TIME
and the Art of Living

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'Why is it against the law to have a clock?'

Stacey tossed a piece of chalk from one hand to the other.

'Is it against the law?'

Conrad nodded. 'There's an old notice in the police station offering a bounty of one hundred pounds for every clock or wrist-watch brought in. I saw it yesterday. The sergeant said it was still in force.'

Stacey raised his eyebrows mockingly. 'You'll make a million. Thinking of going into business?'

Conrad ignored this. 'It's against the law to have a gun because you might shoot someone. But how can you hurt anybody with a clock?'

'Isn't it obvious? You can time him, know exactly how long it takes him to do something.'

'Well?'

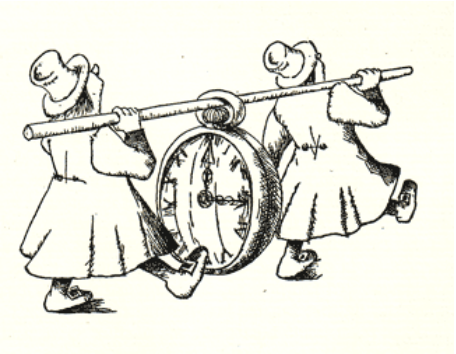
'Then you can make him do it faster.'

from J.G. Ballard 'Chronopolis' in *Chronopolis and Other Stories*

Obsessed with time

My first watch was a present from my father, brought back from a business trip to Japan. I was thrilled that it counted not only seconds but tenths of seconds, and that I could see each moment running into the future in flickering black digits. I remember proudly showing off the watch to my friends and being able to record how quickly I could cycle to school. Eight minutes, forty seconds. After my mother died, when I was ten, I developed a compulsive and superstitious habit during tennis matches of glancing at this watch after I hit every shot. I knew it was distracting me from the rally but I just had to look, for the briefest instant. What had initially been a gift had become a dependency.

Knowing the time is a drug, and most of us are addicted to it. If you accidentally leave your watch at home you begin noticing how often you look at your wrist throughout the day, almost as if you have a nervous tick. Not knowing the time makes you feel frustrated and probably anxious. But luckily your addiction can usually be satisfied, for you live in a world full of clocks: on your mobile phone, in the bottom right-hand corner of your computer screen, on the microwave oven in the office kitchen, on car dashboards, on the facades of church towers and town halls, in shops and train stations. An alien anthropologist visiting the earth would probably conclude that this strange species worshiped the clock, that the time pieces found everywhere were idols for religious veneration or perhaps talismans to ward off evil. This is precisely what the Lilliputians thought when they noticed Gulliver consulting his watch so often. He assured them that he seldom did anything without consulting it.



Gulliver's watch being taken off for examination: 'We conjecture that it is either some unknown animal, or the god that he worships; but we are more inclined to the latter opinion'.

Time has always been with us. It is the invisible thread that stitches one moment to the next; it is the uncertain path we travel from birth to death. The present moment in time, the now, is the point from which we can survey the past and imagine the future, providing perspective on our lives as a journey. The universe, and our planet within it, is governed by laws of time. The earth takes twenty-four hours to spin on its axis. A mother is normally pregnant for nine months before giving birth to a child. Most chrysanthemums will only develop flower buds when there are fewer than twelve hours of daylight. Nature provides its own clocks.

The problem is that time is no longer just an unseen thread that binds the successive instants of existence, or the regular rhythm quietly beating as we conduct our daily lives. We have allowed time to become a tyrant that enslaves us and prevents us from the free pursuit of the art of living. We forever want more of it but have devised no way of extending a day beyond twenty-four hours. We are constantly rushing to save time but there are no banks in which to deposit our savings. As individuals our obsession with time, and having too little of it, can create stress, ruin our health, destroy friendships, deaden our curiosity and senses, cloud our judgement and ultimately stop us from pursuing our passions. As a society, this obsession is partly responsible for a culture of short-termism that has

resulted in our voracious consumption of natural resources and our inability to consider the implications for future generations.

But there is hope. It is worth remembering that humanity managed to survive and thrive for centuries without this fixation on time, without being able to divide the days into tiny, precise portions. Socrates invented Western philosophy without ever knowing if it was actually ten past three or ten to. Buddha had no idea exactly how many hours he sat under the Bo tree. Hildegard von Bingen revolutionised medieval music never having heard of minutes or seconds. Leonardo Da Vinci was not checking his watch when he painted the Last Supper.

Time is not like love, a fickle element of our natures that can seem impossible to control. We have created our obsession with time, and we are shackled by chains of our own making. For each one of us it is possible to reinvent our personal approach to time and to develop a more gentle and meaningful relationship with the passing moments of our lives.

So, how has the problem of time arisen, and what can we do about it?

Controlled by time

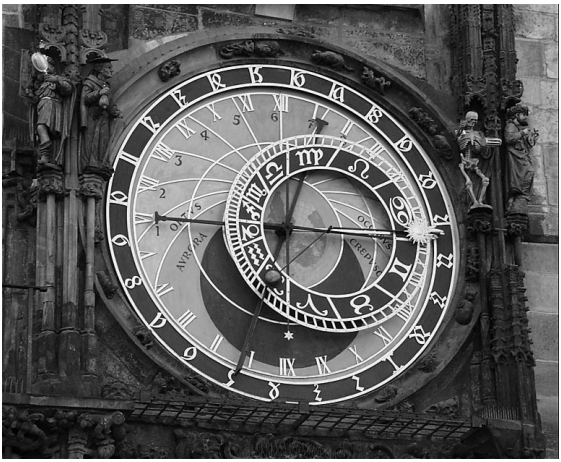
When I was at university, I became known for my mastery of time. I had to write two essays a week and for each one I spent two sessions of three hours reading, and one session of three hours writing the essay. Eighteen hours in total. The rest of my time was free for sport, love, adventures and the college bar. I never had to stay up into the night to finish an essay and never handed one in late. I was, I believed, in control of time.

