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The Rule of Three

Lucky number three, or is it?

Isn't it funny that we focus so much on the number three? In some instances it is regarded as lucky; at least for some, as the Bingo caller says. For many, though, it seems to be quite the opposite and can be a worry, because bad things do tend to happen in threes. Take the baseball batter – if he or she misses the pitched ball three times in a row it's three strikes and you're out! Coincidence, however, doesn't apply in this case – it's all about skill, or the lack of it. As for non-sporting folk leading ordinary lives, Murphy's law is waiting to deal three of the not-so good kind. Where, I wonder, did this rule of three originate?

The World War I soldiers in the trenches were very mindful of the dreaded number when lighting their cigarettes, especially at night; because someone would be watching from a distance. A match struck to light the first fag would be seen on the other side of no-man's land, alerting the enemy to raise a rifle. Passing the same match over to a mate to light his and the rifle's sights followed the flame; the shooter's finger poised on the trigger, ready to fire. Unless the third bloke along declined the light – bang! He was gone! I recall a friend who wouldn't take the third light, even though he had never been a soldier or in the trenches. Perhaps he was thinking it would still bring bad luck, nevertheless, and he wasn't prepared to take a chance.

The concept does not always leave a sour taste. It has featured in plenty of songs over the years. Two spring to mind – notice I steered clear of adding another. Eddie Cochran sang of Three Steps to Heaven tendering positive advice for finding the right girl and keeping her. Doris Day's Three Coins in a Fountain told of hopeful lovers tossing coins into the water in their search for a happy relationship; then it posed the question: which one would the fountain bless? I imagine if one of them had been me and I was third in line, I'd have thought twice about lobbing my Lira in the pond and spent it on a bunch of flowers, or a coffee instead.

Despite being written for children, nursery rhymes often told of misfortune. The three blind mice didn't have such a good time, thanks to the farmer's wife. There were three little pigs, however, who won out in the end; at least the third's house was still intact after all the huffing and puffing. This story, I believe, is important because the number three isn't always predictive of doom and gloom, and third time lucky is an outcome most would welcome. It is, indeed, our philosophy.

Whenever we have to make a decision on coping with a change in circumstances; rather than plunging in feet first, we survey the options and begin with the one that seems most likely to succeed. It is always given our best shot, generally looking for ways around whatever obstacles crop up; but if it seems we are banging heads against a brick wall, it is time to pause and think: maybe we weren't meant to go this way for some reason; but

it's early days yet and it might still be worth looking for an alternative approach? Usually there are a few waiting in the wings; and, either by informed choice or simple instinct, we select what tenders itself as a good number two. Our former strategy is revived and we persevere with a positive mindset; but if that eventually bombs out too, it's time for one last try. Unlike the well-known try, try, try again advice, as far as we're concerned it's either third time lucky, or ditch the whole idea and move on to something else entirely.

It sounds like defeatism; but in reality it is merely accepting there is more to life than pursuing hopeless dreams. That's not to say give up on them altogether, which would make for a pretty dull existence. No, the rule of three can still be applied and may work, provided a different direction is taken. I recall a holiday trip we took that was meticulously planned. We'd always done things this way in the past and it usually worked well. As the whole journey would be a two-day drive, we picked an interesting place half-way for a stopover. I guess something must have happened that night, a kind-of Dreamtime visitation that injected a sense of adventure into our thinking. Setting off next day, the map came out and one of us noticed a national park we had never been to. No bookings had been made for our original destination, so it was our choice whether we went there, or somewhere else altogether; and that's what we did.

I suppose Cape Arid National Park was number two of the options – not that we'd ever imagined before we left home that there'd be more than one. It was magic: an isolated bush setting with very few facilities, and the only people we saw was a mob of black cockatoos eating Banksia flowers right next to our tent – they didn't even ask us for a camp-site fee! Right, we said; forget the planning: let's fly by the seat of our pants. And we set off, bypassing the original resort of Esperance in favour of another National Park, Lucky Bay. The name of the place said it all. We had another truly wonderful experience; and, I guess, it proved to us that more than bad things come in threes – good things can, too; if you only give them a chance.

Our change in outlook certainly made things better for us back then; and, it seems, as long as we have faith it will continue on. Sure, there are the odd setbacks to suffer, quite often three on the trot; but it is comforting to believe that, once the third is out of the way the lucky number three will return to brighten our lives and help with future decision-making.

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