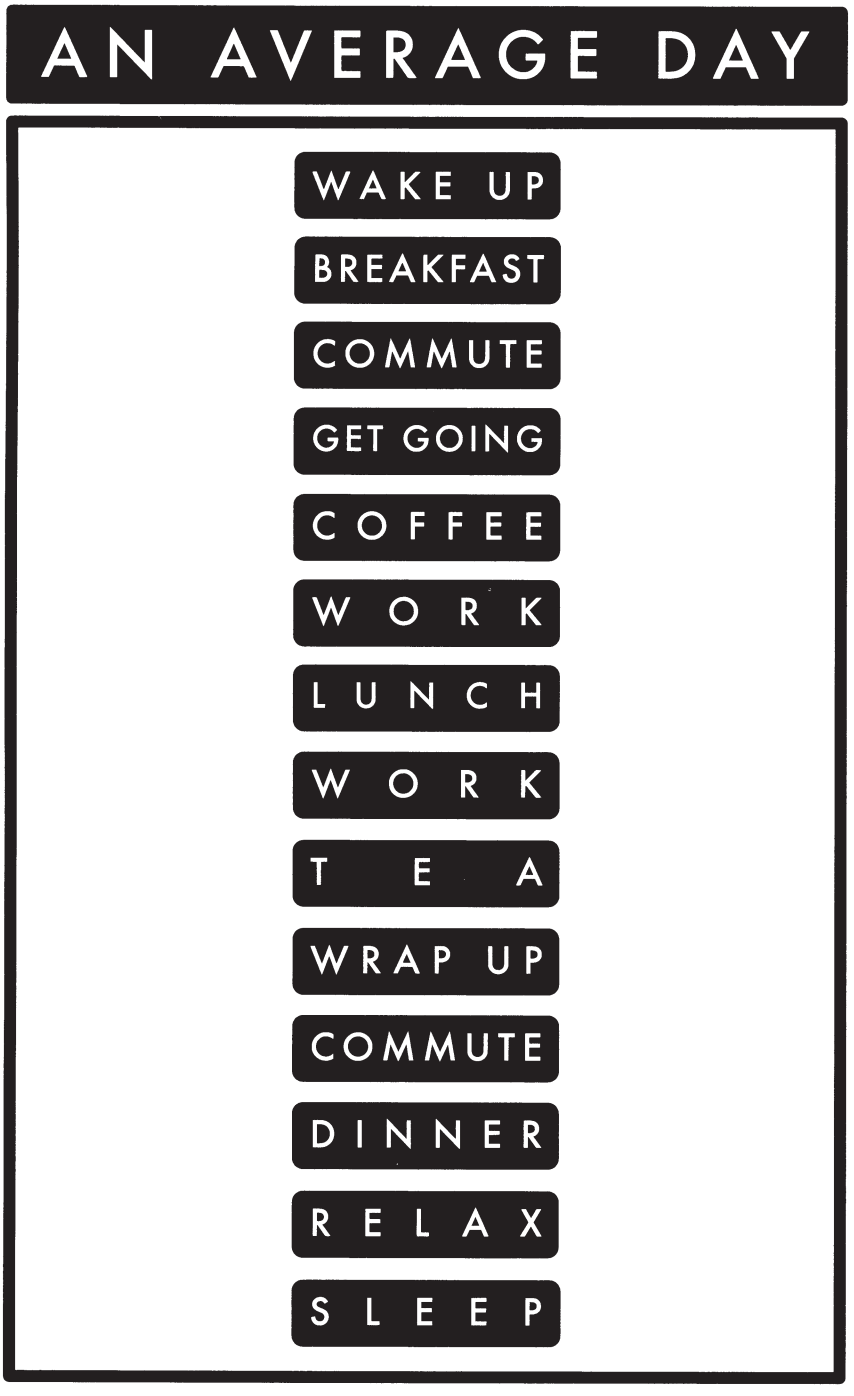

Tim Peters, *An Average Day*, 2011

REPETITION

OR: THE "REAL WORLD"

