

Modest hopes of man and rodent

Groundhog Day has a simple but heartening message for a bleak month: The sun will come out (eventually).

There are many made-up February holidays, but if you aren't an especially lively woman of a certain age (Spunky Old Broads Day) or an animal hoping to reproduce (National Spay Your Pet Day), these whimsical observances are not for you. And of course there are Valentine's Day and Presidents' Day, but the former is little more than a shakedown for guilt-laden cash, and the latter has become an arbitrary excuse for a long weekend. Never Lincoln's and rarely Washington's actual birthday, it gives you nothing but time and leisure to enjoy your closed bank, shuttered state store, and undelivered mail.

But today, Groundhog Day, is an oasis of pure optimism in the face of adversity — a great message for a bleak month. Everyone is at least mildly curious to hear the verdict of Punxsutawney Phil, who, looking astoundingly good for his advanced age, emerges from his burrow and predicts the end of winter.

And that's pretty much that. No need to spend a dime on decorations. No scrambling to trim a tree or roast a turkey or dye an egg. And only the merchants of Punxsutawney see any profit from this distinctly noncommercial holiday.

Phil delivers a clear message: Spring will be here in less than six weeks. Or it will be here in about six weeks. Occasionally, he's even right — a track record that is surely the envy of meteorologists everywhere.

Unlike some of the more fanciful holiday mascots, this lovable rodent doesn't demand teeth under pillows or milk and cookies by the fireplace. His simple, heartfelt prognostication is offered free of charge: Someday soon (or soonish), the flowers will bloom again, and the birds will sing. We've all nearly made it through another season of cold and darkness, and Phil cheers us on: "You can do it! The finish line's just up ahead! Maybe!"

If Groundhog Day got the federal recognition it deserves, how would we spend the day off? We could start, like Phil, by going back to sleep for a few hours. We are, all of us, very tired. On Groundhog Day, snoozing would be mandatory.

Later, we could make shadow puppets with the family, and maybe gather for a simple meal of hickory nuts, roots, leaves, and grubs.

But the primary activities of the holiday would be encouraging and hoping — two lovely pursuits that require no equipment or expenditure.

Encouraging might include calling a friend who has the blues, smiling at a harried cashier, and pointing out the spots your husband missed while shoveling the driveway.

As for hoping, on Groundhog Day, we could declare a moratorium on gloom and doom, turn off the television news, and step away from the Internet. We could dream of a happy future — a halcyon time when the snow boots go into storage and the heating bills go down.

Like Punxsutawney Phil, we are mere speculators, not usually understanding all the hows and whens and wheres of life. But on Groundhog Day, we can learn from the example of our wise animal friend and just keep showing up — just keep giving life our best shot and hoping for a brighter future.

And then we can take a nap.