Once I left university and began working, however, I found myself increasingly at the mercy of time. I lived in Spain for a year and was shocked into the world at 5.45 each morning by an old wind-up alarm clock, one with a little silver hammer on the top that hit a rounded steel shell on either side. That was the order to get up and catch the bus to the industrial estate in the

north of Madrid where my first English teaching class began at 7am. It took months to get used to rising so early, and even then my body and mind could barely operate for the first hour of the day. I had to drink a double espresso before I left for work to jolt my being into existence. Time, I slowly came to realise, was now in control of me.

Most of us live with this kind of experience. Each morning clocks beep and ring us out of sleep, then summon us onto trains and into meetings, and later force us back from our lunch breaks and prevent us from going home even if we are tired, ill or being unproductive. It is as if we have all been to obedience classes and trained to be submissive to time and to respond to its call at all moments. How is it that we have become so subject to the tyranny of the clock?

Human civilisations began measuring time thousands of years ago, using instruments such as the burning candle, the hour glass, the water clock and the sun dial, most of which were inexact and unreliable. There was little interest in the accurate measurement of time until the early middle ages, when monastic orders became concerned with regulating the times for daily prayer. The first mechanical clocks appeared in Europe in the late middle ages. But these were primarily designed to measure the movements of the sun and moon rather than to command the movements of people. One of the most famous is Prague's medieval astrological clock, mounted on the southern wall of the Old Town City Hall, which dates back to 1410. The device is a form of astrolabe, which can be thought of as a kind of planetarium displaying the current state of the universe. The main dial has a background showing the stationary earth and sky. Surrounding it are the moving components such as the zodiacal ring, an icon representing the sun and another icon showing the moon.



By the late fifteenth century public clocks had become a common sight in the larger towns of Europe. And their function was changing: instead of depicting the starry heavens they were now beginning to demarcate the hours of the day. This may have been the greatest revolution in the history of time and an event which changed human consciousness forever. People started measuring their days by the regular chimes, which came to determine when merchants would open and close shop, when meals would take place and when lovers would meet. But even then the clocks did not usually have dials, nor did they divide the hours into smaller portions. At their most accurate, these clocks split the hours into quarters, so a liaison could be arranged for half past the hour yet never for twenty past.

It was not until the end of the seventeenth century that clocks had minute hands, and another hundred years before the second hand appeared regularly on longcase clocks. Fewer and fewer clocks had any astrological indicators. By the eighteenth century, the phases of the moon were thought to be less interesting than the passing of minutes. Daily life came to be quantified more and more precisely. Soon it became common for individuals to carry their very own signifiers of time in their

pockets, on chains (where it was unclear who was chained to whom). Eventually these timepieces left pockets and became fastened to wrists. The voluntary handcuff had arrived.

'The United States of North America' by Yoshikazu, 1861. This Japanese print depicts an American man proudly showing off his pocket watch to his wife. The text describes how the American people are 'patriotic and, moreover, quite clever'.

The advent of the personal watch was not the only way in which time took hold of society. The exploitation of workers in the industrial revolution would have been impossible without the strict measurement of time. Work and time first became closely associated in the fourteenth century: in 1370 a public clock was erected in the German city of Cologne, and by 1374 a statute had been passed that fixed the start and the end of the work day for labourers, and limited their lunch break to 'one hour and no longer'. But this association took a new form in the late eighteenth century when Josiah Wedgwood, a severe disciplinarian, introduced the first recorded system of clocking-in. If his potters were late they forfeited a portion of their daily wages. The timesheet then became a ubiquitous feature of the

manufacturing industry, and workers started to be paid by the hour rather than for what they produced.

A new language of time evolved. People began talking about 'lengths' of time, as if they were speaking about lengths of cloth. Workers sold their labour time to factory owners, transforming time into a commodity. By the nineteenth century 'time is money' had become a mantra of capitalism. Punctuality was elevated into a supreme virtue while 'wasting time' was now a sin. Even sleep was subject to ridicule, evident in Hannah Moore's poem 'Early Rising' (1830):

Thou silent murderer, Sloth, no more
My mind imprison'd keep;
Nor let me waste another hour
With thee, thou felon Sleep.

Time was so precious to the owners of capital that they manipulated it wherever they could. The anonymous author of *Chapters in the Life of a Dundee Factory Boy* (1887) remembered how: '…in reality there were no regular hours: masters and managers did with us as they liked. The clocks at the factories were often put forward in the morning and back at night, and instead of being instruments for the measurement of time, they were used as cloaks for cheatery and oppression. Though this was known amongst the hands, all were afraid to speak, and a workman then was afraid to carry a watch, as it was no uncommon event to dismiss any one who presumed to know too much about the science of horology.'

Towards the end of the nineteenth century tasks on the production line, initially measured in minutes, were now measured in seconds. Slow labourers were sacked. Workers protested the new forms of regimentation by 'going slow'. By the twentieth century the industrial world was subject to 'time and motion' studies, first made famous in the factories owned by Henry Ford.

In his 1936 film, aptly named *Modern Times*, Charlie Chaplin is working on the production line of a factory with machinery resembling the inner cogs of a giant clock. When the owner orders the foreman to speed up the line, the increased tempo of his monotonous work fastening bolts drives him insane, and he is swallowed into the machinery itself. At that moment he becomes a martyr, through comedy, for all those who have suffered the tyranny of the clock.

