

Who Moved My Cheese, Revisited

Kevin Carson

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I've already done Who Moved My Cheese?, so a lot of the comments below are new only to those who missed them the first time around. But every once in a while, as with the "best available alternative" meme about sweatshops, I find another example of the phenomenon so sickening I can't help repeating myself.

So here it is: a review (by Terry Watson, "international speaker") of Spencer Johnson's godawful *Who Moved My Cheese: An Amazing Way To Deal With Change In Your Work And In Your Life*. The fact that it's clustered, on Watson's recommended books page, along with a bunch of motivational dreck by Dale Carnegie, Og Mandino, and Stephen Covey, should tell you something about Watson. (The genre was deliciously parodied by *National Lampoon* in the person of Sphinx Sphincter, author of the motivational classic *Visualize, Actualize, Grasp and Claw*.)

The defunct Molotov Cocktail for the Soul site had this to say about another specimen of the genre, Tom Lagana (creator of the execrable *Chicken Soup* series):

Snatching hypocritical victory from the jaws of defeat, this electrical engineer turned mind engineer is now complicit with his old "redundancy eliminators." He now helps "organizations who want to get the most out of people;" and those people would, of course, be the Prozac-plied personnel now doing twice the work they would have at the same position twenty years ago and are too sedated to feel the boss's whip cracking across their backs. "[Lagana] put a smile on my face and it stayed there even after I went back to work," gushes one successfully sheered sheep, her organization now getting the most out of her. "I already feel less stress as I apply some of the techniques," bleated another after scampering from a Lagana seminar payed for by the Firm.

Anyway, here's what Watson writes:

Change can be a blessing or a curse, depending on your perspective. The message of *Who Moved My Cheese?* is that all can come to see it as a blessing, if they understand the nature of cheese and the role it plays in their lives. *Who Moved My Cheese?* is a parable that takes place in a maze. Four beings live in that maze: Sniff and Scurry are mice—nonanalytical and nonjudgmental, they just want cheese and are willing to

do whatever it takes to get it. Hem and Haw are “littlepeople,” mouse-size humans who have an entirely different relationship with cheese. It’s not just sustenance to them; it’s their self-image. Their lives and belief systems are built around the cheese they’ve found. Most of us reading the story will see the cheese as something related to our livelihoods—our jobs, our career paths, the industries we work in—although it can stand for anything, from health to relationships. The point of the story is that we have to be alert to changes in the cheese, and be prepared to go running off in search of new sources of cheese when the cheese we have runs out.

Change, like cheese, is something that “just happens”; it’s presented in much the same way Tom Friedman presents “globalization”: not as the product of human action, but as an inevitable and impersonal force of nature. We’re expected to accept as it comes, and deal with it within whatever framework is established by the anonymous gods in white coats who structure the maze. The idea that some authority figures are in a position to dole out cheese, and that we must jump through whatever hoops they require in order to get it, goes without saying.

In fact, Johnson’s recipe for “dealing with change in your work and in your life” is a lot like the medieval peasant’s fatalistic acceptance of one ruler after another, washing over him in succession like a series of tidal waves. “Keep your head down, do your work, pay your rent without complaint, don’t look beyond your station in life; and *don’t* above all, meddle in the affairs of the great lords.”

It’s also a bit like Parsons’ enthusiastic embrace of “change” in 1984: “The choco-ration’s been increased to 20 grammes. Doubleplusgood, eh?”

Thomas Frank, in *One Market Under God*, describes it as an “asinine” work of “breathhtaking obscenity,” designed to “openly advance a scheme for gulling, silencing, and firing workers who are critical of management...” Not only is the mover of the cheese never identified, Frank points out:

...[E]ven to wonder about the logic of the cheese’s movements or to ask the title question *Who Moved My Cheese?* is to commit workplace error of such magnitude that management can rightly “let” workers who are given to such thoughts “go.” So while one of the “littlepeople” remains stubbornly at the place where he last sighted the cheese, the other sets off through the maze again, running the rat race, but finding along the way that job insecurity is good for his soul and composing a number of pithy observations about adapting to “change”...

Or, like *Watership Down*’s Silverweed, composing hymns to the wire. The book, according to Frank, was created as a management tool for dealing with “change resisters.” And naturally, it’s a big favorite of HR departments everywhere, who order it by the gross for employee self-criticism meetings—er, seminars. Those managers who applied the lessons of the book in their thankless job of imposing “change” found, to their delight, that it “worked wonders.”

Those who had been fired learned to relish their situation (“there was New Cheese out there just waiting to be found!”) and those were permitted to stay stopped “complaining” and bowed to management’s new scheme.

For most of us, it's an accepted part of existence to dread showing up for work and finding out just how far our fucking cheese has been moved *this* time.
Here's to the day when *we're* moving *their* cheese.

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