

DIFFERENT  
NOTIONS  
OF  
TIME

BY  
ATHENA  
TACHA

WASHINGTON  
DC  
1979-2005

In spite of its dependence on the motions of heavenly bodies, and for humans chiefly on the Earth's relationship to the Sun and Moon, time is a very elusive concept.

Theoretical scientists still debate its existence. Yet life is obviously time's creation, as our molecules and cells are ticking away throughout our birth, development and march to extinction. We all resent time, knowing we cannot escape it, but each of us has a different sense of it.

I am a small person with a fast pulse, which generally means a quick metabolism and speedy life rhythms. Still, I am one of the slowest individuals imaginable. Not that I cannot act fast, or have swift reactions – to the contrary. But I don't enjoy doing things in a rush. I

want to take my time, as they say. Richard teases me that on my way to the grave, I'll tell Death: "Hey, wait a minute, I am not quite ready yet!"

I do indeed hate time limits. Although I am a very organized person, time is one element that I prefer fluid and unstructured. I never look at the clock if I can help it, and my mind does not work well unless I have an unlimited period in front of me. I love the luxury of an entire day without appointments or places to go. I remember my father claiming that, when I was a kid, I did not want the day to end so that I could play more. I actually still feel the same: I want every day to last longer so that I can work without stop; and I would happily dispense with sleep if I could, in order to have

more time to live and do things. I clearly am one of those people who would extend their days continuously, if they had no clocks or sunlight. Whenever it is time to go someplace or have dinner, I always am surprised. "I did not know it was so late!" is my motto.

Richard is the exact opposite in this regard. He obviously belongs to the people for whom days would get constantly shortened in the absence of sunlight. He frequently looks at the clock and is completely aware of time. Even when he is immersed in working or reading, he hardly ever forgets that it is time for the news or his exercise, and of course for an appointment or a meal. In fact, like his father (and my father), he is passionate about his watch being accurate – even within a few

seconds! His father was always setting his watch, and in fact he had half a dozen older watches that he kept on winding, observing daily how fast or slow each one ran. My father used to show with pride his Zenith pocket watch that kept perfect time, and when I was a student he bought me an Omega for the same purpose (not that it did me any good!).

Much as Richard and I enjoy living and doing things together, one of the most stressful things in our relationship is our different sense of time.

He usually gets up earlier than I do, often an hour or more, and as soon as he shaves and dresses, he goes to the kitchen, gets breakfast ready and turns on the news. Even

if I wake up at the same time, I take forever to get started. After the usual little morning ceremonies (tying back the curtains, weighing myself, etc.), I dawdle while deciding what to put on and finally dress, often getting interrupted by this and that. (I would never dream of taking my shower in the morning.) I then have to straighten our beds, check every room in the house to see if anything needs to be done (such as throwing out faded flowers or adding water to their vases), and eventually make my way to the dining room – where Richard usually has finished breakfast and moved on to the living room with the *Times* and the *Post*. I actually don't like listening to the news, and I want to read a novel with my coffee in peace, so I don't mind if he has his breakfast ahead of

me. By the time I finish, he has gone over all his e-mail and listserves, and sometimes finished the newspapers (which I can't even contemplate doing). I don't like starting my day until about 10 or 10:30, unless I have some appointment or we travel – and then almost invariably my bowels stop operating.

Once I get going I do accomplish a lot, often working on more tasks than one at the same time, whereas Richard always zooms in on one job and finishes it fast before he takes up something else. I have a meditative way of doing things, with parallel thinking that takes longer, compared to his intensely focused, single-track operating method. So, he is typically done ahead of me, and I am usually late to lunch, and behind in getting ready for dinner as well

(“Oh, I didn't know it was so late!”), which drives Richard crazy, while I always feel rushed. Ellen's sense of time was similar to mine. When Richard was away and I sometimes stayed with her, we would go without eating for hours, because neither of us realized that it was time for dinner!

The same differences apply to the end of the day: Richard is normally ready for bed by 11 p.m., and he probably would move to an earlier schedule if he lived with somebody with a comparable sense of time. On the contrary, I never am ready for sleep until midnight at the earliest, and the same was true of Ellen. We both enjoyed working late in the evening, and her greatest pleasure was to have her ice cream in bed after midnight. I suspect that

night-owl types like us share other characteristics too, such as direction of jetlag. I noticed that I get jetlag consistently on my flights east, whereas Richard, who is a morning person, gets his worst jetlag on overseas trips flying west.