While most of us today are unlikely to have our wages docked for arriving late to work, and may even be allowed to work on flexitime, the majority of our waking hours are still sold to our employers, at a price that is usually far below what they mean to us. Nor can most people arrive late for work with the excuse that it was such a beautiful morning they decided to go for a walk in the local woods.

As you read these words, the tyranny of the clock is operating in the sweatshops of the developing world. The women who sewed the shirt you are wearing keep their jobs only if they keep to time. We are all controlled by time but we are also complicit in its regimental domination over others.

Rushed by time

Another childhood memory. I am in second grade at primary school, aged seven. The class is working its way through a series of reading comprehension exercises that are contained on separate cards in a large box. Each student goes at their own speed. Sean Sparks, the fastest runner in our class, has completed the most cards but I am just behind him in a close second place. I remember desperately wanting to be the first to finish all the cards in the box. For years afterwards, in all my classes, I strove to be the first to finish, sacrificing everything else to speed.

Perhaps my greatest lesson in slowing down was when I first went to Guatemala to do human rights work with returned refugees in a remote jungle village. Each morning it would take around three hours to do basic daily tasks, such as fetching water in plastic canisters, washing myself and my clothes in the river, sweeping the dusty floor of my hut and boiling water over the fire. Only then could the day begin. And it was too hot to perform these tasks quickly. Occasionally I would walk to a nearby village where I could catch a bus to the frontier town, a few hours drive from my isolation. There was no timetable for the bus. Some days it came and some days it didn't. Sometimes it would pass by in the morning and on other days in the afternoon. It became normal to be sitting in the heat for four or five hours until the bus came. Guatemala is where I learned to wait.

Back in England, I swore to myself that I would never again feel impatient when waiting for a bus or train, or for a person. But within weeks of my return to London, I was churning inside and tapping my foot on the ground as I heard that the next train was delayed. The same impatience began welling up as I waited in supermarket queues or at the post office. Today I feel it when I hear my aging laptop cranking as it downloads large files from the Internet. Although the trip to Guatemala, to the land of a

slower time, still provides perspective and softens my impatience, that old childhood need to hurry, to finish first, is still with me.

We all know what it is like to live in a high-velocity world, in a perpetual state of fast forward. We hurry to work, we eat fast food, we search for love through speed dating. We get caught in rush hour and try to fit in power naps. We want fast-growing plants for our gardens. We pack as much as we can into each day, filling our diaries as if a blank space is damning evidence that we are missing out on life. The advertisers and companies tell us that faster is better: faster computers, faster planes, faster cars. Live life in the fast lane. We are now unlikely to say, 'slow and steady wins the race': the hare, we believe, has already overtaken the tortoise. Only our clocks and watches have escaped from the cult of speed, for nobody yet knows how to make time travel faster.

'Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be late!'
John Tenniel's drawing of the white rabbit from Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland.*

In 1844 J.W.M. Turner painted *Rain, Steam, Speed.* It not only depicts the intrusion of the industrial revolution into the English

countryside, but also conveys how Turner sensed that the future was now hurtling towards Victorian society. Too much, too fast. At that time, people were astonished and even frightened by the speed of steam trains, a new form of transport that was rapidly spreading across Europe. It was obvious to most observers that their velocity was unnatural. Yet society soon became accustomed to their speed, and we now delight in the swiftness of the train journey from London to Paris.

Somehow the faster we go, the less time we seem to have. Almost everyone I know complains about not having enough time, as if it has been stolen from them. Despite this, we still find ourselves equating 'busy' - the state of being short of time - with goodness and success. That is why people sometimes greet each other not with the question 'How are you?, but with 'Are you busy at the moment?' It is customary to reply something like, 'Yes, I'm rushed off my feet'. To respond, 'No, not particularly' is considered to be self-disparaging and evidence of failure.

Almost every survey in the western world shows that we now have less free time than we used to a few decades ago. We

work longer hours, and we feel more stressed and frenzied by our lack of leisure time. Our current predicament is odd, since in Victorian England there was a belief that economic progress and technology would mean we would have to work less and less, leaving us with the problem of how to fill our empty days. An optimistic essay on 'Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren', written in 1930 by the economist John Maynard Keynes, warned that the greatest problem facing man in the future would be 'how to use his freedom from pressing economic cares, how to occupy the leisure, which science and compound interest will have won for him, to live wisely, agreeably and well'. How wrong he was.

A new relationship with time

Time has not always controlled human societies. We invented obedience to time and are responsible for the adoration of speed. This means we also have the power to resist these compulsions and forge a new relationship with time. If time is a tyrant in your life, you may be able to discover new ways of living with time, and of nurturing the kinder and more creative sides of its character.

There are three important ways of changing our relationship with time: challenging the metaphors of time that pervade our language; taking aspects of daily life more slowly; and expanding our repertoire of approaches to time by learning from other cultures. Although I do not believe there are any blueprints or models of change that will suit us all, you may find that some of the ideas in the following sections will help you erode old habits and awaken new possibilities.

Challenging the metaphors of time

Metaphors help us think and express ourselves. We often use them without realising. For instance, you might say, 'I attacked his argument', 'I demolished her position', 'Your claims are indefensible', 'He's entrenched in his views' or 'I really dug in and refused to budge on that issue'. All these expressions use the language of warfare. The underlying metaphor here is 'argument is war'.

We need metaphors to help us talk about certain concepts. For example, if I ask you 'What is a chair?' you can easily point to one or tell me to sit on one. Then I'll know what a chair is. But if I ask you 'What is time?' it's harder to find anything to point at or touch. We need to find a way of explaining the concept of time, and metaphor is a means of doing this. Thus so far in this essay I've used a sewing metaphor, talking about time as 'the invisible thread that stitches one moment to the next'. I've also discussed the historic invention of metaphors, such as the idea that time is a commodity, leading us to say 'I am spending time' or 'you are wasting time'.

