unfortunately, this is also a deadly place for squirrels. Their corpses litter the streets everywhere. They are victims of old habits.

Battling an SUV

In the wild, you see, squirrels have many natural predators, far more than here in the heart of Dallas. And to fend against those predators, squirrels have perfected a survival technique. When they sense danger, they immediately stand straight up, head held high, tail tucked in close. They remain frozen in this posture until they can survey the threat.

In remote forests it's a great strategy. By standing erect they position their eyes and nostrils as high as possible to spot and sniff out impending danger. And by remaining motionless, they avoid needless movement that might catch a predator's attention.

The tactic works reasonably well against bobcats and coyotes. But it's rather fatal when the approaching "predator" is a SUV. Dozens of times a year squirrels dart out in front of me, sense an approaching object, and suddenly freeze right in the path of my car. If I brake hard, I can usually stop in time to avoid undue harm. But ever once and a while I add to the squirrel carnage in our neighborhood.

Thus, what was once a great survival technique for those squirrels is now, in a different context, a fatal behavior. And as humans we face the same predicament. Early in life we develop our strategies for coping with difficulty, with unpleasantness, with danger.

Early Childhood Learning

Most of these strategies are well-formed before we enter the third grade. Indeed, some developmental specialists argue that 80% of our coping strategies are already habitual responses by the time we start school.

But coping skills learned in childhood may be unwise and inappropriate for later contexts in life. For example, I once coached a woman who had grown up in a home with an alcoholic father. When he had too much to drink, he became violent and abusive.

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As a preschooler she learned the telltale signs of Dad's time with the bottle. When he came through the front door, she knew immediately if he had been drinking. If he was "under the influence," she knew he would soon be yelling at her and fighting with her mother.

So to avoid any conflict, she would quietly retire to her room rather than risk his rage. By the time she was ten, her retreat from conflict was ingrained as a habit. Whenever confrontations began, she would head straight to her room, close the door, and wait things out.

Different Context, Same Response

I began working with her shortly after she was promoted to a line supervisory position. She managed a floor which was frequented with conflict. But when tension broke out, her instinct was to retreat to her office, close the door, and wait for it to blow over. Just like she did as a child.

When she resisted that temptation and actually confronted the conflict, she was seized by the same tight, churning stomach and ferocious headache she remembered from those years when she could not get away from her dad's drunken outbursts. The context was different, but her reaction to conflict was the same.

Now she was in danger of losing a management job she otherwise loved. And it was all because old habits no longer served her well. As is the case with those squirrels, the coping skills that allowed her to survive in one context worked against her survival in another one.

To a greater or lesser degree, we all face similar challenges. We have to "outgrow" conditioned responses that began developing in infancy. We have to become natural at varying our behavior, so that our responses to life are always appropriate for the context of the moment.

What makes this difficult is that the unconscious mind takes no notice of contextual distinctions. When presented with a given situation, it tends to fire off an ingrained, habitual response, without ever asking, "Is this response appropriate for the current context?"

Thus, a youngster who is severely frightened by a man with a shaggy beard may respond with involuntary fright to all other men with shaggy beards. The unconscious mind sees the stimulus (a shaggy beard) and fires off the habitual response (fright) without paying attention to context (this is not the same man who originally frightened me).

Old Squirrels Learning New Tricks

The higher we go in management or leadership, the more we are pressed to master new appropriate behaviors. The same is true to the degree that our adult lives distance us geographically or culturally from the world in which we grew up. In a sense, we are all old squirrels needing to learn new tricks.

What are the habitual life-responses you learned in childhood that no longer serve you well today? Is it distracting yourself by constantly worrying? Is it letting anxiety get the best of you? Is it keeping people at bay by letting your temper cut loose? Is it driving yourself relentlessly in the belief that only a perfect performance will earn you affection or respect?

Squirrels can't repattern their instincts. Humans, fortunately, have more choice in the matter. Many personal coaches today specialize in life-transformation. Their work is closely akin to what spiritual transformation has always aimed to achieve. Transformation is largely about unlearning old habits, the old behaviors that limit our contextually-appropriate choices.

Worrying ourselves to death or working ourselves to death may not be as immediately lethal as a squirrel's encounter with a 3000-pound Mercedes. But they are lethal, nonetheless.

Developing a Transformation Plan

Where do you need to unlearn the past? Where do you need new coping patterns? Where are your behaviors inappropriate for the contexts in which you now function?

Identify those areas of life where transformation is needed. Then develop a self-improvement plan to work on them, either through reading self-help books, listening to self-help tapes, attending self-help seminars, working with a personal coach, or drawing on the advice and counsel of a wise friend and mentor.

Whatever your course, get on with it. Don't settle for the choice of doing nothing. That's like a squirrel freezing in his tracks to avoid the danger of an on-rushing Lexus.

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