by Tim Peters

TWO DAYS AFTER Christmas of last year, I flew from my hometown in the suburbs of Chicago to Washington, D.C., in order to work as an intern at a prestigious television news program. My title was "Desk Assistant" and I would be paid $9 per hour with overtime (but without health benefits) to work full-time, Monday through Friday. The job was to commence on January 3rd and terminate on July 7th. I had graduated from college in the spring of 2008, moved back home and saved money caddying at a golf course, before traveling through South America and Africa for a year. I felt I was ready to move to a big city on the East or the West Coast, to get inside a powerful organization, to work, to grind, and that an internship would be just the beginning, however tedious and tiring.

On March 10th, I quit and gave my two weeks' notice to my boss, the Desk Assistant Coordinator. Prior to my quitting, my parents had planned a long weekend visit to Washington. As it turned out, they arrived on my final day at the show. After we toured the capital Saturday and Sunday, I moved out of my apartment in the U Street neighborhood and was driven back to the Chicago suburbs in my parents' minivan. I had caught a cold that weekend and slept most of the way home. Let me tell you the story.

THE STUDIOS OF the program I was to work at were not located in Washington, but in the suburb of Arlington, Virginia, in a dilapidated brick office over which seagulls hovered and cawed as if it were a barge on the sea.

On my first morning of work, I was told to wait in the lounge for the Desk Assistant Coordinator. In the meantime the other interns arrived. One said the handle of his car door had snapped off from the cold that morning. Another shook my hand and afterwards I noticed a trace of blood on my thumb. I worried that it was my blood, that perhaps my face was bleeding. I discreetly felt my

cheeks and chin and lips and nose. Then I noticed that the intern was biting her thumbnail and that she had a bloodied tissue in her hand. I was relieved my face was not bleeding.

The Coordinator came and led us into the greenroom to meet the outgoing interns. When the Coordinator left the outgoing interns entered. They were glum and quiet and talked mostly among themselves. Many of them seemed not just tired but depressed. None of them sounded proud or excited about having been an intern.

We were given a tour of the office. The hallways were narrow, the ceilings low, the windows sealed and the lights fluorescent. There was an incessant hum of recirculated air and a steady babble of keyboard strokes. The workers were hushed. Most stared solemnly at the screens of their computers. Moving through such a cramped and stuffy space, something flashed through my consciousness—the whistle of a lifeguard or the flap of a black flag—a warning from the shores of my ego that something hideous was headed my way. I let the warning pass and continued trying to be pleasant.

We were introduced to the world-famous anchors, several of whom seemed warm and said that if we had questions we could come by anytime to chat. Several other anchors were cold and indifferent to us. We were shown the newsroom and the studio.

We spent the end of our first day inside the control room. The technicians in the control room were very cynical and very proficient. They could make callous jokes about the deaths of innocent civilians or about the awkwardness of an in-studio guest without missing a beat in the complex rhythms of camera cues and graphics triggers.

The next day, I was training in the newsroom with an outgoing intern, learning what my duties would be for January. His tasks were to answer the phone and to log incoming video footage from the Associated Press. The AP would send a bundle of video clips every hour on the half-hour, a few seconds to a few minutes in length, roughly edited and raw. I asked this intern if he had seen anything disturbing while logging these clips. He said the worst was from a town hall event, when a man entered with a pistol and shot and killed the man who was speaking. The clip showed the speaker pleading for his life as the shots were fired.

This intern said that at first it would be overwhelming to keep up with all the information that had to be logged, but then, after a couple days, it would become routine and very simple. "And then you stop caring."

That Friday, as the outgoing interns departed amid an afternoon sheet cake party, I assured myself that they were losers. They had failed to prove themselves to the gatekeepers of the bureaucracy and now found themselves defeated

and exposed on the front steps of the soaring tower. I told myself that the gates would be opened for me, that I would be whisked inside and up and up to some prestigious level from which I could gaze down at those mediocre, ground-level fuck-ups. I was so sure of it.