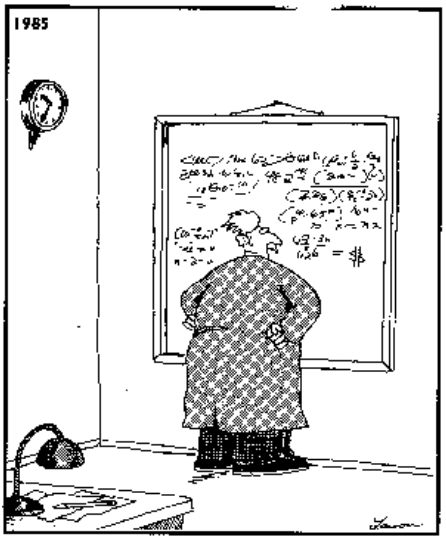
Metaphors shape our actions and our cultures. When a politician speaks about providing 'tax relief' they are suggesting that taxation is a burden, something unhealthy or painful, and that if you are relieved of tax then you will benefit in the same way that a headache pill will give you 'pain relief'. This metaphor has been a powerful force in efforts to cut public spending and dismantle welfare systems across the Western world in the last three decades. Before this, it was more common to think about paying tax in positive terms, as a duty to the nation or a matter of justice. The rise of the idea of 'tax relief' is evidence of how politicians realise that metaphors matter, that they change our thinking and worldviews, and consequently shape what we do (including who we vote for).

I believe that how we think and talk about time also matters, not just to our society but to our individual lives. Becoming

aware of our metaphors of time, questioning them and experimenting with new ones, are the first steps in developing a different relationship with time and liberating ourselves from its strictures.

Time as a commodity and possession

One of the most prevalent metaphors is of time as a commodity: spending time, buying time, wasting time, saving time, budgeting time, having too little time, having too much time, losing time, finding time, living on borrowed time, 'give me a second', 'the flat tire cost me an hour', 'time is precious', 'time is money', 'cash-rich, time-poor'. Another common metaphor is time as a possession: 'my time is my own', 'give me a moment of your time'.



Einstein discovers that time is actually money.

These two metaphors, in tandem, are part of the problem of how we are controlled by time. If time - metaphorically speaking - is a commodity that can be bought or sold, and if you have some that belongs to you, as private property, then it becomes possible not only to give your time away as a gift but for it to be appropriated by others, perhaps against your wishes or at an unfair price.

One manifestation of the 'time as a commodity and possession' metaphor is when we talk about taking 'time off' from work. This expression reflects an underlying attitude that our employment is a form of giving the company ownership of our time, a transfer of the property. Each year the firm will give us back a little of our time, usually no more than a few weeks. This holiday period is usually referred to as 'time off'; it is their gift to us, a temporary pause in the regular pattern, in which being at work is, by implication, 'time on'.

What happens if we challenge this metaphor? Around a year ago my partner started reversing the accepted language. She wanted to give her holiday time and weekends more value, a greater significance in her life, so decided to talk about them as her 'time on' rather than 'time off'. In her view, she still owns her days and chooses to give some to her employer for 47 weeks each year. The metaphorical shift has had real results. Now she doesn't feel so guilty when she is not at work, whether on holiday or because she is ill. She is also far less likely to bring her work home at the weekends: why should she be handing over more of her precious 'time on' to her employer? She additionally finds that it changes her attitude to her passions outside work. When she spends a week of her holiday stone carving, she considers this 'time on' just as important as her job, an essential exploration of her true nature and creativity, rather than approaching it as a hobby she pursues in her 'time off', a temporary respite from work. I also detect another effect, which is that she seems to be enjoying her work more. I suspect it is because going into the office now feels like more of a choice, her gift to the organisation, instead of it being so much of an

obligation. Altering her language has helped her to renegotiate successfully the Faustian bargain in which we exchange our time for money.

It is possible for each of us to make a conscious effort to challenge the metaphors we live by. This simply requires developing an awareness of how we speak, the ability to listen to ourselves as we talk. Here are some ideas for helping you do so and expanding your metaphorical sensitivity and dexterity with respect to time:

- *Become a metaphor detective*: Start by listening out for the metaphors of time that are used by other people and in the media. Keep a mental note of whether they are approaching time as a commodity, a possession or something else. Once you become an adept detective of others, you are likely to begin noticing the metaphors of time that punctuate your own speech.

- *Think hard about the metaphors you use*: Whenever you hear yourself using a metaphor of time, pause a moment in reflection. When you tell a friend, 'Sorry, I don't have enough time to help out at the school fête,' analyse whether the expression was really appropriate. Is it true that you don't possess enough time? Have you already promised it to someone else? How much of your time do you consider your private property and how much of it is a community resource to be shared? Does the person you're talking to have less 'spare time' than you, and should you redistribute some of your time to them as a gift or an act of kindness? Such questions can lead to broader issues: How is 'spare time' distributed in your community? Are there inequalities of time that you might be able to do something about, just as there are inequalities in wealth or access to health and education?

- *Experiment with new metaphors*: Erode the hold of the commodity and possession metaphors. Instead of saying, 'I'll spend some time with you', try something less financial and more egalitarian like, 'I'll share some time with you'. On each occasion that you catch yourself about to say, 'I'm taking time off', feel what a difference it is to say instead, 'I'm having time on'. Friends and colleagues might think you strange, but you may gradually begin to feel a difference in your life.

Recognising these metaphors, asking yourself such questions and using different expressions are the subtle beginnings of your new relationship with time. In practical terms, you may not be able to attend the school fête or have more 'time on' away from work. But thinking about the metaphors could quietly affect your approach to your job, your friends and lovers, the local community and even to yourself. The result may be that you no longer feel so controlled by time.

