

A Very Brief History of Time

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My father got rather serious about life in a new way when he learned he had cancer. In January of 1997 he had emergency surgery to remove a softball-sized tumor from his colon. Afterward, the question remained as to how to proceed.

My father had been a fighter all his life and so he naturally chose to fight the cancer with all he had. He didn't like what he was hearing from his local doctors, so he asked me for help. You see, I was working in an advanced cancer research laboratory at Duke University Medical Center at the time, and my father wanted to take advantage of my access to what he considered to be the best doctors in the world.

I explained that the doctor I was working with, Jusuf Hanun, was doing cellular research in apoptosis, or programmed cell death, looking for ways to shut down cancerous cells from the inside. He was doing his work with yeast cultures and didn't do any actual patient care. I said I'd do what I could, but these top doctors seemed pretty hard to get close to. To my surprise and delight, Dr. Hanun called his friend, Dr Wolff, one of the world's foremost colon cancer specialists, and asked for a favor on my behalf. Instead of a run-around or a referral, my father got an appointment with the world's top expert within two weeks' time.

My father and his wife came to Durham for the appointment, along with several other family members, including my youngest sister, who is a nurse. There was a heightened tension in the air combined with a special kind of heady optimism: Dad was going to get the best treatment on the planet!

We all crowded into the examination room with him, as Dr. Wolff reviewed the chart and asked questions. Finally, he said, "Mr. Garrett, there are things we can do to slow the progress somewhat, but make no mistake, this cancer is going to take your life."

In that instant, my father's world changed completely. His toughness melted away, his shoulders slumped, and his normally strong voice fell quiet. He knew he was going to die, and he began to die then and there. Eventually he regained his composure and used his toughness to live his last years with strength and dignity. He kept his condition to himself and some of his acquaintances didn't even know he was sick.

My father had devoted his life to earning money to support his family. In his later years, he had a fair amount of success in the stock market. A year or so after this diagnosis and not long before his death, he was talking to a person who was excited about investing, and didn't know my father was ill. Dad told him, "If you're smart and lucky, you can make a lot of money and die rich." He had realized that his money couldn't buy him another day of life and, though he never regretted his responsibility as a provider, he did come to question the single-mindedness with which he had pursued his goals.

When you know you're dying, time can become very important. Scarcity has a way of focusing our attention. One's sense of time can be transformed, as we cherish and savor each precious moment with a poignancy cast by mortality's lengthening shadow.

The way we experience the passing of time depends on the situation. The time we spend waiting for something is different from the time we spend enjoying what we waited for. We experience time differently after a meal than before. And the meal can seem to take an eternity if we don't like the food, or if we are sharing it with people who don't like us.

Can you remember how summer vacation seemed to last forever when you were a child? Can you think of points in your life when the nature of time changed for you?

The meaning of time changed for an entire culture as England adapted to the industrial revolution. This brought the clock and whistle of factory time, replacing the sunrise and seasons as markers of farming time. It's hard for us, who live with clock time as a matter of course, even to imagine how wrenching this transformation must have been. But William Wordsworth lived it.

In his poem, “The World is Too Much with Us,” Wordsworth sounds a complaint that’s familiar to us, although it was fairly new to his 19th-century England:

“Late and soon, getting and spending,
we lay waste our powers.
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!”

This describes the rat race, what Fred Allen called the treadmill to oblivion. We hurry and race and run, working, earning, planning, doing. And we never get ahead of it all; we rarely even catch up.

Wordsworth says that we lay waste our powers in such pursuits; that we become blind to the wonders of nature and the miracle of life. He goes on to long for a return to the vibrancy of pre-Christian spirituality if that could restore the sense of beauty and the miraculous that had been lost.

I think Wordsworth was right: the way we experience time has very real consequences for how life is lived. He was also right in recognizing that something had gone wrong with time in his time, something that has troubling consequences for us as well. But we’ll need to look way back at the historical development of time if we’re going to appreciate just what those consequences are. Mircea Eliade gave me some tools for this in his book, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, where he explores some of the ways that various cultures have experienced time.

