

When the Hamster Wheel Stops Spinning

A lil story about going off course

Implementation for reader: Have the courage to break away from the norm in any aspect of life.

Goal for me: Have one person say this story gave them the courage to pursue something different and out of the ordinary.

“Are we ever going to stop running?” Jeri looks at Teri and Keri, as he tries to take a big gasp of air to finally catch his breath. His front legs propel him forward, but he stays in the same spot on the same rungs of the circular ladder he runs on every single day. He’s a one-year old, chestnut brown hamster with white spots, and he is known in the cage to spark up some debate and conversation regarding their daily activities.

“I love to run! It makes me feel safe, stable, and secure! I have no problem going on this wheel forever!” Keri is a strong, intelligent hamster. She has dark black fur and powerful legs. A true stallion in the hamster world. She’s been in this particular cage for over three years now, and she thrives the moment she hops onto the red wheel on her side of the hamster home.

“Just keep going, Jeri. There’s no use in getting off now.” Teri is an older hamster. His all white fur is beginning to turn gray, and his once beaming blue eyes are now more subdued. His hind leg on his right side is shorter than all his other limbs, making it difficult for him to run as fast as the others. This difficulty has led to not only problems with speed, but also problems with energy maintenance when the hamsters go on their runs. But he continues on, making the most of each run although longing for something different.

As this trifecta of furballs continues to dart and dash on their respective hamster wheels, they are startled by a slamming open of a door and a hand in their cage. The hand drops some food

in a round dish in the center of the cage, and then proceeds to tap on each wheel, indicating that each hamster can stop with their running for the day. Exhausted and eager for food like fisherman after an unlucky day on the open water, they scurry over to the bowl and attempt to satiate themselves.

Keri blocks the bowl with her large, voluminous body. “You both know the rules. We each get an equal amount of food. That is what’s fair. I will divide it up accordingly. This is the way it has been; this is what the hand has told us dozens of times, and this is the way it’ll always be. These are our norms.”

Jeri tries to wiggle his way around Keri, but to no avail. “I don’t really think we should all get the same amount! Why do we always have to follow what has always been? What does normal mean anyway?” Keri shoots him a stern look, but Jeri continues.

“Sometimes it’d be nice if Teri got a little extra food when he’s feeling hungry. He needs more fuel than we do because he’s older, so why shouldn’t we give him more food? It also could be nice to change things up one day and be pleasantly surprised with a bigger portion. Or maybe I want to try intermittent fasting, and I don’t eat any food one day at all! Keri, I’m not even saying this for my own personal benefit. You can have a day too where you get the most food! After all you always perform the best on the wheel, so maybe you should be rewarded with an extra serving!” Jeri is on his hind legs now and his arms are spread wide. He’s out of breath from his passionate rant.

Keri looks at him, and calmly states, “The way we always do things works. Nothing bad ever happens, so why would we change it. Let’s just keep going through the motions so the hand doesn’t get upset with us. After all, we all eat the same amount of food, and I always outperform you both. So clearly, the amount of food we get does not equate to how well we run on the wheel. I run the best on the wheel because I enjoy running on the wheel the most.”

“But maybe I’d enjoy running on the wheel more if things changed! Or maybe I can use the energy from the extra food on a different activity other than the wheel!” Jeri shrieks as he rapidly dashes around the cage.

Teri finally speaks. But before doing so, he slowly crawls over to the food bowl and makes intense, deliberate eye contact with Keri. She moves away from the bowl allowing Teri to get his food. Teri takes his paws and starts drawing lines in the bowl. He splits the food into three and takes his first bite. He finishes chewing, swallows, and looks directly at Jeri in the back of the cage.

“There’s no use in fighting, Jeri. Change is exhausting. Keri is right. This is what’s normal. Let’s just keep things normal. To answer your question, normal means steady. It means stable. It means no risk or potential for failure. Normal is just going through the motions continuing to run on that wheel.”

The hamsters gather around the bowl. Keri proudly and quickly eats his third of the food. Teri slowly but surely finishes his portion. Defiantly, Jeri splits his third in half, and pushes it to his mates. He doesn’t consume a morsel.

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The remainder of the day is spent rolling around in the hay, drinking water, chatting with one another, or staring out of the cage into the room around them. The hamsters are startled again by a whooshing open of the door and the hand that taps the front of their glass home. After a gentle tap on the glass, the hand moves over to a light switch by the door he just came through, and flicks it down, darkening the room. Jeri, Teri, and Keri know it’s time for bed.