Speed is good

Our language is replete with expressions that associate speed with something valuable or worthwhile, and lack of speed with negative traits. I've mentioned the phrase 'live life in the fast lane' but there are many others: 'going at a snail's pace', 'time was really crawling along', 'that was a real drag', 'time flies when you're having fun', 'get your skates on', 'he's not up to speed'. Describing someone as 'a bit slow' is an insult. These metaphors of time partly reflect a world in which we attempt to do things faster and faster, the world in which we are rushed by time and are participants in the cult of speed. The Tibetan monk who lives around the corner from my house has never advised me to live life in the fast lane. I would be surprised if he even knew the phrase. Once I asked him, 'How are you doing?' and he replied to my delight, 'Nothing doing'.

Those who live at high speed tend to measure time precisely. When asked, 'What is the time?' they are more likely to answer 'ten past four' rather than 'around four'. For those on the move, every minute counts. Their response is also a product of Western culture, where 'now', the present, is understood in extremely exact terms. If I'm visiting a friend, and phone beforehand to say 'I'm leaving home now', I mean that I'm leaving within the next few minutes, not the next few hours or days. The question, 'What time is it right now?' usually evokes a response in hours and minutes, 'it's is 3:54pm'. It would be odd to answer, '2007' or 'early in the twenty-first century'. Now exists in the short term, its beginning is just behind us and its end only a moment into the future.

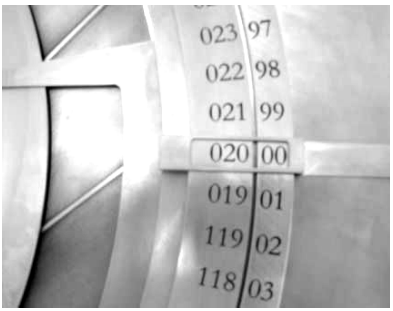
Our conception of what constitutes now is a symptom not only of a high-velocity culture but also of short-term thinking. We are extremely adept at considering the short-term consequences of our actions but less skilled at comprehending the long term. The classic case is smoking. For several years I smoked regularly and loved the instant feeling of relaxation that it provided. Although I knew it was bad for my health, I still could not easily conceive of the long-term effects on my own body. I was lucky that I smoked only a few cigarettes a day. Those smokers who develop lung cancer are not so fortunate.

Not only as individuals, but also as a society, we are trapped by our short attention span and an inability to think about the long-term consequences of how we live. The most significant expression of these attitudes is our squandering of the planet's natural resources without due consideration of the long-term effects on both the earth and the lives of future generations.

One of the most innovative antidotes to this problem is The Clock of the Long Now. This is a project designed to reframe the way we think about time and the future. The Long Now Foundation is building a slow-time clock in a limestone mountain in the American desert that ticks only once each year and will last 10,000 years. Its inventors believe that even if the clock is never completed, the very idea of it will encourage

longer-term thinking and a more responsible attitude towards the use of the earth's resources. The project aims to create a new mythology of time, where now is not only in the present, but also in the distant future.

Just imagine what might happen if you began to live by the rhythm of The Clock of the Long Now.



The first prototype of The Clock of the Long Now, completed in 1999. When the new millennium arrived, it bonged very slowly, twice.

There are ways in which you can become a connoisseur of slow-time language and thinking:

- *Celebrate the slow-witted*: As with the metaphors of time as a commodity and possession, increase your awareness of expressions which reflect the idea that speed is good, and seek alternatives. When discussing someone who is a profound thinker, you could describe them admiringly as 'slow-witted', or advise a stressed-out friend to 'live life in the slow lane'.

- *Conduct slow-time research*: Visit the website of The Long Now Foundation, study their projects and peruse their blog, which is a compendium of slow-time and long-term projects and research from around the world. Surrounding yourself by such alternative visions may recalibrate your internal clock and have you thinking and talking in geological time rather than hours and

minutes. You might even start using the Long Now calendar, in which the current year is 02007.

A cheaper and more portable alternative to the Long Now 10,000-year Clock (courtesy of the Long Now blog).

Slowing time down

'There is more to life than increasing its speed,' said Gandhi. Most of us understand the virtues of slowing down, of taking more time to visit our friends, play with our children, watch a beautiful sunset, think through an argument, eat a delicious meal or make love. But we find it extraordinarily difficult to do. We face pressures at work, we have deadlines to meet, our diaries fill up so quickly, the phone is always ringing, there are emails that have to be answered, we need to catch the last train home. Slowing down has become a luxury that is primarily reserved for the idle rich or those who live in countries like Brazil, Mexico or Indonesia, where the pace of life is far slower, where it is normal to arrive an hour late for lunch and then to linger over it leisurely until a mid-afternoon departure for a siesta.

But I sometimes wonder if we also fear slowing down. We are so afraid of having longer, emptier hours that we fill them with distractions, we strive to stay occupied. When was the last

time you sat quietly on the sofa for half an hour without switching on the television, picking up a magazine or making a phone call, and instead just thinking? We are products of a culture of distraction, where we are accustomed to channel surfing, multi-tasking and iPods. What exactly are we afraid of? On some level we fear boredom. A deeper explanation, one that can be most easily found in our unconscious, is that we are afraid that slowing down and pausing would give us the time to realise that our lives are not as meaningful and fulfilled as we think they are. The time for contemplation, for inner searching, has become an object of fear, a demon.