For a while in my life, when I was extremely busy with teaching and public commissions, I used to work until 3 in the morning or later, much as I felt tired, passing over my first wave of sleepiness at midnight or so. I had read that some individuals can get along fine with just 3 to 5 hours of sleep and I thought that sounded great. However, I soon discovered that unfortunately this was not for me: I evidently weakened my immune system and suffered for years from a terrible respiratory allergy, plus, in the long run, I ruined

my sleep. (I regularly need 7 or 8 hours to function well.)

The worst trial for me is to be ready for going out someplace. Usually I forget to watch the clock and underestimate when to start dressing. So Richard has made a practice to remind me of the time. However, even if I select all my clothes and jewelry, etc. in advance, I still can end up being a few minutes late because my estimate of how much time is left for finishing up what I was doing is invariably wrong (I think I have lots of time!). And something happens the last moment, such as my pantyhose having a runner, my zipper not pulling up, somebody calling, or whatever, to delay me further. This is the worst ordeal for Richard, who is always ready ten minutes ahead of

me, and stands on a toe (or so I feel) while I put the finishing touches on my toilette.

Moreover, he generally anticipates, to save time, while I hardly prepare ahead. For instance, when we return home, he has his key ready to open the back door before even getting out of the car. Actually, getting out of the car is another minor trauma in our daily life. He jumps out of his seat as soon as he turns the ignition off, and is instantly ready to lock the doors and go. I, on the other hand, have things on my lap, either because I read or look at the map when he is driving, or because I am holding a batch of notes and objects for errands. It takes me forever to unlock my belt, disentangle my purse from my legs, put away the

stuff I am reading and collect what I need for shopping. By the time I am out, Richard has already locked the car doors and walked ten paces to wherever we are going, whereas I often need something from the back of the car as well. So routinely he ends up walking ahead of me.

This is almost symbolic of all our activities. Since he races through everything so fast, I am forever anguished about being behind. In my mind, we are like the hare and the turtle in Aesop's myth. Yet, as in the myth, I end up accomplishing as much as he does, if not more (judging from my bio). But I only can do so by working incessantly, to compensate for my slow pace. So, he teases me that I don't ever stop doing things, even for a minute – for instance, taking with me articles to

read on the metro or before movies or concerts, in case we arrive early. (He always makes us leave in advance, lest the traffic is bad or we have difficulty parking.) Furthermore, because I know I need all the time I can get, I am impatient when I have to wait, so I also take reading with me to keep me from fretting.

Another aspect of time that I find fascinating is our subjective sense of how fast or slowly it passes. For me, time seems to run slower if I don't do a lot of things – say, if I have a whole day that I spend at home, working at leisure and poking around. On the other hand, time also appears longer while I travel and change locations. When we go to some unfamiliar place and do a lot of different things (e.g.,

settling in a hotel in a new city and starting to explore), the first day or two stretches out a lot. After that, the remaining days of the trip pass with increasing speed. Similarly, time extends unbelievably during actual traveling, probably due to changes of settings, independently of the time zones. When we return home from somewhere abroad, I can not believe that in the morning of that same day we were in, say, Thessaloniki, Greece.

A comparable distortion of time seems to happen as we age. It may be because we increasingly do more things and the pace of life has speeded up, but years appear to slip away much faster lately – and I hear the same from friends. Every week, marked by the day that our garbage is picked up or our cleaning woman

comes, seems to fly by at an incredible rate. And when I put receipts into our income tax file, I become painfully aware that spring is over, and summer is practically gone, yet it almost seems like yesterday that we filed last year's tax return. And it was 2003 not long ago – and actually the memorable millennium of 2000 does not sound that far back.

The first year that we moved to Washington appeared very expanded, as we finished task after task of settling, and savored every new season. I realize now that we have been here over seven years, yet it feels as if it was hardly a year or two ago that we came. I suppose these time distortions are due to chemical changes in the brain, which may intensify as we get older. Or

perhaps, with a greater awareness of the past and the future, we live in the present less.

Another time compression related to memory, which Richard actually experiences more than I do, is the phenomenon of years collapsing. Something that we remember as having happened only five years ago in reality occurred twice as far back. Our friends' kids grow up at an astonishing pace, and when we talk of, say, 1975 or 1980, we cannot believe that it was 30 or 25 years ago. Let alone conceive that we have been married 40 years! But then, nobody can truly accept his or her own age. Is this time illusion simply wishful thinking?

© Athena Tacha, 2005