

For the Time Being

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In his poem, “Time Enough,” the poet Dennis Driscoll writes:

The tally of years
added up so rapidly
it appeared I had
been short-changed,
tricked by sleight
of hand, fallen victim
to false bookkeeping.

Yet when I checked
my records, each
and every year had
been accounted for,
down to the last day,
and could be audited
against old diary entries
(client briefings,
dental check-ups,
parent-teacher meetings,
wedding anniversaries),
verified with credit
card statements
(multi-trip insurance,
antibiotics, concert bookings,
mobile [phone fees]).

And, although
nagging doubts
remained—an
inkling that I had
been ripped off
in some way,
given short shrift,
made to live at an
accelerated pace,

rushed through
my routines with
unseemly haste—
nothing could be proved,
no hard and fast
statistics adduced.

I had, it seems,
unknown to me,
been living my
life to the full.

I know that many of us have been reviewing our accounts
over these past twelve months.

Running the numbers.
Doing the math.
Double-checking the ledger for errors.

Trying to figure out just how our sense of time
could be so very much out of balance.

If I were to take an instant poll right now,
asking you all whether the past year has dragged or sped by,
I suspect the most popular answer would be “yes.”

Not an indication of this or that—but both/and.
That some stretches of time moved like frozen molasses
while others simply seemed to evaporate into thin air.

It’s all been disorienting.
And likely left us feeling a bit discombobulated
when it comes to our relationship with time.

As I mentioned in First Light this week,
I haven’t worn a watch in over a year now.
There hasn’t really been a need,
as there are clocks in most every room of our home.

And so, for me,
it’s not actually been a matter of knowing what time it is.

It's been more a matter
of how the experience of time
unfolds across a day, a week, or a month.

People have joked this year about every day of the week being "Blursday,"
and there's certainly something to that.

This past year has been both a "time out of time."
And a period of life when we've likely been
more acutely aware of time's passing
than at any other point.

While we are still living through a defining moment in our world,
the day-to-day experience of it
has been different for each of us.

While some have felt boredom and restlessness at being stuck at home,
others have faced the dangers of front-line life as essential workers.

While some have had to juggle the chaos
of work and homeschooling all around the kitchen table,
others have tried to simply endure the tedium
punctuated by the relentless tick-tock of the clock,
all while feeling that a precious year of life
has slipped like sands through the hour-glass.

That's why some among us are completely exhausted,
and will be for some time to come.

And why others are desperate to get their vaccines, raring to go,
to get back to life as we knew it in the before times,
even though we still have quite a way to go,
and are in a time that requires of each of us continued vigilance
until we are truly through the worst of this ordeal.

There will, though, come a day when we are together again.
When our pandemic bubbles are finally, intentionally burst,
and we see family, and friends, and our long-lost acquaintances.

I imagine, when that day comes, we will ask one another

some variation on the question: “How as your pandemic?”

I hope we will truly listen for the answer.

For no matter how each of our pandemics has been,
we are going to need to hear one another out.

To take in the story of each other’s struggle.
And bear witness to the resilience every person has—
in their own way—had to draw on to get through this.

May we invite and receive these stories with compassion.
And may we listen carefully
for the ways this experience has changed all of us.

I believe one of the most enduring of these changes
will be in how we relate to time,
in how we understand the meaning and measure
of a day, a season, a year, a life.

I know there are surely some among us
who have been living their best lives over this past year.

For me, personally, I would say it’s been more of a mixed bag.

Working mostly from home,
I have, in some ways, had more freedom to structure my days
in a way that’s been more conducive to balancing work and home.

And I’ve found, like many of you,
that it’s also been at times difficult to separate the two.

Maybe you saw the recent report that Canadians are, on average,
working two extra hours a day during the pandemic.

At the same time, there has, at points,
been some sense of space in my schedule—
though I’ve had to ultimately come clean with myself
about things I have always thought I would do,
if only I had a more time.

It turns out that having a bit more time wasn't actually what was holding me back from reading more of the great, epic Russian novels, for instance. Truth is, I may never get around to reading Pushkin or Dostoevsky.

Maybe you've seen the meme going around this year that claims Sir Isaac Newton, who worked from home when the University of Cambridge was closed during the Bubonic Plague, put forward his theories of calculus during this time.

The meme then asks, "Do you have any idea how bored you must be to invent calculus?"

We all have different ways of coping.
And I want you to hear me say
that whatever you've had to do to get through this year is okay.

If you've been beating yourself up
because you've not baked enough bread,
or developed six-pack abs,
or written the next great Canadian novel,
or not even invented a whole new branch of mathematics,
I want, as your minister, to lovingly say: Stop!

What I do hope for you in this time
is that you are finding ways to live into your days
that sustain you and help you to come alive—
to find whatever helps you to feel connected
to your own life
and life in the broadest sense.

One of the most meaningful ways I've done this
has been by taking up the cello,
which is something I've always wanted to do.

I'm truly awful at it.
But that doesn't matter.

What matters is the deep vibration of the strings
resonating against my chest.
And just giving myself over to something
that absorbs me without numbing me.

Happily, to Bob's relief, I've made a wee bit of progress,
meaning I can now play some scales and a few nursery rhymes
without it sounding like there's
a distressed cat with a lawnmower tearing apart the house.

It is my imperfect offering.

And it is giving me life.

Playing, if I dare call it that,
helps me to attend to my own mental health.

It is a central spiritual practice for me.

And it has helped me this year
to quite literally mark time by keeping time.

Not so much by keeping up with the tick-tock of the metronome,
but by forcing me to be fully in the present moment,
as I scramble to put my fingers in position
and struggle to draw the bow without too much screeching.

Mostly, it's about simply paying attention,
as best I can, given the present circumstances.

It's about trying to inhabit time rather than be inhibited by it.
That's my prayer for you.

What I mean by that is this:
this pandemic, this ordeal,
with all its monotony and all its challenges,
is no less a part of your life
than all that came before any of this started,
and anything that will follow.

And whether it goes by in a blur or drags at a snail's pace,
or both somehow at the same time(!),
I hope you can be engaged and fully alive
through as much of it as you can possibly manage.

It is easy to allow ourselves to be hindered or held back in this time, while we long for the day when we'll all get back to our real lives, when we return to our regularly-scheduled programming.

But, dearly beloved, there is no such thing.

Life's only iron-clad guarantee
is this present, precious and always-passing moment.

So be as attentive to it as you can be.
Be alive to it as much as possible.

Find your thing—
a hobby, a practice, anything, even your chores,
that you can do with intention and mindfulness.

Don't let hope of tomorrow
distract you from gift of today.

As the poet Rhina Espaillat puts it:

don't save yourself for later, you won't keep;
spend yourself now on loving all you can.¹

May we do just that.

In the way we spend our time,
may we honour the sacred and stubborn fact
that we are, indeed, spending ourselves.

May we spend ourselves in such a way
that when the final accounting is done,
we will count ourselves blessed to have been alive,
for every moment we were given.

Blessed Be.

Reflection Question: What has time taught you this year?

¹ Rhina Espaillat, "Guidelines."

Benediction

The words of the ancient Indian writer, Kalidasa:

Look to this day!
For it is life, the very life of life,
 In its brief course
lie all the verities and realities of our existence:
 The bliss of growth
The glory of action
The splendour of achievement

For yesterday is but a dream
And tomorrow is only a vision,
But today well-lived
makes every yesterday a dream of happiness
 And every tomorrow a vision of hope.

[Let us] look well, therefore, to this day!