The time of our lives

Monica Furlong

SOME YEARS AGO A FRIEND AND I WERE LENT a former miner's cabin in a remote bit of the Mohave desert in California. It stood by itself among the cactus and the *palo verde* in sight of the Chocolate Mountains, and it had no mod cons – no water supply, no electricity or gas, no lavatory. We collected water on foot for drinking, cooking and washing, from a pure spring which was, happily, twenty minutes walking distance away. When we needed to answer a call of nature we did so out on the sand – there was no one to observe us – and made the delightful discovery that what we carelessly flush down the loo at home was treasure trove to hundreds of little insects in the desert who always arrived on cue to bear their trophy away. When we wanted a cup of tea or a cooked meal (we had brought supplies of food with us), we collected dried-up bits of cactus and made a fire in an old stove. This burned so rapidly (because of holes in the stove and the dryness of the fuel) that we had to confine ourselves to frying and very quick boiling (tea, rice, Japanese noodles, etc.). We slept on the floor on strips of plastic foam which we rolled up during the day, and after dark we lit an oil lamp. Since by day it was very hot and we were totally alone, we gradually, without really thinking about it or discussing it, got out of the habit of wearing clothes around the cabin except at night – I guess we were about as close to the garden of Eden as it is possible for over-civilized westerners like us to get.

Letting time flow

It was an austere but special time, and memories of it influence me to this day, but the most interesting thing of all about it was our relation to time. We would get up when we felt like it, and sleep when we felt tired. There was no need to do anything except minimal chores – fetching water from the spring, collecting a bit of fuel, tidying away the beds and eating breakfast. The middle part of the day was too hot to do anything at all – so we lay around, talked, slept, watched birds, and tried to pick out tunes on a simple musical instrument we found there – a psaltery, I think it was. The late afternoon was a wonderful time in which to walk, observing flowers, birds, scorpions, footprints, snake marks, scuffles in the sand which had ended in some creature capturing its prey. Then we

would return to the cabin, drink a little gin, cook our supper, and light the lamp. The final phase before bed was to sit outside and watch the stars, which were very clear.

The place was an extraordinary discovery of time without pressure. I could not remember when I had felt so happy since I was a small child. Trying to work out the source of it I felt that two strands were involved. One was that since there was simply nothing to do in the desert that was not directly related to simple bodily needs. There was a total absence of the usual nagging sense of things to be done – phone calls to be made, shopping to be fetched, bills to be paid, work to be finished, letters to be written, or even trips to be gone on, people to see, or television to watch. What simply did not exist was the usually heavy sense of 'ought'. Take away the sense of 'ought' and one was free to be. Time was limitless and therefore almost meaningless, though there was, of course, a finishing point at which we would need to return to our time-bound lives. It was as if I had taken off manacles, temporarily exchanged the justification of works (all those duties) for justification by grace. My huge happiness seemed to stem from the feeling that I was 'all right' without doing anything at all – nothing had to be proved. Far from Satan finding mischief for idle hands to do, it was as if the vacuum of time was effortlessly filled by being and was no longer a problem.

But it isn't like that

For most of us in the West, including me, most of the time life simply isn't like that. We have jobs, duties, worries (usually related to money), standards, which keep us hard at it. The burdens appear to come unsought, but we also bring them on ourselves – household labour-saving devices, for example, drive us to demand higher standards of cleanliness and effort from ourselves, just as faxes, voice mail and e-mail in the office demand faster, better responses. Perhaps we feel we need our burdens of the time-consuming sort, from housework to busy admin, as a sort of ballast to convince us that we matter, that we are real, not little blobs of matter which in another eighty years or so will have ceased to be. It makes us what some of the first Australian Aboriginals to meet white people in the eighteenth century called 'the people of the clock', as opposed to being 'the people of the dream' as they were themselves.[1] We keep our eye on watch or clock as a way of checking up on ourselves, making sure that we are using time in the way our parents and teachers would have approved, and it makes us, temporarily, feel better.

The perception in the West of the proper use of time is that we should be useful, busy, occupied. This is an attitude that has developed during my lifetime – drones were more admired in the pre-war era, I think because they were thought to have a certain aristocratic style about them. But now, in some occupations, virtually no time for private life is allowed at all. This would have been true of the factory worker or servant in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, but now tends to be true of some of the highest-paid occupations – lawyers, business executives, people 'in the City'. The business guru Charles Handy describes giving an invitation to a young man who works in the City to come round for a drink one evening, only to discover that he worked every evening of his life as well as all day. There is a lesser breed, in the lower managerial group, however, who also work very long hours, said to be the longest in Europe, without getting extraordinarily well paid, more or less forced to do so if they hope to keep their jobs. Greed, of various kinds, is an ever present temptation – greed for money, greed for power. Yet to make money and have no leisure in which to spend it is an odd paradox, and can be borne only by postponing the pleasure to an annual holiday or some future date of bliss. Pleasure becomes divorced from the means of producing it. There is pleasure in work, of course, but not in overwork and exhaustion.