“Bedtime folks! Let’s all reside to our usual quarters. I’ll go underneath the tunnel, Teri will snuggle up against the front corner window, and Jeri will sleep on the pile of hay near his

wheel. Good night every..." But before Teri can say good night, she's interrupted by a familiar voice.

"What if we did something different tonight? What if we broke the rules, stepped out of line for once? I say we switch things up. How about Teri sleeps in that bed none of us ever use? Keri, you could sleep on the hay if you wanted, and I'd like to try underneath the tunnel. How does that sound?"

Keri responds quickly and assertively. "That sounds like you're trying to jump off the wheel again, Jeri. I respect where you're coming from, but I must say, I don't quite understand it. Why would we deviate from the path we've always been on? Why would we do something different from everyone else? Why would we do something completely foreign to what our bodies have gotten so used to? I happen to enjoy my routine, my safety, my comfort under the tunnel."

Jeri sees an opportunity to respond. He lights up. "But how would you know if you liked something else even more so if you never give yourself the chance to try? What if the hay felt amazing on your soft fur? What if your strong legs were supported by the bed next to my wheel? You enjoy what you have now, of course that's true. But who's to say that you can't have it better in the future? You're never going to know what deviating from the norm feels like unless you give it a try. None of us are!" Jeri finishes exasperated.

Teri finally intervenes. His eyes are already half-closed as he lays in his usual spot in the front corner window. "It's not the right time for that Jeri. Not tonight. Keri has been around for much longer than you have, and I've been around for longer than the two of you combined. The hand wants us in these spots for a reason. You don't want to see what happens if we try to steer off course. It's just not worth it." Teri yawns and fully closes his eyes, diminishing any hopes of Jeri's plans for the three of them to rearrange their sleeping positions.

Keri says good night to Jeri and closes her eyes. Jeri slowly creeps over to his bale of hay and lies flat on his back. He remains still, eyes open for over an hour, until he's startled by a whisper coming from the front of the cage.

"Psssst. Psssst. Hey kid. Are you still awake?" Jeri rolls onto all fours and looks toward the front of the cage. Teri is sitting upright with his back against the wall. He's breathing heavily, but for the most part seems at peace. Teri whispers Keri's name a few times to see if she's sleeping. When he can confidently confirm that she is, he tells Jeri to come over to the front of the cage. Jeri hustles over and lays flat on his stomach in front of Teri.

"What's going on, Teri?" Jeri says quietly. "I wanna tell you a story kid." Teri begins.

"I had a pal in here a few years back. Her name was Peri. Peri was a little bit older than me, but we hit it off great. She was golden brown, and her eyes still sparkled even when the hand would shut the light and get us ready for bed. She was quite the hamster Jeri, one of the sweetest I've ever seen. Physically, she was like Keri. She was a fast runner, always the best on her wheel. She was powerful, beautiful. I called her pristine Peri. But mentally, Peri was a lot like you Jeri. She didn't love rules. She always had bigger plans. She had this intuitive feeling that there was a bigger world out there, one much larger than this cage. She didn't always do the normal thing, the common thing, and I admired that. I took quite a liking to it actually." Teri pauses, smiles, shakes his head slowly and continues.

"You see, Peri had this burning desire to hop off of the hamster wheel one day and break loose from the almighty hand that watches over us. And because I was so infatuated by her, I was dumb enough to listen to her and follow along. She devised this plan to jump on top of the hand when it came over to tap on our wheels and tell us to stop running. Then she'd climb quickly up the hand and jump out of the cage and make it to the door before the hand had time

to go and shut it. She even made a plan for me too. She said that while the hand was chasing after her, I should hop on top of one of the wheels and escape as well, and we could venture off course together. We'd both be able to experience the unknown and take the road less traveled together." Again, Teri pauses. He wipes his eyes with his paws. He chuckles and proceeds.

"Peri always had this saying about the road less traveled. She wanted to see it in bumper to bumper traffic. Now, I've never seen traffic before Jeri, but I think she meant she wanted the road to be more crowded. She wanted more people to take that road that so many others were too afraid to take. But anyway, the day finally came when we were going to act upon our plan. We were going to get out of this box and do something different than anybody had ever done before. Peri was going to climb and jump and scurry out the door, and then I was going to follow her."

"But I never got the chance to follow her. Just as she had drawn up, Peri crawled up the hand and jumped into the outside world. She'd made it. She darted to the door and then CLAP!" Teri raises his voice. They check to make sure Keri isn't awake. She wasn't. Teri doesn't say anything, so Jeri chimes in.