Taking aspects of daily life more slowly is, after challenging our metaphors of time, a second way to develop a new relationship with time. It is common to read about techniques to help you slow down, to reduce the frenzied rush of high speed culture. Go to a meditation class. Don't eat lunch sitting at your desk. They are usually presented as long lists of suggestions, like techniques to be a better manager. I am reluctant to provide a catalogue of strategies because I know that we each discover change and respond to it in our own ways. Instead, I would like to describe some of my personal attempts to slow down, and what I have learned from then, and allow you to draw your own conclusions about the best ways to alter your pace of life.

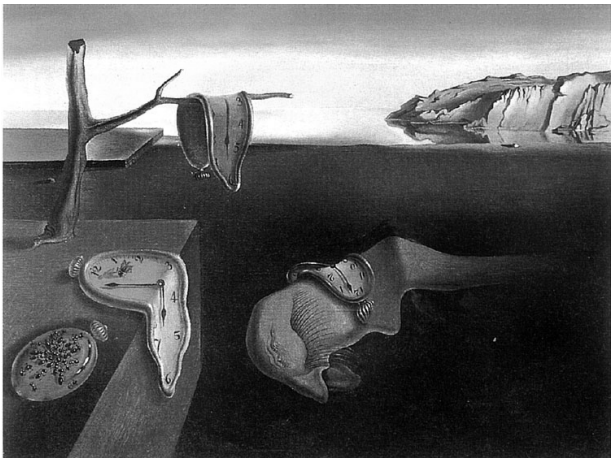
Watches and clocks

Around ten years ago I stopped wearing a watch. This was my most fundamental step in developing a different approach to time. Liberated from a childhood obsession with my digital watch, I discovered the pleasures of ignoring and disobeying time. I was now less likely to interrupt a conversation or a thought with a glance at my wrist that would send me scuttling to some new task. I stopped wolfing down sandwiches and stared longer at paintings in art galleries. And contrary to what

you might expect, I did not suddenly start turning up late for everything.

Mobile phone culture makes this tactic of slowing time down less effective. I was out for dinner a few nights ago and none of the eight people at my table wore a watch anymore. But all of them (apart from me) had a phone and said they checked the time on the display as often as they used to look at their watches. If I had a phone, I would certainly adjust it so that the time was not the first thing I saw on the display.

Clocks have become part of the furniture of our homes, sitting on the mantelpiece or dominating the hallway, evil eyes watching our every move. I have banished such timepieces from my house, except those that are built into appliances. To deal with the latter, I have made a special cover to obscure the fluorescent green of the digital clock on the cooker. I do have an alarm clock but only use it on rare occasions; instead of beeping, it wakes me up with birdsong. I prefer, however, to wake with the light, with my body's natural rhythms and an infinite expectation of the dawn. I once dreamed that I tore down a clock that was hanging on the living room wall and replaced it with a print of Salvador Dalí's painting, *The Persistence of Memory*.



Food

There is a global Slow Food movement that began in Italy in the 1980s and now has over 80,000 members. It is the opposite of the fast-food and fast-life culture of McDonalds, and advocates: leisurely dining with friends and family; using fresh, local and seasonal produce; learning about where food comes from; and developing sustainable food production. Of course, it also encourages taking greater pleasure in eating. My main approach to slow food is to pause for around a minute before I begin each meal, smelling the aromas and thinking about how the food has travelled to my plate. A kind of grace without God. It helps create a culinary calm so that I eat more slowly and thoughtfully. One of my greatest sins, however, is that when I am dining alone at home I sometimes read a magazine as I'm eating. Invariably I rush my food and fail to taste its wonders. So I have not yet mastered slow eating. At least I don't watch television as I eat.

A memorable experience of slow food is a recent restaurant lunch I had with two friends. The meal was innovative because we ordered each dish (which we shared) one at a time. Once a

plate was finished we asked again for the menu, pondered, discussed, chose, then waited patiently for it to be cooked. Our conversation expanded easily and interestingly into the space between courses. The meal took six hours, and by the time we left our table other customers were busy devouring their dinners. The point was not to indulge in lavish eating, a gourmet extravaganza (the food was actually quite simple and relatively cheap). Rather, our intention was to take a little more time with each other. It worked.

Travel

One day, when I was living in London, I calculated that I spent, on average, twenty-three hours per week travelling, the vast majority of it in the rattling underground cages of the tube. It was a moment of revelation. Almost a whole day a week (and around two days in terms of time awake) was spent simply getting from here to there. No wonder I felt I had no time. It was obviously madness and convinced me to leave the city. I found a new job and moved to a small coastal village in Essex, where it took me twenty minutes to walk to work, following a pathway alongside the river Colne. Living in the village, everything was closer. Not only work, but also shops, pubs and eventually (once I had found them) friends. My travelling time dropped to around seven hours per week, and most of it was a joy, for I had nature as my walking companion. I now had the time to read novels quietly at home in the mornings before leaving for work and to swim in the estuary on long summer evenings. My days seemed twice as long. Really. I realise, though, that this kind of change is not possible for most people.

In around two weeks I am travelling to Italy to meet my parents in the Cinque Terra region near Genoa. Every second year they come to Europe, and the years in between I go to Australia, so I only see them around once every twelve months. I miss them terribly and am especially afraid that my father will die before our next encounter (even though he is in good

health). They are actually going to be staying with me in Oxford in about six weeks from now but when I saw that their itinerary included a month in Italy beforehand, I felt a great yearning to meet them there, to share some extra moments with them. I decided to go. Making this decision, and planning the trip, required grappling with time in several ways.

