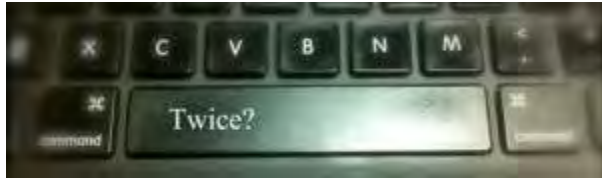# Teaching an old dog new tricks

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Old habits are really hard to shake off. For example, while I'm typing my right thumb instinctively taps the space bar twice in quick succession after I type a full stop. The reason for this is because I was taught (probably during some rudimentary IT lessons in school) that this was the correct thing to do. Alas, this week I discovered that this habit is a remnant of a bygone era, when people used typewriters: The need for double-spacing after a full stop was a result of monospaced typeface, in which all letters and characters occupy an equal amount of horizontal space, and hence the need for exaggerated gaps to make it easier to notice the spaces between sentences. Since virtually all current typefaces are proportional, there is no longer any need for double-spacing after a full stop. In fact, contemporary typographers have declared that single-spacing is the correct form, and double-spacing should be discouraged.

Great, so I've been doing it wrongly the whole time. Now I need to retrain myself in the art of typing.

It wouldn't surprise me if some of you paused before reading the rest of this post in order to comb through this text counting the spaces in between my sentences to find any double-spaces; it would be equally unsurprising if you manage to find this error somewhere on this page. The old habit was so well rehearsed that it's ingrained deeply onto my subconscious. It requires a great deal of mental exertion to force myself to only tap the space bar once.

Did you know that the Russians sold Alaska to the USA for $7.2 million?

Sometimes, the things I've been taught are just plainly wrong. (Like the "fact" taught to me by a primary school teacher that Alaska was an independent country and was not one of the 50 states of the USA, despite my protest to the otherwise.) Other things, like the above mentioned spacing issue, are contextualised by timing; double-spacing is simply out of date and obsolete, replaced by a newer more efficient method. But whenever I'm presented with evidence that demonstrates the falsehood of a current habit, I make an effort to change.

That's not easy, because firstly I have to admit that the way I've been doing something might be wrong. I might feel justified in ignoring the truth and defy reason, sticking to old ways. Or I might (inappropriately) infer that I (as a whole person) am wrong and devalue myself. I might allow the old habit define me, especially if it's a bad habit. Rather than changing my ways I could give into an identity which is characterised by the old habit. There's a laziness about both approaches, which declines the opportunity to engage with the habit and address it.

Correcting violin posture

The second challenge is in correcting the habit. I've resisted the international spelling of "fetus" for a long time, as I've always believed that the traditional British English spelling "foetus" was more correct. Having realised that the original Latin is "fetus" I'll happily, and relatively effortlessly, conform to the international standard. Correcting my typing will require more determined effort, however. It's not simply an acknowledgement of a better way but a rewiring of my brain to retrain it in a new habit, fighting against the old habit. I remember when my violin teacher, when I was still relatively new to the instrument, instructed me to alter my posture as I held the fiddle as he noticed I was slipping into the habit of bad posture. At the time it felt incredibly awkward to adapt, and I reckon my violin posture is still not perfect. In the effort to change to a new way of doing things, it can be tempting to give up trying and revert back to the old way of doing things, because it's easier. I know it might be wrong but I'll excuse myself as that's just the way I am, again defining myself by this feature.

I recently delivered a sermon about my fear of slipping back into old habits. I was reflecting on the tragic passing of Philip Seymour Hoffman, particularly on how, despite being sober for 20 odd years, he quickly slipped back into an addiction to hard drugs that eventually cost him his life. My take home message was about filling our nests with true love, using the image of a nest as a metaphor for the spiritual environment we create around ourselves. A lot of us trying to demonstrate that the proverbial old dog can, in fact, learn some new tricks, and I think we can all do ourselves a favour by creating an environment of love that will support and encourage us as we strive to develop good habits and overcome past habits. Having a group of friends to whom I can be honest, who I can ask to hold me accountable, is incredibly empowering.

I host a weekly small group in my home for some local 2nd generation young men, almost all of whom are married. We're currently working our way through an excellent programme called the Prayer Course. This week I shared with my brothers the fact that I'm struggling to keep a promise to myself of dedicating every Thursday and Friday to studying for my masters course. They promised to pray for me. Sure enough, I received text messages from some of those brothers informing me that they were praying for me. That served as a reminder, just in case I had allowed myself to get distracted by work. I'm pleased to announce that I was already studying, so the reminders were thankfully unnecessary, but I welcome the sentiment: It moved me to think that there's a group of men with whom I can share my insecurities (as well as my doubts, or even greatest achievements) and that they will pray for me. That gave me a lift, and helped me feel that I can accomplish my goal.

What this old dog needs is a pack of other dogs with whom I can learn the new tricks. They can simply cheer me on as I make efforts to improve, or lovingly point out when I slip.

So don't hesitate to comment on how many times I've double-spaced in this blog (or indeed committed any other grammatical or typographical error); your comment will show me you love me and want me to improve!