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Life Becomes a Habit

by Chris Baker

In our house habits were encouraged, often strongly: the justification, that they would stand one in good stead throughout one's life and so by and large they have: the habits were many and various. Seemingly without number and without order – a curious omission – cleaning one's teeth first thing in the morning and last thing at night, thrift, reading, reflection, telling the truth, putting others first – offering one's seat to someone older or to a lady, standing up when a lady comes into the room, putting people at their ease, a place for everything and everything in its place, no elbows on the table and hands in one's lap – no mention was made that in continental Europe it was considered very poor form that one's hands were out of sight.

In what monstrous activity continental Europeans thought that they might have been engaged was never explained. Looking back, most have stood one in good stead. Experiences differ. Take bowel discipline for example. I never developed the required discipline. Compare and contrast a contemporary who was either temperamentally more compliant or whose mother was fiercer than mine: I do not know. He is haunted by a habit that irrespective of the circumstances and at whatever hour he rises: the unexpected (and memorable) benefit of a shared room on a fishing trip to Scotland.

Other habits are vital, literally life giving. The Immediate Action or IA drill Cock, Hook and Look repeated in basic training over and over again when a soldier's personal weapon stops firing: is to keep him and his fellows alive. For him, life becomes a habit: that is, it is deserving of the drill; again and again and again and again, day after day week after week. Convenient, wholesome and life preserving as habit may be, complacency is its inseparable companion. How could it be otherwise: repetition is the antithesis of critical thought, hampering, indeed often preventing change. How often are deaths, injuries and financial failure found to have occurred because habitual behaviour is not examined? And habitually, this whatever this is, must never be allowed to happen again. Perhaps.