First, my diary was telling me that I did not have the time to go away for a week. Although I work from home, independently, and so have great freedom to choose when I travel and for how long, I initially decided that I simply couldn't spare the time. I had meetings scheduled, I was in the middle of several writing projects, I was waiting to hear from a potential publisher. Not a good time for me. Over the next two days I started regretting my decision not to meet them. I began thinking about how little I see my parents, how whenever I leave them I vow to stay longer the next time, how they seem to cherish my company as much as I cherish theirs, how they have been so central in shaping who I am. Once I gave myself the space to be with my own understanding of what I cared about, I realised that all these things were more important than my work commitments, most of which could in case be delayed or rescheduled without any major problems. So I decided to make the trip.

Then there was the issue of how long to go away for. I have always loved walking, and wherever I travel I try to find time to wander and explore by foot, allowing my curiosity to lead me to strange and beautiful woodlands, secluded swimming holes, ancient village inns, and encounters with shepherds and their goats. I find that the change of pace, the rhythm of my footsteps, restores a sense of inner balance and perspective on life, and allows me to ponder and dream in unexpected ways. I knew my parents did not share my addiction to walking so I decided to arrive three days early and walk along the coast and through the hills of the Cinque Terra to meet them upon their arrival from Rome. I would approach the walk as a form of pilgrimage to my parents.

Finally I had to consider how to travel. A plane would be the cheapest and fastest option. Instead, I decided to go by train, for two reasons. First, I love the slow time of train journeys, staring out the window, noticing that Germans grow more flowers on their allotments than the English, discovering that French graffiti lacks artistry, passing through timeless rural valleys, watching lovers embrace on station platforms. Far more interesting than the bad films on an aeroplane. Second, I have been trying to reduce my carbon footprint by cutting down on my plane flights. This is also about time. On the one hand it means my journeys take longer, and on the other I hope it is a way of contributing to the wellbeing of future generations and embracing the Long Now.

I hope these few episodes in my personal history of going slow do not make me sound smug about my success. Time is an area of my life I have struggled with over the years and I continue to struggle. Although I said earlier that I did not want to offer a list of strategies to slow down and make the moments last, I have a strong desire to write down a few other approaches I have used, still use, or would like to use. Please forgive the indulgence.

- *Ideas for slowing down time*: Going to an art gallery but only visiting a single painting; at the cinema staying until the final credits are finished; taking a sketch book on walks and stopping to draw an unusual flower; when waiting in a queue, allowing someone who seems in a rush to take my place; when offered a pay rise, asking for more holiday time instead (a 'day review' instead of a 'pay review'); crossing off a day of my diary each month where nothing is planned and only deciding my activities when I wake up; when having friends over for lunch, only starting to cook once they arrive and preparing the meal together; not looking at my email until 4pm and making sure I have finished by 5pm; and watching television for an hour without it switched on.

Finally, a strategy that I adopted two years ago: using the smallest planning diary I can buy in order to reduce the number of appointments and tasks I can fill it with. It sounds ridiculous but I find it works. My diary only allows this much space for each day:

Fri May 18
The best way I know to have more time, to feel less rushed, to appreciate life to the fullest, is simply to do less.

Abandoning linear time

It is difficult to change our behaviour by adopting new techniques or strategies of living. We are likely to abandon them before they become ingrained habits. Altering our relationship with time also requires developing a deeper understanding of it, so that we think about time differently, not just 'do' time differently.

Western culture is dominated by linear time, the arrow of time that travels from the past into the future, and along which we position ourselves. There are alternative cultural traditions that can help expand our repertoire of approaches to time. One is the Balinese conception of time as a wheel, and another is the Zen Buddhist practice of stepping out of time.

Time as a wheel

A visit to Bali, when I was twenty-two, helped me realise that attitudes to time in the Western world are by no means universal, and are possibly rather peculiar. I remember arriving in the upland village of Ubud. First I noticed that everywhere, in every house or restaurant, there were offerings of flowers, rice and salt arranged on small bamboo leaf trays. These *sesajen*, I later discovered, are set and sprinkled with holy water at least

three times a day, before each meal, as part of Bali's unique religious fusion of Hinduism and animism.

The streets of Ubud were also lined with decorative bamboo poles, the women were carrying elaborately arranged piles of fruit on their heads, and temples were draped with cloth. It was Galungan, the most important festival in Bali's main 210-day calendar, when for ten days the deified ancestors of the family return to their former homes and must be suitably entertained and welcomed with special prayers and offerings.

Balinese culture is infused with ritual. There seem to be festivals and ceremonies almost every day. They are evidence not only of Bali's religion but of the inhabitants' particular relationship with time. The Balinese conception of time has been a favourite subject of study for anthropologists. The calendar is in effect a series of wheels within wheels, where the major repeated and overlapping cycles of five, six and seven days together help constitute the 210-day cycle. Conjunctions of the various wheels determine which days are of ritual importance. The primary purpose of the calendar is not to tell you how much time has passed (e.g. since some previous event) or the amount that remains (e.g. to complete a project) but to designate the position in the cycle of days. The cycles do not indicate what time it is, they tell you what *kind of time* it is. One

of the results is that Balinese time falls broadly into two types, 'full days', when something of importance happens (such as a ritual) or 'empty' days, when nothing much happens. In this system, the linear passage of time is blunted, and time becomes much more punctual than durational, as it is the West. When you ask a Balinese when they were born, they may well answer with something equivalent to 'Thursday the ninth'. The moment in the cycle is more significant than the year.

The idea of cyclical time is not completely alien to us. We are aware of the recurrent passing of the seasons, and women experience the regularity of their periods (which often synchronise with phases of the moon). I have found it useful to adopt a more cyclical approach to time, particularly the Balinese idea of 'full' and 'empty' days. I used to think that my weekends should be packed with activity and new experiences but now I like to retain one day, or at least a long morning, as 'empty' time where I don't do very much at all. Similarly, I am slowly shifting to a new work pattern. Instead of working regularly, all day, five days a week, I am experimenting with working in bursts of intense activity. So I might spend three or four weeks writing and thinking very hard, often working into the night, and follow it with two much slower, 'empty' weeks. I find that I am both more productive and more creative, while at the same time feeling freer and less locked into the straightjacket of a Protestant work ethic.

