

Cycles: the rhythms of life

“To everything there is a season... a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to reap that which has been planted” (Ecclesiastes 3:2, The Bible)

“Of what is the body made? It is made of emptiness and rhythm. At the heart of the world there is no solidity, there is only dance ...” (George Leonard)

Life is not just movement, but rhythm. In the modern world, a sense of natural rhythm has been largely lost as we switch on artificial lights to change night into day, override the urge for rest or to wake with stimulants and depressants, and fail to acknowledge the natural human cycles which make people healthy, happy and sustainably productive. The fact remains, however, that the body-mind has its cycles, and we would be wise to accommodate them. These cycles can be short or long-term and operate in everything we do, from taking a sip of water, to relationships, to work projects, to the course of our life. Cycles exist within cycles making them ‘fractal’.



A kiss

Think of a kiss; this is a good micro-example to illustrate. If we think of a kiss simply as a linear action, we lose the essence of it. When one ‘goes in’ for a kiss there is a listening, an entry to negotiate, a moment to seize, a time to sustain the kiss for, a way to develop and play with it, a rising of excitement, a peak, a winding-down, an exit to ‘negotiate’, a completion, a withdrawal and rest, before whatever comes next! These complex time and relational aspects may happen in under a second, and the more we get used to kissing with someone, the easier and less obvious they become.

We are all already masters of rhythms, negotiating cycles like the one above many times a day. Internally, our bodies are massively complex sets of interrelated rhythms. Our breathing, heart-beat, sleep, nerve impulses, hormonal changes – in fact, every imaginable bodily system – dances to a beat and melody. The ‘big body’ of the universe moves in similar rhythms; the movement of everything – from atoms to season to planets – is not just flowing, but pulsing. Everything is waxing and waning; the universe is tidal. George Leonard describes this eloquently in his book *The Silent Pulse*: “At the heart of each of us, whatever our imperfections, there exists a silent pulse of perfect rhythm, a complex of wave forms and resonances, which is absolutely individual and unique, and yet which connects us to everything in the universe.”

Life looks like a set of things but linguistically nouns are only convenient simplifications. We are not static. A tree is in fact ‘treeing’, not ‘a tree’. I am more ‘Mark Walshing’, than Mark Walsh. Even what looks static – like a rock – is in fact, in very slow process. Look long enough or close enough at what seems static – including our bodies and precious selves – and you will find it is all moving. There is no firm place to stand and everything relies upon everything else. Everything is process and in relationship.

Some models of rhythms

There are many ways to divide up the complexity of reality; maps that simplify and clarify. Rhythmical maps are usually shown as a sequence of stages; but they are best seen as a cyclical flow. Spring gradually becomes summer and doesn't suddenly end on 1st June.

Yin and yang

The interplay of yin and yang is perhaps the most fundamental cycle. The swing between the two can be seen as the basis of all other rhythms.

The hero's journey

The 'hero's journey' is a wonderful story cycle model, with more complexity than 'beginning, middle and end'. It is an archetypal structure with deep intuitive and emotional appeal. People often unconsciously structure experience through it. You will see aspects of it in many great myths and modern movies, from Gilgamesh and Beowulf, to The Matrix and Star Wars, to your own EFC journey. We will discuss this further when we look at training design on module 4.

The seasons

Perhaps the easiest cycle to use because most Western people are so familiar with it, is that of the seasons. The seasons contain all the basic elements that we will get into in more depth with the 'I, we, it' version of a seasons cycle, below. It may be enough for many leaders to simply ask, 'what season am I in, personally, in my job, with this person I'm talking with, or with this project?' The table on the next page shows some of the features of the seasons. Note that as with yin and yang, one season 'births' the next. The cycle of the seasons is one of the key models we use at EFC.

Three-part cycles

The three aspects of God in Hinduism – Brahman the creator, Vishnu the preserver and Shiva the destroyer (also the creator as it's a cycle!) – create an ancient cyclical model. Modern embodiment master Stuart Heller's 'add on, keep and let go' cycle – influenced by Chinese and Indian medicine and philosophy – is another simple yet profound three-part model and is the 'beginning, middle and end' of story-telling.

Gabriel Roth's '5 Rhythms'

A natural cycle model and embodied practice is Gabriel Roth's '5 Rhythms'. The rhythms referred to are flowing, staccato, chaos, lyrical, stillness. On EFC we'll explore musical movement work based on this.

Other models

A wealth of other cyclical models exist: ancient indigenous wisdom cycles (eg Native American medicine wheels and Mayan models), modern Gestalt psychology, life cycles in biology, models of business change and teams (eg Tuckman), learning cycles, reactivity models within chemistry, and strange wonders in quantum physics. They often match the basic seasonal or 'I, we, it' models I have laid out here. Explore and have fun. Sometimes the flavour of a particular model brings it alive and provides great insight.

