

"DEJA VU ALL OVER AGAIN"

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If you consult that ultimate compendium of all twenty-first century knowledge Google, you will find over one hundred and twenty cross references to the phrase "deja vu all over again." But I could not find a single one that told me when, where, or under what circumstances the great Yogi Berra spake these immortal lines.

The actual quote seems to be, "This is like deja vu all over again" which makes me all the more curious to know what circumstances originally prompted the remark. Incidentally, Google ranks this phrase fourteenth among its author's many wonderful and deathless lines... but on what basis is not made clear.

We all know the phrase. It has entered our lexicon and is in near-universal use. But when you hold it up to the light for close scrutiny, its precise meaning is not entirely clear. Does it have any real meaning beyond its obvious, enjoyable, tautology? Perhaps usage provides the answer... and so, back to the one hundred and twenty samples cited by Google.

At its simplest level, many people use the phrase to refer to recurring phenomena: you would expect that. "Deja vu all over again" thus becomes a way of thinking about the recurring patterns in our lives: things that, in the course of human experience, happen over and over again, as in...

It's time to open up the place in Michigan again... or,

Christmas is upon us once again... or,

Here comes another grandchild

But for others there is more to "deja vu all over again" than a simple acknowledgment of something that has happened before and is happening again. In its more mature sense, the phrase carries with it an emotional response along the lines of "I've seen that before and so I ought to have handled it better this time around." It has to do with the way we would like to respond to these recurring phenomena if we could, but somehow don't. And we turn to the phrase in annoyance when it becomes clear that we have failed to learn from our previous experience. And so,

"Christmas is upon us once again" becomes "and this year I'm determined to keep it simple, and not overspend." And when the eye-popping bills come in once more, we mutter the magic phrase. Or,

"Here comes another grandchild" becomes "I've got to get that old crib out of the attic again and this time I'll remember how it goes together." And when it becomes apparent that we have no clue on how the damned thing goes together, and we have to ask our mechanically inclined (and very pregnant) daughter-in-law for help, it is truly "deja vu all over again."

Others rely on the phrase as a panacea to ease the reality of the impossible: there are certain things in our world that, despite man's best efforts, never can happen... at least not in our lifetimes. And when we see repeated attempts at these daunting goals come to naught, we take cold comfort from Yogi's words with each successive failure. As in...

- The Mississippi will never be tamed. And when Katrina shows once again this to be the case, we turn to Yogi. Or,

- Afghanistan will never be subdued: The Persians failed, the Mongols failed, the

Brits failed twice, the Russians failed, and we are in the process of failing now. What would Yogi say? Or, coming a little closer to Yogi's world,

- Cincinnati will never have a winning football team (and may never see another winning baseball team, either).

Others see in this phrase a response to the natural law of repeating cycles of life from one generation to the next. Look within your own family tree and you will probably find the same kinds of circumstances inevitably and periodically surfacing within every successive generation:

- there is the successful business man who recoups family fortunes, and there is the wastrel who squanders them... "Deja vu all over again."

- there is the steady man, and the military man who serves his country well and there is the utterly ineffectual and the drunk...

- there is the man who marries well and whose wife brings new vigor to the family line, and the womanizer who makes a mess of liaison after liaison...

-there is the brilliant professional: the student or scholar or medical man or lawyer, and there is the dropout who vanishes from sight.

There was one (or more) of these in your family in your grandfather's time and again in your father's... there is one today in your time, and there will be one or more in your children's time. It is the natural order of things. What more telling usage of "Deja vu all over again" could there be?

But let's return to usage to get a better grip on this slippery phrase: back to

Google's one hundred and twenty "hits." It becomes increasingly clear, as you plow through these, that for most people most of the time "Deja vu all over again" is not used in response to happy or upbeat developments, or those which are positive and pleasurable. The great majority of usage seems to be in response to the negative, the bad news, the disappointing or the inevitable: a fatalistic shrug that says, "I wish that hadn't happened." Webster defines *deja vu* as "overly or unpleasantly familiar." Indeed, the phrase often seems to suggest a response to a malevolent life force beyond our control that seeks to undo us, or at least to inconvenience us. Thus, we get...