"What happened Teri?" Jeri asks. "What happened to Peri?"

Teri looks at him and shakes his head. "Peri never made it out the door. I was never able to follow her. We never got to explore that other road. I never got off my hamster wheel." The hamsters sit there for a few moments without saying a word. Teri concludes their talk.

"I saw a lot of fight in you today, Jeri. I saw fervor, I saw charisma, and I saw Peri, whom I miss so dearly. But for that reason, because I know Peri's fate, I must try to protect you from the unknown. I have to steer you back toward the road that everybody travels, because that's the one that's safe. Staying on the hamster wheel is for your own good, kid. As much as you may not think so, staying on that hamster wheel or sleeping on that same bale of hay is going to give

you a long life. I can tell you that from experience. I can tell you that because. Because I saw the love of my life's own life get cut short." Teri pauses.

"Now go on over to bed, kid. Tomorrow we have some more running to do." Jeri hobbles over to his hay and closes his eyes tight. He falls asleep soon enough. Teri on the other hand, does not. He remains awake for the entire night.

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"Can't wait for another amazing day! I just love knowing exactly what we're going to do and when we're going to do it. Should be about time to hop on our wheels now gentlemen, let's get to it!" Keri yells over to Teri and Jeri. Most often, Jeri puts up a little fight. He asks if they can start a bit later. He wonders if they can switch wheels. But today, he does nothing. Today, Jeri doesn't try to ruffle anyone's fur.

Teri trots heavily over to his wheel. He's breathing audibly, but he doesn't say anything to his housemates. He looks over at Jeri and grunts to himself but proceeds to hop up onto his wheel. Jeri does the same. Keri counts down from ten and the trio begin running on their wheels, no questions asked.

They run and run and continue to run until the hand barges in. He taps their wheels and places some food in the middle of their home.

"Nice going today, Jeri! Really good stuff, I think you gave me a run for my money!" Keri taps Jeri and gives him his portion of food. Jeri doesn't say a word. "You were a little slower than usual today, Teri. Is anything bothering you more so than your legs and arms?" Keri smiles as she teases him.

“I’ll be ok, Keri. Just chugging along as best as I possibly can.” He flashes her a quick smile and he struggles to get food down. Jeri eats his food quietly, which bothers Keri and Teri, but they don’t say anything. Keri shrugs her shoulder and eats happily, but Teri observes Jeri intently. He clearly notices something is off.

Later that evening, the hand approaches the glass, taps on it, then shuts the lights, letting the hamsters know it’s time for bed. Keri delivers her normal addendum about where they’ll all be sleeping and waits for Jeri to say something, but he does not. In fact, he’s already lying on his bale of hay with his eyes closed. Teri looks over toward the hay and waits until Keri falls asleep. Once he notices she’s fully out, he limps over to Jeri and politely taps him on the back.

“Jeri. Wake up kid. I have to tell you another story.”

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Jeri rises to his hind legs. He hears Teri coughing and urges him to sit on the bale of hay. Teri insists that Jeri continue to lay down, but Jeri practically forces Teri onto the hay to catch his breath. Once the coughing is subdued, Teri reaches his arm out and touches Jeri’s shoulder.

“I don’t want to see you how you were today, kid.” Teri states matter-of-factly.

“What’s wrong with how I was today?” Jeri retorts. “I was running on the wheel, going through the motions. I ate my food. I slept where I was supposed to. I didn’t complain. I didn’t try to enhance my experience or individualize my life. I didn’t step out of line; I didn’t speak up to Keri. I did exactly as you said last night, Teri. I played it safe. You’re right, it was nice to know that I was protected, stable, normal.”

Teri interrupts. “You don’t mean that Jeri. I could see it in your eyes the entire day. You were miserable. Even when your ideas are getting shot down, you’re still more alive and energetic

than you were today. That's not the hamster you want to be. That's not the hamster I want you to be."

"So, who do you want me to be?" Jeri erupts.

"I think it's time for that story." Teri smiles, coughs, and starts his story.

"I didn't tell you everything last night, kid. I thought I was doing it for you, to protect you, but I was wrong. I was doing it for me. I didn't want to see what happened to so many other hamsters happen to you. But after seeing you today, I knew I couldn't let you live like that. That wasn't living at all." He exhales loudly.