The seasons

| Season | Features | Images and archetypes | Direction | Human life-stage | Simple |
|---------------|---|---|-----------|------------------|--|
| Spring | starting, awakening, growing, accelerating, rising, increasing | blossom light green shoots conception and birth spring showers | up | childhood | turning on / waking (I) greeting (we) prepare (it) |
| Summer | fulfilling, expressing, full growth, full speed, high, maximum | fruit full green leaves mature animals and families sun | forward | early adulthood | on / awake (I) relating (we) do (it) |
| Autumn | containing, slowing, declining, falling, less speed, decreasing | storing nuts falling brown leaves ageing animals cloud and drizzle | back | 'middle' age | turning off / sleepy (I) parting (we) stop (it) |
| Winter | ending and preparing, resting, slowest, low, minimum | no fruit or leaves hibernation and death snow | down | elderhood | off / sleeping (I) alone (we) don't do (it) |

One consideration is that we have cultural bias towards the youth of spring and full activity of summer. In business, for example, this shows up as people having little time for rest, reflection and satisfying endings. It leads to burnout personally, and lost learning organisationally, amongst a host of other problems. In popular culture, this translates as airbrushing, infantilising, fads, rushing, a lack of respect for wisdom and a general lack of depth. Note that winter is not just the time of ending, but rest and preparation for spring. Winter is not dead; it's fully alive in a less obvious way.



'I, we, it' seasons variations

Now let's take a more in-depth look at rhythms. The seasons is a good general model and may be enough for many people. If you are interested in this area, it is worth understanding cycles from a first, second and third person perspective. This produces three fundamental cycles.

The subjective flow – the 'I' cycle

Activation – increasing – peaking – containing – decreasing – completing – rest

Simplified versions: wake – awake – sleepy – sleep; turning on – on – turning off – off

The subjective cycle describes the level of pure internal arousal and activation (one meaning of 'energy'), which may also be described as the personal potential for action and relationship, if relating it to the other cycles.

The cycle begins with interest and activation. If we return to the example of the kiss, the start may be the flash of excitement that precedes the kiss, itself initiated by the mere thought of a kiss. This excitement builds (and while I am using this as an example, I should point out it is often not sexual!) and eventually peaks, reaching a maximum fever-pitch. Hopefully by this point you are in a passionate embrace, but it is the internal aspects we are currently concerned with. From now, the energy is contained and then decreases. With a kiss this may take half a second or some hours depending upon how long you have been together for. :-) Eventually, the passion of the kiss must complete and there is a period of stillness and rest that follows. Note: this cycle is just a more detailed version of the four seasons and can also be seen as simply waking up and going to sleep or turning on and off.

The relationship flow – 'we' cycle

Aloneness – meeting – connecting – dialogue – transformation – completing – departing

Simplified version: greeting – relating – parting – alone

We do not just have our own internal cycles, but are rhythmical in relationship. This is the art of tact: saying and doing the right thing at the right time with others. It's not just a matter of social graces and manners, it is the very essence of good working and intimate relationships. A kiss at the wrong time might as well be a punch.

Importantly, the relationship cycle begins with aloneness. People who are unable to tolerate being by themselves may rush from one foolish co-dependent relationship to another. Many modern societies confuse being alone with loneliness, so it is endemic that this cycle starts badly. From aloneness, we may then meet others. We all know people who are terminally shy or addicted to this part of friendships, always needing to meet new people rather than deepening into connection. Truly connecting with others allows us to dialogue. This involves the yang of authentic expression and the yin of really listening. True dialogue is not just conversation, but mutual transformation. Real relationship is often both exciting and scary (especially for 'I' and 'it' types) because it always involves change and both loss and growth. After connection and conversation, comes the art of finding a way to complete the relationship together and depart elegantly. We have culturally specific social rituals around all aspects of this cycle. I have yet to find a language that does not have words for 'hello' and 'goodbye' (the most basic frame of this cycle) and a way of asking 'how are you?' (the middle part).

Influenced by Dr Richard Strozzi-Heckler's 'Rhythm of Excitement' model

The action flow – ‘it’ cycle

Preparing – allowing – starting – doing – completing – reflecting – not doing

Simplified version: prepare – do – stop – don’t

This is the cycle of getting things done. It is built upon a person’s cycles of self-management and working with others, and its essence is action and the task at hand. This cycle is best explored by doing things.

Before we start any activity it is wise to do some preparation so we have ‘all the ducks in a row’. Starting itself is then, of course, vital. As Goethe said, “What you can do, or dream you can do, begin it; boldness has genius, power and magic in it.” Or as my ex-boss said, “Get on with it”. Action can be pushed, but is often more powerful when we ‘get out of the way’ and allow it to start. There is the action itself, and then the wrapping up of that action; completion, as per the other cycles. After the action itself, it is wise to spend some time evaluating and learning from what was done. This cycle could also be framed as a ‘learning cycle’ in the style of other models that exist, such as Kolb’s. Lastly, there is a period of productive and necessary inactivity.

Reflection

Which of these is most true for you?

I prefer the excitement of beginnings (spring).

I prefer it when everything is expressed fully and going full speed ahead (summer).

I prefer wrapping things up (autumn).

I prefer the rest at the end of activity (winter).

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What is the cost for you of skipping over some of the other areas?

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