

Reader's Guide: Wouldn't it be fun to have two birthdays a year! Why not create an extra birthday for each of your loved ones. We are serious. *A bonus birthday* is a novel way to illustrate both Type I and II improvements in definitions. It is either a new definition or the creative application of an existing definition and that depends solely upon your interpretation. (2,000 words) Other definitions: Unbirthday, leaplings, Hajri and Gregorian calendars.

FAR TWO FEW BIRTHDAYS

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Ben and his fiancée independently have chosen a Friday in April, 2009 to tie the knot. They have been patient and are planning ahead. It sounds remarkable, but neither recognized the significance of their selected wedding date. I did not realize it either. That is, until it dawned on me early the next morning after their announcement.

In the not too distant future Ben will also have celebrated more birthdays than his Dad. I should know. Again, I am his Dad. I have also celebrated every single one of my birthdays. And no, this is not somehow being written posthumously.

This is not a logic game or riddle. It is reality and always has been for us. My son simply forgets the date of one of his birthdays. Yes, he does get two birthdays per year! So does his sister.

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A birthday is an extraordinary day. It almost always makes us feel extra special. This day of celebration and recognition is tracked, anticipated and often fixated on by both the very young and old. It is also just a definition. Much of life is. It is, however, an absolutely vital definition since through most of one's life there is a requirement to know - but not necessarily act - your exact age.

Think about it. Our date of birth and age is a major determinant in the big events of life. I am not, however, referring to "drinking age" or "driving age" though both are revered by America's youth. Neither does this center on "legal age", "middle age", "retirement age" or any other stage of age.

My son, Ben, was born in Saudi Arabia on a Wednesday late afternoon. It was good timing since the traditional weekend fell on Thursday and Friday. His birth was recorded twice. The U.S. State Department recorded it as January 25, 1984. That is based on our Gregorian calendar of 365.25 days per year. It is a solar ledger, which means that the seasons occur each and every year during the same month of the year.

On the Hijri calendar, his date of birth was 22 Rabi II 1404. It too was recorded, but in Arabic. The Hijri calendar is a lunar calendar with 354 days per year. It is the calendar of record in many parts of the world. It has eleven days less than the Western year.

On the Hijri calendar, his date of birth was 22 Rabi II 1404. It too was recorded, but in Arabic. It is the calendar of record in many parts of the world. It has eleven days less each year than the Western Gregorian calendar.

Both dates are accurate. They are also different.

What does this have to do with birthday celebrations? Everything, my son and I have thus far celebrated his Hijri birthday in the winter, fall and summer. We are finally moving into the spring. That is because based on our Western calendar his Hijri birth date happens eleven and a fraction days earlier each and every year. That is why he gets two birthdays a year. It is also why Ben finds it difficult to track his lunar-based birthday. That has always been left to Dad.

Ben is the first person that I have ever known to celebrate two birthdays each and every year. That has been the case even though the hospital in which he was born has been in continual operation for about 70 years. This oil company hospital has seen at least two to three thousand Western baby births. I sometimes wonder why those other families did not also celebrate their child's Hijri calendar birthdays, until I reflect upon the considerable power definitions and traditions exert over us. In fact, Arab babies born in the same hospital, and believe me when I say that is a much more frequent event, also celebrate only one birthday per year. Their birthdays are understandably based on the Hijri calendar.

Actually, it is understandable how my son might lose track of his annual bonus birthday. Again, it comes earlier on our calendar each and every year. In fact, once in a blue moon he will even legitimately get three birthdays in a year, but let's not complicate this any further.

As this is being written neither Ben nor his fiancée are aware that they have chosen his second, extra, bonus birthday upon which to wed. Since I have always tracked his Hijri birth date it has always been a surprise. It will definitely be a special celebration! Should we sing "Happy Birthday" at their wedding? After all this won't be just any routine bonus birthday. It will also be the fiftieth birthday celebration since his birth and Ben's "champagne birthday" on the Hijri calendar.

Maybe there is more to it than even I realized. What stock we take in marking our births and I am not just referring to astrology and its immense ancient influence over history. Neither am I tooting numerology. Birthdays simply matter. They often matter a lot! Yet they are just a tradition and an almost universal definition at that.

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Now marriage itself is more than just a ceremony. It will indeed be a special day for my son and his fiancée. It is one of the oldest definitions in existence. Marriage is not only codified in hieroglyphics and the bible, but also in every other past and present major religious doctrine and set of laws ever established by mankind. For many the institution of marriage is therefore sacred. At a minimum, there is much beyond the ceremonial. Marriage truly matters. That is why changing the definition of marriage to include same sex civil unions is so super charged.

Adding and celebrating a bonus birthday pales in comparison. Many would, however, be every bit as intransigent on keeping birthdays in their proper place. That is, everyone should get their allotted one birthday a year per person, period.