Time and the ages of life

Nobody starts that way. One of the many good things about young children is that they simply 'don't get' the adult obsession with time and the need for hurry. Just because time, in a sense, does not exist for them, they can take twenty minutes to put on their shoes, to visit the loo, to clean their teeth, to climb the stairs, as whatever does not interest them gets taken over by thoughts, fantasies, play, conversation and other ideas which crop up along the way. They are living in their private world of Batman, Spiderman, Barbie, pirates, knights, mummies and daddies, fantasy school and all the rest. The outside world encroaches on this earlier than it used to do, with 'activities', but to a degree their inner world is intact and invulnerable at least until school starts. Most of us recall this early world, and indeed much of our childhood and youth, as 'going on for ever'. I can remember thinking how unlikely it was that I should ever reach the end of the four years of junior school. It was not that I expected to die, but that the period of time seemed unimaginable – I was still living in a more or less timeless world.

The world of work always hung over the adolescent young a good deal – 'shades of the prison house begin to close / Upon the growing

boy', as Wordsworth said. As with all human growth there is a mixture of pride and frustration in assuming adult responsibilities, in being able to hold down a job, earn a wage, and spend one's own money on items of one's own choice. For those who still get the chance of finding a job, it is a rite of passage into the adult world. Many now never make this passage – time for them becomes something very different from the morning struggle to be on time at the office or factory; it is something to be filled in, preferably with something (legal or otherwise) more interesting and exciting than sitting and watching television all the time.

For the young parent life is more stressful than it ever will be again, unless they happen to work in one of the pressured, but well-paid, professions. For a parent there is no time to live one's own life – to talk to one's partner without interruption, to read books, to go out, to eat a quiet meal at home. The huge creative task of bringing up children eats away the whole of young adulthood – by the time it is over parents are different people from those who began the great task.

Middle age, which, in living memory, was often the beginning of the process of physical decline, has changed extraordinarily in a generation or so. There was always the hope of life briefly being a bit easier, before retirement set in, and the hope of money being a bit more plentiful – for middle-class society of the mortgage being paid for, some repairs and decorating done to the house, investment in new carpets or some new furniture, and a really good holiday for two. But even twenty years ago nothing could quite have prepared us for the scale of the explosion of new adventure in middle age – the wrinklies going to university, learning new skills, starting new businesses, going on demanding expeditions in wilderness country, and spending enormous sums of money on holidays. How we crave 'experiences'. I find in myself that there is some greed in this too, part of a need to feel that I have really lived. Yet experiences only make sense if I know how to digest what I have seen. Sometimes I feel that the passion to go everywhere and do everything is a little like the current obsession with 'information'. 'Experiences', like 'information', are meaningless outside a context that makes them relevant.

Yet it would be hard to deny that the new middle-aged vitality does have the potential for good. A new level of fitness at this time of life, together with, for a section of the population, a relative affluence, has transformed the expectation of when old age is likely to arrive. Old age, as we live it now, is simply an extension of this active life, one limited only by money and, eventually, frailty.

Have we lost something?

It is perfectly possible to see this energetic use of time as pure gain, a great leap forward in human happiness and fulfilment, and I am surprised at how uncomfortable I feel with it all, even as I explore some of the new possibilities for myself. What is it that rings an alarm bell?

I suppose the making of people into a commodity is one alarm bell. 'In my job,' someone in a managerial role said to me recently, 'they work you till you drop. Then when you break down, physically or mentally, they get rid of you, and take on someone else, whom they then work until *they* drop . . .' Is the thought of a prosperous middle age the carrot that makes this abuse of a life possible? Not everyone is going to survive until the day of release comes, or be in good health to enjoy it, and in the meantime they have lost much that is irretrievable in terms of relationships, culture, reflection, meditation – all the things that 'take time', and that 'time' makes possible. Rather like the old idea of 'pie in the sky' for those who had had a disappointing life on earth, so there is a new idea of a blissful era ahead of us in our lives, for which, so it is thought, it may be worth trading a good life in the present.