THE FIRST SEVERAL weeks as an intern at "NewsHour" involved many thrills. The back of my head and the profile of my face appeared on television during the "Other News" segment of the broadcast, which is filmed inside the newsroom. I recorded a voice-over translation for the sound bite of a Middle Eastern statesman. I published several articles for the show's website. I chatted with David Brooks and I took a phone message from Michele Norris. I handed Gwen Ifill an urgent package and I urinated next to Jim Lehrer. Unfortunately, the media-related thrills, with repetition, soon became no more nourishing than the little pieces of candy a technician in the control room insisted on distributing to anyone who passed.

What was the substance of my days as an intern? Throughout the months I was there, it was: answering phones, making copies, faxing reports, tidying the canteen, distributing mail, running scripts, peeling the labels off tapes and shuttling those tapes to and fro, transcribing interviews, fetching lunch (and fetching from a grocery store a gallon of organic skim milk for one particular gentleman). I also spent many, many hours sitting at a desk in an adjustable office chair, with no particular task to do, staring at the screen of my computer and trying to look busy. It was not that I wanted to be idle, but I found my mind either scrambled and jumpy or lethargic and weary, and it was difficult to get anything more accomplished than checking my email or scanning a news article.

Many of my tasks felt superfluous, arbitrary, required for no reason beyond obedience to the invisible gods of the office—the all-mighty "They"—that would condemn all departures from tradition. These were tasks such as making excessive copies of documents that I had to throw into the garbage the following day, or faxing reports that could just as well have been emailed, or, when ordering lunch, always insisting on a side of panini bread for that one particular gentleman's lunch orders (I eventually learned he wasn't even eating bread at the time and would give it away to another intern who sat near his office).

All these tasks, whether important-feeling or not, were reduced to a series of routines and scripts and sequences, and soon were easy enough to perform automatically, without conscious thought, with a rhythm of this-then-that-then this-then-that, and so on, to the end of the broadcast at 7 p.m.

I began to feel that there were fumes in the building, a miasma, perhaps, billowing out from the corner office of The Old Man. This gas circulated through me within minutes of arriving and shriveled my desire. I found that I no longer wanted to outrace my fellow interns, that I no longer wanted a job at this company or to be around longer than my six-month internship.

I observed that my moods and mental state were following a pattern through the workweek. I called this rhythm "The Cycle of Futility." It went like this: Monday and Tuesday involved fantasies of enraged window-smashing, of bellowing in disgust at the phoniness of my coworkers and all their pleasant chatting and quiet acquiescence; Wednesday felt like a cool relief in being slightly less edgy and bleak than the previous days; Thursday and Friday involved nihilistic smirks and a very caustic and apathetic mood as I counted down the hours until the reprieve of the weekend. Every night of the week I came home too exhausted to read or write or apply for jobs or think hard about anything particularly meaningful. I had enough energy to cook dinner, check my email and watch a part of a film. It was a constant evening temptation to smoke pot or drink alcohol and sink myself into a stupor similar to—although more pleasant and peaceful than—the stupor of the daytime. It did not help to think about how I was only working fifty hours a week, and was considered a slacker by most of my friends.

During college, I had worked as a temp at an insurance company and a consulting firm, both of which were located in drab suburban offices, and both of which stupefied me the way the office of the show was stupefying me. I wondered if malaise was the only possible mood in all these offices, if it would not have been more lively at NPR, or the *New York Times*, or *Harper's*. During my internship, several employees of the show left for other jobs, at places like NPR, *Good Morning America* or the *Denver Post*. Would the mood of those places be any less anemic or leave those workers any less beaten by the end of the day?

Why did working at this powerful, important news show feel so dreary and dull? The ugly, air-tight office surely had something to do with it, but doesn't the spirit of a place come from what is actually going on there, from what force and faith and joy the congregants carry there to do their work?