After all, who would even bother to consider bestowing a bonus birthday on a significant other? Against tradition, deviation is often an orphan.

Do you know anyone else who celebrates two personal birthdays per year, other than my daughter? I don't. Surely others do somewhere. It is, after all, just an informal addition to the calendar with minimal, if any, built-in resistance. Besides it is fun and definitely appreciated.

Oh yes, because Ben gets two birthdays per year my daughter understandably felt slighted. The solution was obvious. We just chose one for her. It is fortunately easier to track. Her bonus birthday is celebrated on the same day each year - the day of her deceased grandmother's stateside birth. We could have chosen something more complex like my daughter's Julian calendar birth date or a floating date like Good Friday or Memorial Day. We kept it uncomplicated, but symbolic and in remembrance of my mother.

We are not the first to think about adding birthdays to enliven life. There is the *Unbirthday* of Lewis Carroll fame adapted in 1951 in the Disney animated film "Alice in Wonderland". March Hare and the Mad Hatter sang to Alice "The Unbirthday Song". They explained lyrically that an unbirthday is celebrated on any of the 364 or in a leap year 365 days of the year, any of which are not your regular birthday. Alice caught on right away, declared that it was also her unbirthday and then enthusiastically joined in the celebration.

Leap year; just consider the four million or so people around the world that were born on February 29th. They even have a label - Leaplings! They enjoy sharing their age with almost anyone who will listen. Talk about being forever young when your birthday happens just once every four years. Of course, that would mess up everything else, so legally their birthday is February 28th unless it is actually a leap year.

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Birthdays could have been defined differently. Thoroughbred racehorses, for instance, celebrate their birthdays on either January 1st or August 1st depending upon the hemisphere in which they were born. This would be awful if it were applied to humans. Anyway, this definition is what makes it possible for only three year olds to compete in America's Triple Crown races.

I hesitate to add that I also celebrate the anniversary of the birth of Benjamin Franklin each year. Benjamin, my son is his namesake, was born on January 6, 1705, by the calendar then in use; this was translated to January 17, 1706, when the calendar was reformed halfway through his life. As inventive as Franklin was, he celebrated his birth only once a year.

It is not unusual to observe the birthday of a historical figure like Franklin. However, getting it established on the calendar can be a messy affair. For instance, making Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday a federal holiday was a struggle taken up by many Americans. And guess what? We ended up with a *variable* date not a birth date. His holiday is observed the third Monday in January to make a three-day holiday weekend.

There is even a website calculator to help people determine their half-birthday. By definition it is to be celebrated at the mid-point between a person's last and their next upcoming birthday.

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All birthdays are not fixed in stone after all. They can be arbitrary, fixed or even variable.

Personally, I think that for some the benefit of a second birthday is obvious. The cost is definitely minimal and the rewards have been great. My son recently told me that their bonus birthdays remind him and his sister that "they are loved year round" and that each of them is extra special. Isn't that what birthday's are all about any way?

Well of course there is more to it than that. Our date of birth is - as was mentioned earlier - a major determinant in one's life. It affects when we get the right to vote, fly alone, drive, drink, sexually consent, marry, serve in the military, run for president, enroll in Medicare, retire, or become eligible or ineligible for a virtual basket of benefits and rights. Our date of birth also impacts many other of life's conventions including insurability, tax deductibility and social security.

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So what is the point? It is really rather straightforward. Why should twins, triplets and those born on holidays on or near Christmas, Valentine's Day and Halloween have to share the limelight? Shouldn't they have a bonus birthday as well? After all, almost everyone else gets their birthday all to themselves. We expect that at a minimum. Best of all it doesn't take any

legislation or anyone else's permission to celebrate one or even more than one extra birthday a year. Anybody can do it.

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Anyway, who is going to bother to organize against bonus birthdays? Add in the potential boost to commerce and, of course, the retailers and restaurateurs will be obvious early proponents.

There is always the option of having a present-less extra celebration. "Lord of the Rings" author J. R. R. Tolkien suggested a reverse birthday. It is a day for the birthday celebrant to give gifts to family and friends, not to receive presents. Somehow, I just can't see my kids adopting this on their bonus birthdays. Do you think your friends and family would buy into this notion?

While minds can often be locked, our hearts usually aren't. That gives birthdays, both regular and seconds, an advantage. They usually flow from good intentions all around. If I had my life to live over again, I would definitely celebrate even more (including birthdays).

Life is truly the occasion most worthy of celebration. A bonus birthday becomes a reminder to do just that. After all, it is just a definition!

Life is truly the occasion most worthy of celebration. A bonus birthday becomes a reminder to do just that. Why not get friends and family together and choose one for each of those that matter most. It is a small step toward redefining our lives. It is also incredibly easy, yet immensely rewarding.

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