On the other hand, not everyone is prepared to play this harsh game. There are many who opt out of 'working till they drop', either through necessity, or because the idea makes them angry, or because they have a dream of a better sort of life. They want life *now* and are prepared to experiment as a way to get it, even if that means living on less money – sailing round the world, living on remote islands, joining communities, or (and this is probably the hard way to do it) staying put but making a deliberate choice to earn less money, but also to work less. Rather like Thoreau on Walden Pond,[2] they are rich in time if in nothing else.

Built into us, fortunately, there are certain recurring human experiences which simply, though temporarily, wipe out all the worrying about money and calculating career possibilities; by putting them into a different perspective they make them appear so much nonsense. They are the experiences that take us outside time. Ecstasy (*ekstasis*) – however this standing outside of ourselves is achieved – gives an overpowering sense of unity with the created world. Sex, if linked to love, can give this feeling. So can great art. Or religious conversion. Illness and pain can sometimes do it too – our own, or that of those we love. It is as if such experiences reorientate us to a knowledge of ourselves as creatures for whom time is fleeting, but who, at least in part, inhabit eternity.

Too great a sense of worldliness makes time our enemy, with death the most dreaded possibility, and ageing – the visible sign that death approaches – bitterly fought. It feels like an act of denial – 'I am not the sort of creature who could possibly die'. I wonder if it is not the fear of death that makes us so busy – 'I cannot possibly die while there is all this going on'. A couple of times I have watched terminally ill friends deal with their natural fear of imminent death by a frantic whirl of buying expensive goods coupled with a desperate busyness. God knows, I can imagine the feeling, but I have wondered whether acquiring possessions and remaining busy is a common human trick for trying to stave off death. How can I die when I have a marvellous new stereo, and so many interesting things to do? Very easily, actually, but as I note the marks of my own ageing, and also my resolute busyness, I wonder sometimes if I, and indeed many people around me, are not playing a slower but similarly morbid game.

Taking the longer perspective

There are those, however, who are simply not in a position to play these games. Carers of sick and handicapped relatives, the poor, the frail elderly – they are not usually able to fill their time with delightful and stimulating activity, but are often confined to the home, or rarely have the chance to travel far beyond it. I do not know whether they are any more in touch with death than the rest of us, but many must experience time as a burden, with the loneliness and boredom it can inflict.

Making some sort of acknowledgement of our inevitable death and an accommodation to it is possibly the secret our forebears knew that we do not. Death was a much more common event in people's lives – like so many of their contemporaries my grandmothers both lost children – and it was not possible for them to have too many illusions about it. Religion too was much more commonly part of everyday life, and undoubtedly informed the lives of those, like my grandparents, who did not practise it themselves. What religion does, over and over again, is place life on a long perspective.

But there are important forms of reflection and meditation, even in our clock-ridden world. The passion for gardening in England shows a fine instinct for a slowing down of our nervous haste for as long as it takes plants to grow – it forces a patience upon us, and has its own slow rhythms which quieten and soothe us. (I am not speaking, of course, of those who invite a professional in to create their garden for them.) Some games, I think, are similarly reflective – cricket, for example –

and some handicrafts. Music, the other arts at all but the most superficial level, reading, cooking, eating with friends, walking, swimming, some kinds of travel, playing with small children – all are, or can be, ways of treasuring, cherishing time, living fully in the present moment.

Finally, old age is the time when the confrontation with time becomes unavoidable. The imprint is unmistakably upon us, our strength and vitality are diminished, and our vulnerability cannot be ignored. The question is how to find some liberty from this decline, a different joy which does not depend on our beauty, or success, or boundless energy, or even the acute mind that we once enjoyed. The answer may lie in ceasing to prove ourselves – it is too late to do that anyway – and rediscovering ourselves as children of a God beyond time. And this in turn, in my view, makes it possible to make an appropriate accommodation to the fact of death.

What religion faithfully reminded us of, as it does still if we care to listen, is that we are not just creatures of this world, here today and gone tomorrow, our lives comparable, as the poet Herrick suggested, to the brief flowering of the daffodil. Some part of us, as we have glimpsed occasionally in the course of our lives, in our moments of joy and ecstasy, is planted in eternity, and contrary to what we feel in this life, may feel more at home there, more certain of who we have turned out to be, than among the frets and stings of time. Well, we shall see.

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NOTE

1 Mary Durack, The rock and the sand (Constable, 1969), p 21.
2 Thoreau was a nineteenth-century American writer who lived 'the simple life' as a hermit near Walden Pond.