"There was another hamster besides Peri who used to be in this here cage." Jeri's ears perk up. Teri speaks between deep breaths. "In fact, there were a lot of hamsters. Many received the same destiny as Peri, but one hamster was like none other. His name was Benny. He was different, kid, a different kind of hamster you've never seen before. He was fast. He was funny. He was charming. He joined the crew a few hamsters after Peri left us, and immediately I knew something was different about him. Just like you he wanted to live a different kind of life. Immediately, I thought about Peri, and I did all I could to warn him. I was trying my best to hold him back and keep him on the wheel. But there was no holding Benny back. He had big dreams, big plans, he was going to become something. But Benny was also patient. Sadly, he watched a few different hamsters get caught trying to escape, just like Peri did. So, Benny planned something different. He figured that there was another way out. There was a way out that the hand couldn't prepare for. It's the same way out I'm going to share with you, Jeri."

"What is it!" Jeri peeps. He can barely contain himself.

"There's a third exit." Teri pauses. Jeri chimes in. "I didn't even know there was a second exit!" Teri proceeds.

“Most hamsters try to go through exit number one. It’s the doorway, but the hand has that one pretty blocked up. Other hamsters have tried to get out exit number two. It’s the window, but the majority of the time, the window is closed, and the hand takes the hamsters away when they realize there’s nowhere else to go. But Benny, Benny found a third exit. When he made his way off the wheel and got out of the cage, he didn’t panic when he saw the door was shut and the window was down. He kept his head on a swivel, and he peered around the room. He stood up tall on his hind legs and noticed a crack in the wall, which was barely visible because it was just behind a large dresser. But Benny saw the crack, and just like that, he looked back at me, saluted me, and eagerly hustled through that crack never to be seen again. Benny made it out of here Jeri. He got off the wheel by finding a third exit that nobody else was willing to look for. He was the first and only hamster I ever saw to successfully get off the wheel.”

The ardor Jeri was lacking that day was suddenly back and then some. “Let’s do this Teri! Let’s get out of here! Tomorrow let’s get off the wheel together and run through that crack in the wall! We can do this Teri! We can be just like Benny and drive our own cars down that road less traveled just like Peri wanted to. Let’s do this for pristine Peri!”

Teri stares out at the crack in the wall beside the mirror. He tells Jeri one more thing about that day Benny broke free. “Benny wanted me to go with him, Jeri. He pleaded for me to follow along. He wasn’t quite sure how he’d get out, but he wanted me to trust him that we’d do it together. But I could only think about Peri. I could only think about what happened to her. I refused to get off the wheel that day Benny left. And I’ll tell you what, Jeri, looking back on my life, it’s one of my biggest regrets. And also, I wasn’t even happy for Benny when I saw him leave through that crack. I couldn’t be. I was too mad at myself. Mad at the world. When he gave me that salute, I didn’t even wave back or wish him well. I just stood there jaw-dropped, disheartened by the fact that it wasn’t me.”

“But now, I have an opportunity to in some way resolve that regret. Here you are, a new hamster just like Peri and just like Benny, urging me to get off the wheel once more. I think I’m finally ready Jeri. Let’s get out of here together.”

Reenergized by life, Jeri and Teri stay up the rest of the night devising their plan. When it’s finally light again in the room, and just before Keri wakes up, they test as to whether or not they can actually get out of the cage. Jeri is able to muster up enough strength to get to the top of his wheel and jump out of the cage with relative ease, but Teri has much more difficulty. His shortened leg is a problem, and his shortness of breath prevents him from trying time and time again to get on top of the wheel. After a long arduous battle, Teri ultimately decides he’s unable to get out.

“It’s just not in the cards for me Jeri. I’ve waited too long. I had my chance to get off the wheel and go off course, but I chose this life of mediocrity and normalcy. But this isn’t the life you have to live. You can get off the wheel just like Benny. You can get out of the cage, scoot by the hand, run through the third exit like not many have before and truly experience life. As much as I want to, I won’t be able to join you. But I’ll be supporting you every step of the way. This is my contribution now. Helping you get off the wheel will allow me to get off of my own.”

Jeri looks at Teri but doesn’t say anything. He just nods his head and looks into his eyes until they’re interrupted by a loud cheer from Keri.

“Great day for a run on the hamster wheel, isn’t it gentlemen?” Little does she know.

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Jeri is now approaching the day with a heightened sense of confidence. His outlook is back to the way it used to be, and he immediately tries to stir up some controversy amongst the group.

“You know what, Keri, it is a great day for some running, but how about we don’t do it on our wheels? What if we just raced around the cage for a few hours, wouldn’t that be fun? We’d still be running after all.”

Keri looks at Teri. Teri doesn’t say anything, but rather, just rolls his eyes and smiles. Keri speaks.