- The crown on my left molar just came unglued again. "Deja vu all over again."
Or,

- Isn't it about time for the seventeen year locusts to reappear? Or,

- Here comes another April 15. Or,

- Dammit, my back has gone out again. Or,

- The tire with the slow leak has gone dead flat again. Or,

- The school called and the dean wants to see us about Winslow again. Or,

- My hemorrhoids are giving me fits again.

In response to each of these, about our best response is Yogi Berra's immortal line. What else can we do, or say?

For many of us, there seems to be one further, particularly malevolent life force which, over and over again, seeks to undo us. For me, and (I suspect) many of you, this is the driving force of technology, which sucks us ever deeper into its maw.

This menace again and again humbles me so utterly and totally that all I can do in response is to whimper Yogi's mantra. As in...

- The computer is down again. Dead as a doornail. "Deja vu all over again." Or...

- The printer isn't working. Or,

- I can't open that damned email attachment. Or,

- I forgot to Save the document I worked on until two in the morning. Or,

- I can't figure out how to order some new underpants on the L L Bean website. Or,

- Even with Dave Edmundson's coaching, I still can't get to the Literary Club page.
Or,

- The Goddamned DVD player did not record the Jane Austen Masterpiece Theatre I particularly wanted to see. Or,

- I can't find a single human being to talk to when I call the bank (airline, credit card company, to stop the newspaper... you name it) Or,

- Why am I being made to replace my damned television and what the hell are all these led and plasma and whatever variations I have to choose among? Or,

- What are all these Goddamned remote control devices that are everywhere in my life? It takes four just to run my TV and DVD player. Why can't there be just one?
Or,

- I set out to buy a simpler, easier remote control for my TV and DVD player.

I came home with the simplest one there is. It has forty-seven buttons on it.
Or, speaking of buttons,

- Isn't there a cell phone somewhere with buttons I can read, and push one at a time? Or,

- What is all this Blackberry and Bluetooth and iPod and iPhone bullshit all about?

To some small extent, Yogi's words help us shrug off these technology-based annoyances which keep coming at us, which we cannot fend off, and against which we are so utterly impotent. I suppose I should feel grateful to Yogi.

Yogi's phrase takes on new force when used in response to another category of frustration: things which we bring down on ourselves through our own quirks of character... through the "who we are." In these awkward situations, we know full well that we brought these circumstances on ourselves and cannot honestly lay off the responsibility on anyone else. So we snap at our wives, kick the dog, and mutter Yogi's shabby bit of philosophy to take the edge off our own failings.

"Know thyself," said Socrates (it was Socrates, I think?), and I know that when I find myself forced to acknowledge my own responsibility for my frustrations, I have typically been brought low by my innate optimism... by my desire to trust people, places and things. And this optimism dooms me to recurring disappointment and delusion, and reliance on Yogi's saying.

It is central to my character to believe that things will work out for the best, and that the people in my life will not disappoint me. Some might say that I am a habitual optimist, addicted to trust.

- This undoubtedly explains my lifelong commitment to fishing: was there ever a

pessimistic angler?

- How many times have I chosen to believe a builder's estimate... or a home remodeler's timetable?

- What is my track record on choosing an honest well driller?

- How many bird dogs have I bought and given my heart to, based just on their good looks and cheerful disposition?

And when truth is revealed... when there are no fish at the end of a trip... when a building project comes in at double the estimate and twice the timing... when the well driller comes up with a dry hole or the beloved new bird dog bites me and runs away... who is to blame, really? I ruefully say "Deja vu all over again," but I know in my heart that optimism and trust are, for me, a way of life. It is a privilege not to lock your doors at night. And the more privileged we are, the more we trust.

Those of us who prefer to trust - we optimistic trust-junkies - are resigned to the inevitability of occasional disappointment, but it does not change us. We shrug it off, console ourselves with Yogi's useful phrase, and soldier on because we like it that way. As Cleante remarks in Moliere's Tartuffe, ""It is best to err, if err one must, as you have done, on the side of trust."