Was it staring at a computer screen all day long that was so exhausting? I've had moments, as when editing a video or designing graphics or writing a paper, when I sat and stared at a screen for hours and hours—but instead of feeling dead, I felt alive and wired and like I was in a terrific trance.

Or what about the quality of human interaction? Was it that, during the workday, we mostly regarded each other as machines to be queried for information or ordered to perform tasks, rather than conscious beings with desires, feelings and appetites?

Perhaps it was just being an intern, being ignored, talked down to, ordered about, that was so deeply depressing. What about those who were higher up: the production assistants, the reporters, the producers, the anchors? They were making more money than me, but did they enjoy themselves more, or feel less vulnerable? Were their days less automatic and repetitious than mine?

My first and safely distant observations of the higher-ups were that a few of them looked devastatingly tired and unwell, many of them looked fine—not miserable, but not happy either—and a few of them looked perky and satisfied. I was eventually able to talk with one or two other employees—some who had been at the show only a couple years, others for many years. When speaking with me alone, they complained bitterly, giving anecdotes about the incompetence of their coworkers and their frustrations at having to do repetitive work. And yet these employees were still there, still grinding, and not prone to quit anytime soon. Why, after making such damning accusations, did they finish their lunches and head back to the office and to the people onto which and onto whom they had just heaved heavy buckets of bile? Had they been humoring me? Some of them said they would gladly leave if they had other things to do, if they had "the next thing" figured out. Were they being lazy or fearful?

Is this what it is to be grown-up and to be in the real world? To feel frustrated and tired and to complain when you have a chance but to just keep showing up and sticking to it—whatever your "it" may be—day after day? To quietly and nobly suffer in obscurity as you make ends meet?

In *Repetition*, Kierkegaard wrote, "He who chooses repetition, he lives. He does not chase after butterflies like a child, or stand on tiptoe in order to glimpse the wonders of the world. He knows them. Neither does he sit like an old woman and spin on the spinning wheel of recollection. He goes calmly about his life, happy in repetition."

Does the calm life of repetition entail some sort of permanent spiritual resignation? Does it require you to stop gazing up at the far-off constellations of hopes and dreams and fantastic desires, to instead tilt your head back down to earth and to know, more or less, which lot is your lot, and to be okay with each day being a slightly varied circuit within that lot, a circuit with certain frustrations and satisfactions, but one that can be reliably iterated deep into the future?

At the end of F. Scott Fitzgerald's story "Winter Dreams," the protagonist Dexter learns that a woman he once painfully desired as a young man has gotten married, lost her looks, and been tamed by a rude husband. Dexter has a terrible epiphany and begins to weep as he looks down upon Manhattan from his office. The story concludes:

> For the first time in years the tears were streaming down his face. But they were for himself now. He did not care about mouth and eyes and moving hands. He wanted to care, and he could not care. For he had gone away and he could never go back any more. The gates were closed, the sun was gone down, and there was no beauty but the gray beauty of steel that withstands all time. Even the grief he could have borne was left behind in the country of illusion, of youth, of the richness of life, where his winter dreams had flourished.
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> "Long ago," he said, "long ago, there was something in me, but now that thing is gone. Now that thing is gone, that thing is gone. I cannot cry. I cannot care. That thing will come back no more."

Is that the dialectic beneath the surface of adult life? Between wandering deep into the wilderness of desire—the "country of illusion"—and staying put in the comfort and contentment of a warm home? Between the life of desire, which needs novelty and danger, and the life of domesticity, which needs repetition and safety?

But of course desire has its tedious repetitive qualities, its endlessly cycling obsessiveness (which *Repetition* actually makes its readers suffer through). And domesticity has its unrepeatable surprises and its dramatic novelties.

Could it be that the "real world" is a halfway house for those stuck between desire and domesticity, those who still want to dream, but to do so from the comfort of a steady job and a safe home?

ON WEEKENDS DURING the internship, I went to the free art museums of Washington. The National Portrait Gallery and the American Art Museum were like a terrific storm that broke the dam of thoughts and memories and hopes for the future that had become clogged in my head during the workweek.