Long ago, time wasn’t what it is today. It was based on observations of nature. The sun rose, crossed the sky, set, and later rose again. The nightly procession of the moon across the sky introduced another cycle as it grew from nothingness to full to nothingness again, only to return reborn after three days of darkness. The year confirmed this on a larger scale as the seasons brought germination, growth, harvest, death and a fallow period that led once again to new birth in the spring. Change was cyclical, with one thing leading to another, eventually back to the beginning again.

Cyclical time is also profoundly antihistorical. Each cycle produced a troubling residue of newness that had to be neutralized if the cycle was to repeat

itself. Our celebration of New Year's is an example of such a ritual of renewal. It's like a resetting of the clock of cyclic time, wiping out change and starting over.

One difficulty with this version of time was that there was no place in it for change. Innovation and individuality were regarded as violations that threatened the stability of the cosmos. Social and political structures tended to take rigid forms that held their right to authority as inevitable; regarded their rightness as proven by the very fact of their existence.

This idea of cyclic change was dealt a profound blow by the needs of a bunch of escaped slaves in the second millennium BCE. They gathered in the mountains and caves of Judea, a few at a time. Sometimes a whole family would escape and join them, once a fairly large group escaped from Egypt and found their way to the safety of the Judean hills. As they grew in number, they wanted to portray themselves as a legitimate people. But the cyclic view of time gave them no opening for a change of status, and branded them forever as outlaws. So these ancient people, called the *Api'ru*, or Hebrews, did something audacious: they came up with a new story about the world, and in doing so changed forever the nature of time.

The Hebrews no longer depended on prehistoric gods to decree what was to be done and by whom. Their God was a unique, powerful being that had created the world, had created Israel, and who periodically intervened to change the course of events. This God was powerful, all knowing, and lived in an eternal heaven and lived over an earth that could be changed. Thus, in a single stroke, the Hebrews transformed time from cyclical to linear in nature. Israel was a people with a purpose and the things that happened to Israel were consequences of that purpose as played out in history. That's right, history. I believe that the concept of time as history was a creation of the Hebrew people in order to provide a rationale for their change in status from escaped slaves to a noble kingdom and things have never been the same since.

Historic time introduced a new element to religion: faith. The gods of nature didn't require faith. The tides, seasons, and harvests proved themselves over and over. But with the Hebrew's new God, one had to buy into the unverifiable promises and actions of an unseen God.

There's one thing about time: once it's started, it tends to go somewhere. This wasn't a problem with the cycles of the ancients – they just began over again. But the historical time of the Hebrews required a goal. Their purpose as God's chosen people was to lead humanity toward the end of time. This made all hardships bearable and gave a purpose to both positive and negative events: they all were leading up to Israel's ultimate salvation. It also increased the meaning and value of individuality, because God's will in history could be expressed through the actions of specific individuals.

Well, this started the clock of history going. But the coming of Christianity changed the way it ticked. Developing Christian doctrines replaced God's periodic intervention in human affairs with one person's unique incarnation. Because Jesus was to be God's last act in human history until the end of time, the divine interventions, which had given Israel's history its meaning and direction, were eliminated. All that was left was the faith that there was a history. It also further increased the importance of the individual because of the introduction of dire consequences: people needed to get things right in order to qualify for a rewarding afterlife.

The shift that produced our modern sense of time came along about fifteen hundred years later. At that point, although God's hand had disappeared from earthly events, it was still assumed to guide the movements of the heavens. When astronomers discovered that the stars and planets didn't correspond to their expectations, the last place where God was believed to act was lost, and answers to questions about causation and time have been sought elsewhere ever since.

It's ironic. We've got a form of historical time that depends on a divine plan for its existence and meaning. And it didn't collapse when we removed the divine plan. It's sort of like working with papier mache. When we place the soft, gooey stuff over the mold, it needs that support to keep its shape. But we can remove the mold later without losing the shape because the stuff has hardened and no longer needs support.

And so with historical time. We have an expectation that time leads somewhere but no longer have the goal that originally created this expectation. We are left with a form of time that demands progress towards a goal – a goal

that we've lost – so we end up embracing progress as a goal in itself. Where we used to have a responsibility to a deity, we are left with a responsibility to time itself. And this is a responsibility we can never fulfill, because historical time is meaningless without a goal.

