

TIME IS OF THE ESSENCE

“I’m late, I’m late . . .” cries the Mad Hatter in *Alice in Wonderland*. Mad though he may be, he seems to be singing our song. How often do conversations end abruptly when one conversant looks at his watch and leans impatiently into the “rush” position? How often do people dash past each other, eyes averted, muttering “Late for a meeting, gotta run . . .” as a substitute for a personal greeting and a moment of connection? How often do we tell ourselves and others we simply don’t have enough time for a reflective meeting, for reading something inspiring, for one last kiss good-bye?

In the quotidian routines of our lives, time appears insufficient and we find ourselves trying to “find time” for this or that, or trying to make up for “lost time”. Yet, when we look to grasp the universal meaning of time, we face infinity. On the surface of life, we never have time. Within the depths of our souls, we have all the time in the world.

To reflect on our notions of time is to recognize the boundless variability of perception. Time is never the same for all of us. And, more importantly, time is not the same for each of us, day-to-day and moment-to-moment. Just as the 0’s and 1’s in a binary system can represent an infinitude of ideas, the seconds, minutes and hours of time can represent an infinitude of experiences.

How long is an hour when you’re waiting for a long-absent loved one to arrive? How long is an hour when a short-term project is overdue?

What does six minutes feel like when a patient’s heart stops on the operating table? What does six minutes feel like when a mother and her ill child are waiting past their appointment time to see the doctor?

What do 12 seconds mean to the ball-handler at the close of a two-point basketball game? What do 12 seconds mean to a person flipping through 187 television channels?

How long does six months seem to a nine-and-a-half-year-old waiting to be ten? How long does six months seem to a person in the last stage of a terminal illness?

Some days seem to end before they’ve begun. Other days drag by at the ponderous pace of a snail ascending stadium stairs. Some are “filled” with unexpected discovery. Some are “drained” by lost opportunity.

Some moments seem to “stop time,” and fill us up with gratitude or elation, or love. Other moments seem to jolt us with the shock of too little, too late.

When we express the old cliché, “Time is of the essence,” we are really pointing beyond time to the true essence. Life is the essence, and time is “of” life because we have decreed it so to wrest a general order and a common form from the formless potential of life. The feeling of having all the time in the world comes from life and our engagement in it, not from time and our thoughts about it. The only “real time” we have *is* right now. The present moment *is* all the time in the world. And we are all in it together. Essentially, we all have all the time in the world, all the time. The illusion of hurry or lateness or shortness or plenty is in our minds, the ever-changing product of how we are thinking.

Although this logic seems evident, the power of embracing it and looking to experience it for ourselves is often lost in hustle-bustle and habit. For example, over the years, I have been asked to present seminars on “time management”. I have found that the underlying assumptions of such seminars are that time is real, immutable and external to us and can be managed by some technique. People talk about their time much as they might talk about their dogs on the first night of dog obedience school. They hope to get time under control so it will do what they want it to do. As I talk to people at the beginning of these seminars, they ask things like this:

“Do you think it works to keep an electronic calendar, or is it easier to use one of those books with all the partitions in it? Which manages time better?”

“I’ve always got a plan at the beginning of the day, but the people who work for me keep interrupting me and I can’t stay with my own program. How do I keep other people from upsetting my plans?”

“My patients are always complaining that I don’t spend enough time with them, but I’m always running behind because I give every 15-minute appointment 20 to 30 minutes! What’s their problem? That’s a long time for a doctor visit these days. I have colleagues who see people in 15 minutes and never get complaints!”

“I have so many appointments every day that I never have a moment to myself to do my own work. At the end of the day, I’m exhausted. How do I reduce the demands on my time and get my appointment calendar under control?”

I have come to see that my job in these settings is not to answer such questions, but to question the unspoken or unrecognized ideas behind them.

How does an inanimate object, a calendar, get the power to manage an ephemeral concept, time?

If one’s work involves interaction with others, which is always spontaneous and unpredictable, shouldn’t being available and responsive to them BE a part of the plan?

What's the qualitative difference between your colleagues' 15 minutes and your 20- to 30 minutes? If minutes are not the determining variable of the patients' experience, what is?

Who is in charge of "my" appointment calendar? Who ultimately can block out time, any time, for anything? Where does the notion of an "unruly" calendar come from?

If these discussions move farther and farther into the realm of understanding the nature of time as a product of our own thinking, rather than the measure of time as a force outside of us, they become quiet, constructive and insightful. They move from chronological, linear time into what the Greeks called "kairos", the timeless and deeply touching experience of life in the moment. The distinction between being caught up in one's worldly thoughts about time and simply being connected and alive now and present to what is alive in this moment, erases the need for specific conversation about "time management." Time and management are concepts that have significance when one's head is involved in the past and the future; the timeless state of "all the time in the world" is an experience of living from the heart, now, fully engaged.

I once attended a lecture by the famous heart surgeon Christian Barnard. He captivated the audience for an hour with incredible stories of the human heart seen from the surgeon's perspective. At the end of the hour, as soon as he asked for questions, a nurse stood up, quite agitated, at the back of the room, and blurted out:

"Dr. Barnard, I read once where you gave one of your transplant patients who was rejecting his new heart a second heart! How could you do that? What about all the patients waiting for hearts? What about your more than 100 people who are lingering between life and death, praying for enough time to receive another heart? How could you give two hearts to one patient, knowing full well that all those other sick people were waiting in the wings?"

There was a long pause. Dr. Barnard responded, quietly, "Madam, I only have *one* patient."

There was a hush as people absorbed the meaning of that statement, and then a roar of gratitude. In an instant, that night, hundreds of doctors and nurses in an auditorium saw the present moment illuminated. Afterwards, many commented, "I wish I could be like that," as though Christian Barnard were something special. They missed his following statement. "So do you. One patient at a time."

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