

Greener Time

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As the 40th anniversary of Earth Day approaches, a question: How “green” is the time in your life?

Another way to ask this question, you may have heard before: It’s not about the years in your life, but the life in your years.

Hmm.

Anytime we reflect spiritually on our relationship with time, we may soon recall that none of us knows how much time we’ll have on this planet. For better and for worse, this mystery lives at the heart of our relationship with our finite time here.

But is that *really* the only kind of time? Some aspects of time feel quite boundless, quite unfettered by our clocks and calendars. A parishioner told me recently about meeting a friend for a 3 o’clock bike ride. The friend was behind schedule, and so he took those minutes of waiting to lay back on the grass and look up at the clouds. I wonder how it changed his day—even his friend’s day—that he had that moment of re-tasting those lazy childhood afternoons, gazing up at the endless sky, no appointments or pressures. How blessed is that?

Clocks and calendars are surely useful for orienting ourselves to each other and the world we live in, but they won’t help us think spiritually about time. When we start thinking outside our worldly systems, time and its relationship to us as human beings gets murky, fast. Time quickly bends and slides and becomes a vast, shape-shifting concept that slips away from us as soon as we try to grasp it. (Just read the physicists, poets, spiritual seekers, or others who have tried to speak or write intelligently about the nature of time and its role in our lives—this is deep stuff!)

But a young woman who’s a counselor at Rowe, a UU camp in western Massachusetts, told me she met an 11-year-old camper there who apparently had a great grasp on time’s shape-shifting nature. He told her: “Every evening at bedtime check-in, people talk about their day and all the things that happened, and they can barely believe that breakfast happened on this same day. But then when we’re leaving camp, everyone talks about how the two weeks just flew by. It doesn’t make any sense!—but, I think I understand it: When we’re learning something new, our brains are working on all these exciting things at once, and everything seems really complicated—and time seems to stretch out, since there’s so much experience packed into it. But when we come to the end of our time here, our mind packs it all up into one big package, and then it seems really small and quick.”

Leave it to an 11-year-old to make sense out of things that are too complicated for us adults!

Well, I don't know if I can be as helpful as that camper, but I do have an offering of my own for us to try on. These reflections come out of my own experiences this year; I've been working half-time here and half-time at a hospital chaplaincy internship. Both are requirements, moving me closer to graduation next month and ordination next year: Blessed be! The challenges of these two internships, alongside my roles as spouse and parent to our four-year-old, have stretched me and my capacities in time "six ways to Sunday!" Whether you've been living something similar or vastly different, the dichotomy of time that I'll offer here this morning may be illuminating for you—may it be so.

Like the 11-year-old camper, I too have felt a dichotomy of two modes of time. Some of us have experienced a kind of time I'll call machine time. As I've worked to meet demand after deadline, I've heard myself pleading aloud, "I am not a machine!" Machines don't get tired, or at least not as often as we humans do. Machine time honors production. Machine Time is what that legendary John Henry was trying to compete with, when he famously hammered more steel than a steam engine -- for one day. Then he laid down his hammer and he died.

Machine Time, then as now, drives most of our economic life. And so the world insists that we become fluent in this mode of time. When we're in machine time, we are time-bounded, and deadline-oriented.

In machine time, we stay up working past bedtime ... to meet a deadline. In machine time, we recognize the finite nature of resources—such as time, money, people power, materials, opportunity -- and we try to defy those limits by squeezing as much as possible into or out of those resources.

In machine time, we operate in digital mode, in which resources are understood mechanically: parts are interchangeable; workers are replaceable; knowledge can be replicated and disseminated efficiently; when breakdown happens, we repair as quickly as possible and move on.

Machine time keeps us plugged in to communication devices 24/7/365.

In machine time, we can fabricate a sense of dire emergency faster and more often than we can mobilize ourselves—so we are too often in fight-or-flight mode, and may find ourselves burnt out.

Machine time knows no Sabbath. In machine time, we prize productivity and efficiency. Agendas, goals, and outcomes drive the pace and direction of our efforts. Our down time is rare and only long enough to resume productivity. We may lose sleep, or neglect to eat. Our pace can be relentless, the beat unchanging, the rhythms percussive and monotonous, like the electronic pulse of "house music" or "trance music" common in some clubs on the dance scene.

Everything is *Molto Allegro*. Our mood is industrious; we focus on the individual as a useful part of a profit-driven system; and we treasure a person's economic value to the exclusion of all other values. We prize "making good use of time"; speed is a supreme value.