I also believe that this more cyclical relationship with time will gradually change the way I think about ambition and achievement. I may no longer be so concerned about where I will be in the future, whether I will have reached my goals. Instead I will gain satisfaction from a deep immersion in the immediate moment and a realisation that the wheels of time are always bringing us back to the present.

Stepping out of time

An alternative to cyclical thinking about time is the approach found in Zen Buddhism of shifting out of time by abandoning the past and the future, and living completely in the present, in the now. Anyone who has tried Zen or other Buddhist meditation will be familiar with the practice of concentrating on their breathing, or sensations in a particular part of the body, as a means of arriving in the present. My own experience is that it is extraordinarily difficult to reach this state where you are just breathing, in the moment, without the flurry of thoughts about the past and future invading your mind. Only after meditating for a year did I find that the flotsam and jetsam could settle with relative ease into a picture of mental clarity, presence and emptiness. Even then, that was only in the meditation class. Once I went outside again, after a brief feeling that I was floating through space as I walked home, the detritus in my head reappeared, the past and the future returned. I am trying hard not to think about what to write next but sense the impossibility of the task. I imagine a Zen master would tell me that the impossibility grows out of trying at all, that in order to see a fish you must watch the water.

The question, I think, is how to bring this Zen attitude towards time into our daily lives. Without having intended to, I feel I have been moving towards a closer friendship with the present. This has come about through incorporating more rituals into my daily life. I have already mentioned how I pause before I begin eating. This is only one of several practices that draw me into the now. Another is that each morning, when I get up, I go out into the garden in search of a change, perhaps a shoot that has appeared or a flower that has opened. When I cycle, I focus on the motion of my legs through space and try to feel my balance. At night, before I go to sleep, I spend a few moments standing in front of the bed thinking about a person I have never met, perhaps a fisherman in a Sri Lankan village, and what they might be feeling at that moment. These tiny instances

of ritual, which by no means fill all my day, seem to slow the pace of time, often to a near standstill.

I am neither a Zen monk nor a Balinese rice farmer. I have grown up in epicentres of Western culture that have bequeathed me a linear conception of time, a temporal one-track mind. I still dwell on the past and future, I regret and I look forward. I have ambitions to fulfil and feel old age travelling towards me. 'Don't just do something; sit there,' wrote a famous Buddhist monk. I love the idea but there are things I want to do. On the other hand, I have expanded my repertoire of approaches to time by learning from other cultures. I am no longer trapped by my assumptions, and have some element of choice between the arrow, the wheel and the step out of time.

This giant digital clock sculpture called 'Meantime' by the British artist Darren Almond, is a reminder of the linear approach to time that dominates our culture.

Final thoughts, just in time

Five hours is how long the nineteenth century anarchist Peter Kropotkin believed we needed to work each day to satisfy our basic living requirements in terms of food, clothing, housing and wine. Achieving this ideal (which I aspire to) would give us all plenty of time to pursue our passions and avoid the rush of modern life. But for most of us, it is unfeasible. We have mortgages to pay, we have set hours of work, we have children

to look after. Perhaps we could work freelance, giving us more control over our own time, but are we willing to sacrifice the financial security, and would we feel too isolated? It is not so easy to reinvent our approach to time, and it can never be done without also rethinking other aspects of our lives, such as career ambitions or family relationships.

I don't believe in solutions. Life is not an equation with an answer. It is complex and our problems, though shared, reflect the uniqueness of our personal histories and current circumstances. Yet I believe that it is possible to embark on new journeys, to take new paths, even within a familiar landscape. I think time can become more of a companion than an adversary if we pursue the three routes I have discussed: question the metaphors we habitually use, find ways of slowing down parts of our lives, and explore how other cultures relate to time.

My life no longer has tenths of seconds, or seconds, and very few minutes. Mostly it is composed of indeterminate hours that help me travel from dawn to dusk. In my imagination, I would like to start a new social movement to eradicate seconds and minutes for everyone, subverting the tyranny of the clock. I also wish to campaign for Time to become a school subject and for Free Time to be declared a universal human right.

Yet I have no desire to become a dictator of a new approach to time. Let each of us invent our own rhythms, and walk to the beat of our own drummers.

Further reading on time

Barbara Tedlock *Time and the Highland Maya*
Carl Honoré *In Praise of Slow: How a Worldwide Movement is Challenging the Cult of Speed*
Clifford Geertz 'Person, Time and Conduct in Bali' in *The Interpretation of Cultures*
Daniel Boorstin *The Discoverers* (Book 1)
E.P. Thompson 'Time, Work Discipline and Industrial Capitalism' in *Past and Present* (1967)
George Lakoff and Mark Johnson *Metaphors We Live By*
George Woodcock 'The Tyranny of the Clock' in his edited *The Anarchist Reader*
J.G. Ballard 'Chronopolis' in *Chronopolis and Other Stories*
Lewis Mumford 'The Monastery and the Clock' in *The Human Prospect*
Robert Levine *A Geography of Time: The Temporal Misadventures of a Social Psychologist*
Shunryu Suzuki *Zen Mind Beginner's Mind*
Stephen Hawking *A Brief History of Time*
Stewart Brand *The Clock of the Long Now: Time and Responsibility*
Thich Nhat Hanh *Being Peace*

Websites on time

The Long Now Foundation
http://www.longnow.org/
Slow Food International
http://www.slowfood.com/
Time Banks
http://www.timebanks.co.uk/