“Running on the hamster wheel is our duty, Jeri. It’s what we always do. It’s what all the hamsters who came before us did. It’s what the hamsters who come after us will do as well. Running around the cage sounds like fun, but it’s not always about fun. Sometimes it’s about hard, diligent work that we do repeatedly each day. We run on that wheel and we make the most of it. That’s what I enjoy doing at least. Stability and not taking risks or deviating from the norm matters to me most.”

“That’s where you and I differ, Keri. I understand you don’t like to take risks, but I do. I want to. So, you have to let me try! I don’t think it’s your place to try to stop me or judge me if I do something that is a little bit out of the norm.” Jeri replies.

Keri thinks for a moment. “You know what, Jeri? You’re right. We are all different. Just because I like the wheel doesn’t mean everybody has to like the wheel. I appreciate you for never pressuring me too much, but rather just sharing your opinion and view. I understand it, but it’s not for me. But I also understand that it is for you, and if you want to travel a road that others have never done before, then I will just cheer you on from afar. I just hope the hand is as understanding as I am. I have a bad feeling it’s not.” Jeri thanks Keri for her understanding.

“So, Keri, want to switch wheels today? What do you say?” Jeri jokes. The hamsters laugh, and they begin running on their wheels just like any other day. But today, Jeri has other plans.

Just as the door swings open, Jeri slows down his running. He looks at Teri to give him the signal, and Teri slows down as well. Both hamster wheels stop spinning. When the hand heads over to bring the food, it's surprised to see the wheels have stopped before he gave them each a tap. The hand taps Keri's wheel and then places the bowl next to Keri, different than the usual placement in the middle of the cage.

And then, just like Peri did long ago, just as the hand rises up out of the cage, Jeri jumps on it and scurries up feverishly! He makes his way up and then leaps down, landing safely on the ground. The hand approaches him quickly, but Jeri shuffles around the room, too energetic and too agile to be caught. Jeri is quite enjoying the freedom to run around the outside world, but he mustn't lose focus. "Eyes on the prize Jeri!" Jeri is surprised to hear Keri scream. Teri doesn't speak, he just presses his face up against the glass. He will not miss his pal getting off the wheel this time.

The hand reaches for Jeri once more, but he is able to break loose of his clutches. After some final scampering, Jeri is able to see the crack to the side of the dresser. He races toward it but stops short just as he is about to enter into the unknown. He looks back at Keri, eating her food, still having divvied it up into threes. It's the only world she knows. Then he looks at the corner of the cage and sees Teri. His face is still pressed against the glass. When they make eye contact, Teri takes a step back from the glass, and he stands on his hind legs. He puts his paw up to his forehead. He salutes Jeri, and he returns to all fours. Jeri keeps his gaze on Teri, but as soon as he hears the hand approaching one final time, he squeezes through the crack and keeps his eyes forward.

"Good for you kid." Teri says. "Good for you."

Jeri continues to squeeze and shimmy his way through the crack in the wall. After what feels like a mile of slow crawling, he is delighted to see that the end is in sight. He jets as quickly as possible toward the opening and takes a step into a new world.

But then, Jeri sees something familiar. He's stunned to see the hand lurking toward him! Shocked by what he thought could not be possible, Jeri is absolutely frozen. The hand swoops down and grabs Jeri. Except Jeri notices something different about the hand. It feels different. It looks different. It is different!

"Hey there little friend. I'm not going to hurt you. You seem so scared. Just relax. I know exactly where to put you." The hand says aloud.

Jeri nervously tries to squirm out of the hand, but it assures him to remain calm. Finally, when he sees what's in front of him, Jeri stops moving and smiles as wide as he possibly can. The hand drops him down and tells him he'll enjoy his new home.

Once on the ground, Jeri begins to explore his new terrain. He rolls around in the hay, he sprints around a mini track, and he chews on loose pellets of food that surround the new cage. He makes his way around the entire new home and notices one thing. There's no hamster wheel in sight. Jeri can finally stop running.

Just as he is about to lay down to take a nap after the day's festivities, he hears a shuffling from a nearby tunnel. Out from the tunnel emerges a figure. It's a hamster, but it's a hamster unlike any Jeri has seen before. He walks over to Jeri and reaches out his paw. "I'm Benny." He says. "Congrats on getting off the wheel. Welcome to your new world."

Embarking into the unknown is a daunting task. It takes courage to leave safety and do something different from the people around you. But courage does not mean that you have no fear. Courage is being afraid and still embarking on the journey anyway. Take that road less traveled if you so desire. Let's see that road in bumper to bumper traffic.