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Time Travel

The other day I ran across this amusing poem by Andrew Marvell, and it got me to musing about how time affects so many aspects of our lives:

*Had we but world enough and time,
This coyness, Lady, were no crime ...
But at my back I always hear
Time's winged chariot hurrying near;
And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity.
— Andrew Marvell, "To His Coy Mistress"*

THE AMAZING THING is how, though rarely present in our thought, everyone is a time traveler. We move around in time, every one of us, every day. We traverse its multiple dimensions—future-past; early-late; fast- slow—careening around, lurching from one time to another, in the formless ether of it. We can't see it or touch it. And while we cannot really define the concept of time, it importantly defines us. Our language is rich in tenses, many of which -- like "future conditional"-- no one uses much less understands.

For most of my life time was a commodity that seemed either in short supply, or in excess. This is the way time exists for most people, I think. Of course, the too much-too little balance varies a lot depending on all sorts of circumstances. Some people are always in a hurry: city people in places like New York; ambitious people; over-committed people; Type A and other goal-driven people; and people with places to go who have a compulsion to be "on time." Time is a worry for these people, not an ally; they have to ration it, track it, stand guard over it, lest it get away from them.

But the people we need to be concerned about are those poor souls with more time than they know what to do with. Such people are more likely to be burdened with boredom, maybe even loneliness and depression, even the sinking feeling that life is passing them by. This situation can result from all sorts of circumstances: physical incapacity, isolation, depression, crushing poverty, fear, or from a sheer lack of imagination or energy.

I have often wondered how time works in rural and isolated places, especially in the Developing World, places still largely untouched by TV, movies, radio, the internet, or outside contact of other kinds. The inhabitants of this world are typically untouched by print media, too, like books and newspapers, because they are physically isolated, but also due to the high levels of illiteracy. Even if these people—farmers, small shopkeepers, artisans—work from dawn until dusk, they have some leisure time where they talk, exchanging local news and gossip. But since so little happens in such places (although not little to them, I presume) how on earth do they pass the slow-paced, usually unhurried, time that characterizes these settings? Although I have spent little time in Developing World villages, I think I understand how time works for them. In such settings, people have developed a special way of communicating ingeniously designed to maximize social interactions while, at the same time, filling up these talk

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and socializing sessions to meet the time available. They do this by taking a single, often very minor, event and spin it out to impressive lengths through the use of elaborate, *mind-numbing* detail, and through *repetition* of the same points, examining each from a number of different angles. For example, I can imagine a villager talking about his only cow like this: "My two-year old cow weighs—you know I bartered two months labor to get her—well, she weighs 150 kilos, which is pretty big, but I had one before this one that weighed nearly 200 kilos—gives more milk, but you know it's not always so easy to sell it—while my cousin in Mirpur has a cow that is only a puny 120 kilos. Probably not feed, I'd guess worms." Or, "What about this weather; when will Monsoon come? Not like last year." And so on. Now prompted, other villagers take their turn to provide variations on the theme, chiming in to agree or disagree, or to offer their own experience with the topic.

In this way, the talk goes on for hours and, even though the villagers have heard this same story twenty times before, they never seem to get tired of the repetition, and never bored. Time is defeated.

In one small area, at least, think I understand how to slow down, too—how to defeat it, or more accurately, put it on hold in a small way. When travelling on hundreds of very long flights around the planet for many years, I found that the best way to make time pass was to ignore it completely. I knew that if I started worrying how many more hours before we arrived -- like those kids on long car trips who keep asking "are we there yet?" -- the trip would seem much longer. My elementary coping strategy was never to look at my watch once I got on the plane, no matter how many hours the trip would take. It worked very well. My only concession to time on these flights was to keep track of what time it would be when we arrived, since that would help me to avoid meals that made no sense.

Another far more common way to escape the bounds of time is to immerse oneself in a gripping drama--film, novel, or opera. During these experiences, your time shifts--escapes--to what is going on in the drama. Reality fades into that immediate external experience.

Of course, some people are a lot more easily bored than others; as with children, it takes more to keep some people entertained; they always have to be doing something, always needing some stimulation in order to pass the time free of dreaded boredom. They aren't very self-reliant in that sense. I guess you could say that they're running away from time, afraid of time. I have been fortunate in my ability to avoid boredom; I do this primarily by making sure I always have plenty to keep my mind occupied. My wife says it doesn't take much to entertain me, which I consider to be a compliment.

One of the oddest, yet most common, way of managing one's time is simply to hand over your life and your time to another; where you give up all control to family, ambition, an organization, or a cause. An example of the first of these (family) is central to the novel *Skylark*, by the Hungarian writer Deszo Kosztolanyi: The father (Akos) would "... wait for his wife and daughter to get up, then wait for them to go to bed in the evening. He waited for the table to be laid, then waited to see it cleared again. He potted about restlessly with an anxious glow in his eyes" Sounds neurotic, but when you think of it, everyone is waiting for something,

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dependent on someone, and in a sense our waiting and dependency isn't really voluntary. The only difference is a matter of degree.

Another thing that differentiates people is that some of us--including me-- just *love* to live in the past, while most people inhabit the now, with brief excursions into the future. Of course, in practice we all live in the now, but for some the pleasure and solace lies either towards escaping into *la recherche du temps perdu*, or escaping into fantasies about the future. A future where, of course, everything will be better -- or at least different -- than it is now. I wonder whether I can generalize that the old tend to look back, while the young moonbeam about their promising future?

One of my frivolous hobbies is to think about whether there are properties in our universe that are permanent, unchanging and reliable, properties you could hang your hat on. I am thinking of universals like truth, and the workings of what are called laws, such as gravity. I am no scientist, and was shaken to learn that Einstein had put an end to the notion of absolute time. According to his theory, time has a relativistic connection with space. That is, relative to the observer, distances appear to contract while clocks tick more slowly when moving at velocities close to the speed of light. I have no idea what this means, but have gradually come to the reluctant conclusion that universal properties and laws like time are relative, and that even if they aren't it is beyond our ken to understand what universal properties mean, or even what reality is. I am particularly taken by a statement by J.R. Oppenheimer, when asked about something called probability clouds. Sounding very much like a Zen Master he said: "If asked whether the position of the electron remains the same, I would have to say no. If asked whether the position of an electron changes with the course of time, I would have to say no. If asked whether the electron is in a state of rest, I have to say no. If you ask whether the electron is in motion, I would again have to say no."

When I was still in the labor force and had to meet deadlines, I (of course) felt pressed for time. I didn't feel that time was changing *its* pace, but rather that *I* was because *it* wasn't; I was just running to keep up. With the passage of years --time -- into old age, though, I have noticed a change in my relationship with time as my future gets compressed into fewer years. The paradox is that as my responsibilities and commitments wind down, the more I feel the urge for me and others "just do it," "get on with it." I feel the clock ticking, time running out, and this makes me impatient with procrastination on whatever needs to be decided, what *has* to get done. The irony is that although my time, my "bankable" days, the pace of my life's events are slowing down, and yet time is now flying by faster than ever. It is hurtling me forward faster and faster, and I have no ability to slow the pace, no ability to draw out these fine, final years. I don't find in myself—or recognize in myself—a dread of the Great Beyond. It just *is*, and my only hope is that the end will be short and sweet, and not a burden to my loved ones.

All I know is that I want to spend what remains with the people, places, and experiences I cherish. All that aside, I can only be grateful and positive about the time I have had so far. And if I had it to do all over again, there are very few things I would do differently.