Now we can take a look at a couple of the consequences of the way we experience time. Let's take death, for example. In cultures where cyclic time predominates, death is never complete. The moon always come back, spring always returns. Life and death are just parts of a grand cycle, and in many cultures the dead even come back for a visit at the end of the year. It's more like a transfer to a different city than annihilation. But in a culture where historical time predominates, especially one like ours where the expectation of immortality is marginal at best, death can represent a horrible collision with a brick wall of meaninglessness. We mostly try to ignore it, and fill our days with attainable goals that keep us distracted from the emptiness of our history. When we finally come face to face with our own mortality, many of us, like my father, find ourselves wondering why we spent so little time appreciating life itself.

There's something else that's a part of our lives that is a byproduct of historical time: boredom. Boredom is impossible for someone living in cyclic time because there is no expectation of the new. But historical time emphasizes that every moment is a step toward some fulfillment. When there is no payoff, we experience a collapse of that anticipation: boredom. We're then often anxious and eager to fill the empty time with activities that lead somewhere, anywhere. Our culture has developed into a powerful commercial enterprise the purpose of which is to fill those empty moments with meaning: esteem, prestige, satisfaction, pleasure. Our time has no place for a moment that is simply a moment and nothing more.

So what can we do? We're trapped on a treadmill to oblivion, and we can't even jump off and go back to the cyclic time of the ancients – we value individuality and change too much for that. Although we may have lost the ability to turn back the clock, the benefits of eternity might not be entirely out of our reach. More satisfying and fulfilling ways of experiencing time may still be available to us.

Bear in mind that, although the Hebrews may have invented historical time, they also recognized the enduring value of cyclic time. Their calendar is replete with yearly seasonal celebrations, including Purim, Passover, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Chanukah. These events in cyclic time give continuity and stability. They provide a people with access to moments when the tyranny of historical time ceases its forward rush and gives us the chance to follow Cathleen McTigue's invitation "to rest for a moment on the forming edge of our lives, to resist the headlong tumble into the next moment." This is the gift of our seasonal celebrations. This is the true nature of the excitement we feel at these times: for a moment we are weightless, free from the burdens of the past and the anxieties of the future, free to experience life fully without distraction, free to feel our profound interdependence with one another as the transcendent truth of our lives, free to feel the rebirth of warmth and light in the midst of cold and dark.

This month we have Chanukah, Christmas, Solstice, Gita Jayanti, Al-Hijira, Bhodi Day, and so on. Every enduring religious and cultural tradition has them because of the enduring human need to step outside of history. We need history for growth and change, but we need the cycles of the ancients for stability, continuity, security, and renewal.

Despite the claims of the stories we tell ourselves, we don't live in history. We live in moments. As Buckaroo Bonzai said, "Wherever you go, there you are." I think this is as true in time as it is in space. If the flow of time is like a wave on the surface of eternity's ocean, we always live on the forming crest of that wave as it gathers up the past and becomes the future. This is what the theologian, Paul Tillich, called "the eternal now."

No matter how strong the torrent or raging the sea of time, we're always afloat in the tiny but indestructible boat, which is the present moment. We may be surfing on a wave in a sea of history, but it's always right now.

When every moment of time becomes valuable in and of itself, each moment can become an opportunity for fulfillment. There is a story about a fellow who was walking across a field when he encountered a tiger. He fled, the tiger after him. Coming to a precipice, he caught hold of the root of a wild vine

and swung himself down over the edge. The tiger sniffed at him from above. Trembling, the man looked down to where, far below, another tiger was waiting for him to fall. Only the vine sustained him. Two mice, one white and one black, started to gnaw at the vine. Then he saw a luscious strawberry growing near him. Grasping the vine with one hand, he plucked the strawberry and ate it. How sweet it tasted!

There always have been and always will be tigers in our past and in our future. We need to pay attention to them, but we've already lost if we let them keep us from appreciating the berries that are right in front of us, if we abandon the eternal now that's always within our grasp.

I invite you to notice how differently you experience time from one moment to the next. Observe the urgencies and passions that pull you out of the present. How would you live this moment if it was your last? See if you can catch a glimpse of the eternal dimension within each moment. Life isn't lived in the past or the future. It is lived in the here and now, the only real time available to us, the only time when we can care, listen, understand, and love. It's been suggested that we should seize the day, *carpe diem*. I think that's entirely too broad. Let's *carpe articulum*, instead: seize the moment. Pluck the strawberry. How sweet it tastes!

May it be so.