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Leap Years

Although this is a March blog, I am writing this on Leap Year Day. It is not often I come across a new word that is more appealing than the usual offerings, but I find "leaplings" quite endearing, to describe those with a birthday on 29 February. It gives the impression of youngsters, because the suffix means "diminutive or lesser", as in yearling, sapling, duckling and hireling. It is of course true that even a hundred year old leapling can call themselves young because they have only had 25 birthdays. The other term for leaplings is leapers, which has a more active feel to it, and suggests them racing impatiently towards their birthday and having to leap over four years to get to it. Perhaps they should receive four times as many gifts and have four pieces of cake as well, to make up for the lean years of waiting for the true birthday to arrive. The alternative is to have two birthdays, on the last day of February and the first day of March.

The reason for leap years is to keep the calendar year of 365 days synchronized with the astronomical and seasonal year, which is slightly less than a quarter of a day longer. We are therefore getting ahead by six hours each year, and the extra day every four years brings us back into line. We always think of leap years as being those divisible by four, but this is only part of the system of adjustments. The century years, those ending in two zeros, are only leap ones if they are divisible by 400, in other words if the first two numbers are divisible by four. For example year 2000 was a leap year, but year 1900 was not. There are even leap seconds to make corrections due to variations in the Earth's rotation period, but these are inserted as required and not on a regular schedule. The opposite of a leap year is the common year. This means most of us have common birthdays, a rather uninspiring term but at least we have them every year without fail. However, one could say our

birthdays too are constantly drifting out of sync, because they are either 6, 12 or 18 hours ahead of the true time, so we only have our birthday for some of the day, not all of it. This brings the urgent question of when it is legal for us to open our presents!

Let's not go into the awkward calendar complications of those born on the stroke of midnight, who might also claim two birthdays, or twins born on different days either side of midnight. Then there are those born right on a country border, or in a country that no longer exists as a separate entity, or in a plane or ship just crossing the international date line. The possibilities are endless and frustratingly mind boggling. Maybe we should do away with birth "days" and have birth "moments" instead, counted precisely to the astronomical second, and birth locations described in degrees of latitude and longitude.

In addition, as our planet is slowing down at the rate of 1.4 milliseconds every hundred years, we will have to wait longer and longer for our birthdays to come round. But then think of how much valuable shorthand practice you can do in those bonus microseconds every month! The fact that the extra day is added to slow us down so that our calendars match the cosmos is not what we shorthanders want to hear, we actually prefer to be streaking ahead as fast as we can. Maybe we could see the leap day as an extra day of practising so that we can achieve the desired speed increase even more quickly and reliably, leaping over obstacles with ease and efficiency. We don't want to take leaps in the dark with outlines, or have to leap over unfortunate gaps in our notes, but we do want to improve by leaps and bounds. We aim to not only get to the goals, but also leap over them, so that we earn the name of leaper for an entirely different reason. (695 words)