Our transitions can become rapid and abrupt... we try to minimize time in-between activities or places, since we consider it valueless. We spend the whole journey asking obsessively, Are we there yet? We isolate from ourselves and each other, and from the systems that support Life. We expect our soul to take a back seat, to wait for that weekend that may never arrive. Machine time ignores death, and devalues our mortality.

Thank goodness, that's not the only kind of time we're talking about today! Blessedly, there is another mode of time, too; let's get to know natural time now:
Natural Time is what we return to when we turn off the machine.

Natural time honors Creation. It gives rhythm to our human, mammalian life. When we're in natural time, we may temporarily lose the meaning of clock time. We may stay up past bedtime, but for the fun of it—for working creatively simply because we're in the flow; or for making music, or making love.

Natural time is *open-ended*. In natural time, we recognize the finite nature of resources and we *accept* that for what it is—an inherent limit that we can work *within*, so as not to exhaust ourselves or the world.

In natural time, we respond instinctively to emergency -- fire, flood, earthquake, even battle -- for the sake of people's bodily survival. In natural time we live by analogical understandings: we can tell when to eat or sleep just by the light in the sky, or the feeling in the body. Knowledge is passed person-to-person in apprentice-master relationships; wisdom accrues through reflective and intentional cultivation over years and lifetimes. Intentional wandering is treasured as a blessing. Feelings are honored. Wave-like cycles of energized work and restfulness mirror the earthly rhythms of day and night, summer and winter.

In natural time, we embrace Sabbath as life-giving, and welcome it like a warm bath, for our own renewal. When breakdown happens, we pause, reflect, rest, and rebuild, mindful of the need for gradual change and modification.

Natural time is like jazz: it's relational, dialogical, mutually responsive, and respectful. Natural time is organic, attuned with the bodymind. Personal rhythms can change and adapt in concert with the system, and the system responds. Natural time is humane ... communally oriented ... *Lento*.

In natural time, we remember that among the highest compliments we can pay one another is to "waste time" together. Slow food. Sleeping in. Napping in the hammock. Cloud-watching. Bird-watching. Watching paint dry! A stroll at dawn, or dusk. Weeding the garden.

In Natural time, we supremely treasure the fullness of the moment. Transitions are gradual. The "in-between" times are restful, regenerative, restorative. When a season or a life comes to its end, there is time for mourning, regrouping, and re-entering life at a pace that honors what has gone. In natural time, we prize each human being, each creature of earth and sky, as unique and purposeful; as embodying worlds unto themselves; as precious by their intrinsic nature.

Natural Time honors our mortality by upholding the preciousness of our Life.

Now, how do we find ourselves in relationship to these extremes? Obviously we don't typically experience them in such stark contrast. No one can live in either of these kinds of time exclusively. But which aspects of these times do you recognize in your own choice-making about how you live your moments, your hours, your days?

For the truth is that not everyone in our world is too busy. Some of us may have too much time on our hands. Some of us are underemployed ... or are forced to "retire" before we're ready to. Some of us are in prison, or living under really uncomfortable circumstances. Some of us are suffering with chronic pain or other illness, or attending to loved ones who are. Some of us are lonely—often. Some of us are suffering with depression or other mental illness. Some of us are suffering, or know someone who's suffering, with chemical addiction.

For a person in recovery, each moment of resisting the urge to pick-up-and-use can feel like a slow-motion, epic battle. May we remember that each person is fighting a secret struggle, and encourage them onward into greener times, through our ways of being with them.

So the art of greening our time isn't just about having more of it. Like money, just having more won't, by itself, make us happier.

No matter how long our days may seem, or how short our years, we all get only the same 24 hours in each day. We each occupy our unique place in the world to live those hours; so what helps us make more life-giving choices if and when we're able?

I can share with you an Ignatian practice I rely upon for help in this spiritual journey: the *examen*. It's a simple practice of reflecting on what experiences are most life-giving in each day, each week. As we practice this honest, inward gazing, and learn to calmly notice our motivations, hesitations, and actions, our heightened awareness can enable us to make more life-giving choices in the future.-

So I will close with three questions for your reflection:

From whence comes the water and sunshine that green your moments in each day?

Are they sufficient to see you through the grey days, the dry seasons?

And where does your own power lie to make for greener times, in your life, and in our world?

For now, more than ever, as theologian Howard Thurman reminded us, "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

May we be ever bold, in our living, and in our loving. Amen, and blessed be!