It was James Hampton's "The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly" that really knocked me off my horse. I had never heard so many people gasp at an art museum as when they turned the corner and saw this holy furniture.

Hampton secretly assembled the throne over fourteen years, in a garage in northwest D.C. He built it out of cardboard, aluminum and gold foil, light bulbs, shards of mirror, and broken furniture, all while working as a night jani-

James Hampton with *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly*

tor at the General Services Administration. The throne is uncanny, like something removed from one's dreams and brought into the waking world. You can point at it and know what kind of thing it is, and yet you've never seen anything like it before.

This throne seemed really, truly, Whitmanesquely wonderful to me, and made me think about the routines of the life in which it was created. About quietly toiling at the bottom of the bureaucracy, sweeping its floors, not caring about money or power or promotions, and then coming home each day to work at something that's sacred and weird and grotesquely complex, that makes people gasp, that explodes their sense of possibility. Could that be the labor status of the slacker, of the person who has withdrawn in disgust but yet refuses to become apathetic?

I did feel something very tempting and liberating in thinking about Hampton's life. But of course it's bad faith to believe I can just drop the desire for glory, for power, for artistic and intellectual and romantic satisfaction. Who am I kidding?

In early March, I visited New York City over a long weekend. I had just completed the intern rotation that required lunch-fetching. I felt like I had emerged from a dark valley and that I was going to make it, that I would be able to survive the rest of the internship through July, even if I then decided to withdraw from the corporate world.

I went to the city and had a very nice time with some artistic and intellectual weirdos. I came back to Washington, to the offices of the show, thinking I would be toughened, that the miasma wouldn't penetrate as deeply. But that Monday, the rage, the discomfort, the visions of breaking things, they all returned as strongly as ever. The Thursday of that week, I asked the Desk Assistant Coordinator for a ride home. I told him as we sped down the highway that I had decided to quit, and that I was giving him my two weeks' notice, effective immediately. The next day, the Desk Assistant Coordinator wanted to speak with me again. He said I was being selfish and immature, and that I was refusing to pay my dues.

During my two week notice period, the atmosphere of the office was considerably less noxious. It felt like the spell of the place had been broken. Yet however relieved I was to be leaving the internship, I also felt guilt, confusion and dread. I kept thinking of the King Vidor silent film *The Crowd*, and its protagonist John Sims, who moves to New York City and callously laughs at

a man dressed as a clown and wearing a sandwich board advertisement. Sims says, "I bet his father thought he was going to be president, too!" But by the end of the film, after the stress of the city and marriage and raising a family, Sims has thrown a fit at his office and swept the papers off his desk and quit, and he is seen wearing the same sandwich board and clown suit as the man he once mocked.

Will my impatience, my short temper, my strong desires, ruin me someday, too? Will I someday have to exist in a way that I deride, that seems to me like a joke? Will I look back with regret and shame on these years of being choosy?

SOON AFTER COMING home, a friend told me to read *Youth* by J.M. Coetzee. It was a nice coincidence to read his description of the "gas" at the IBM offices in London and of the spiritual paralysis that made him so quickly quit his first big city job.

It was also encouraging to read this other line from the novel: "The plan at the back of his mind when he came to England, insofar as he had a plan, had been to find a job and save money. When he had enough money he would give up the job and devote himself to writing. When his savings ran out, he would find a new job, and so forth."

I decided to live off my caddie savings and devote myself to writing. Most of my efforts have failed, but a few have succeeded. I am stressed, worried, and I spend much of my day staring at a computer screen and losing myself in a whirl of solipsism. But I do not miss the office, although my internship was perhaps useful as a trial.

I have no idea what I will be doing next year, or where I will be, or how I will make money, but I'll figure something out. I have not relinquished my desires to be successful, to be respected, to create something. If anything, I feel them more strongly, now that I can let them breathe and feed and take exercise every day. Perhaps, someday, they will make me very miserable and very frustrated—but, for now, I am hopeful.