

Beyond the clock, what makes you tick?

How many songs about time run through your head?

“Time Waits for No One”

“Time is On My Side”

“As Time Goes By”

“Until the End of Time”

“Takin My Time”

“Nick of Time”

“Time After Time”

“Time On My Hands”

Look in Bartlett’s or any other collection of famous quotations and you will find dozens of profound pronouncements on the subject. Your local bookstore no doubt features a dozen or more books on time management.

You get the message. We have time on our brains.

Contrary to one popular saying, time is NOT money. Time is much more valuable, much more central to your happiness and your sense of achievement than money.

A number of writers have retold variations of the “Big Rocks First” story as a metaphor for time. Stephen Covey has a version in his 7 Habits book. The metaphor: fill a large bucket with rocks. Is it full? Yes and no. No more rocks will fit, but some small stones will. So add stones to the brim. Is it full now? Yes and no. Fine gravel can still be poured through the cracks. Then you can add sand. Finally, even when the sand is up the edges of the bucket, you can carefully pour in some water, letting it seep slowly into the smallest cracks.

If we put the big rocks in the bucket first, the smaller rocks, the fine gravel, the sand, and the water will all fit. However, if we put them in the opposite order, the big rocks don’t fit.

Many of us do that with our lives – not leaving room for the big rocks. Not doing the important things first.

In this era of digital marking of milliseconds and universal time synchronization signals, it’s easy to forget that we weren’t always so precise and preoccupied with units of time.

Sundials were in use as early as 3500 BC. Early mechanical clocks appeared in the 13th century, and the first public clock (with a bell) was apparently in Milan, about 1335. Sand glass (hour glass) time keepers were common in the 14th century and may have been in use much earlier. The industrial age brought us more consistent spring mechanism clocks and eventually electric mechanical clocks.

Until recently, time was a local thing. Not that long ago – a little more than a century ago – there was still no need for communities to have the same clock as other communities. Travelling by horse or by foot to another village, one could simply judge the time of day by the amount of daylight and proceed accordingly. But a new technology – railroads – forced towns to adopt common systems for time. Rail lines worked best with schedules and schedules depend on towns following the same clock.

While our time keeping devices have changed, time is also ingrained in our bodies. We are inclined to rise with the sun and grow drowsy after it dips over the horizon. Those of us living far from the equator also recognize the seasonal swings – the extended energy of summer and the tendency to hibernate in winter. Our bodies are keeping time.

This article is too short to get into the whole area of biorhythms and how our bodies are governed by time. It's sufficient to make the point that the contemporary emphasis on time-keeping isn't a wholly new thing – it is an information-age variation on an ancient theme.

Despite today's technology, we don't all live with the same sense of time. Studies have shown that people living in different cultures have varying accuracy in estimating time. In fact, you can predict how accurate those people will be by measuring how punctual their commuter trains are. In Germany and Japan, where trains are consistently on time, people have a more accurate mental clock (if by accurate we mean the same as a clock). Having grown up in a society where the difference between 11:08 and 11:09 is the difference between catching and missing the train, they have trained their brains to track time accurately.

It's interesting to look at differences between how Americans and Canadians use time, given that our cultures are so similar. Canadians spend more time than Americans shopping, preparing and eating meals at home, and engaged in adult education. Americans spend more time than Canadians at restaurants, personal grooming, and participating in religious activities.

But within a culture, there are also great personal variations. Try this experiment with someone you know who is chronically late for appointments. Over lunch or some other distraction, compare your sense of time against an objective measure (a clock). You might agree to guess how long your food order will take to arrive. Note the order time then agree not to look at a clock or watch. When the food arrives, compare your estimate of the time that has passed to your (chronically late) friend.

Quite often in these informal little tests, you might estimate the time as 18 minutes. The clock will say it took 21 minutes. But your friend who is always running late likely guessed that time at, for example, 12 minutes.

Still, there are some common characteristics in how people use time. What do we do first? Here's a very common-sense list of our typical preferences:

We will do this:	Before we will do this:
- what we enjoy	- what we dislike
- what is easy	- what is difficult
- what we know how to do	- what we have to learn to do
- what is urgent	- what can be postponed
- what others ask us to do	- what we have 'told ourselves' what we will do

* adapted from "The Art of Time"

How we manage our time is all about how we communicate with ourselves. And there is no effective interpersonal or organizational communication without effective internal communication.

What are your internal conversations about time? What do you tell yourself about your relationship to the passing of the hours, days, weeks and years?

We in North America complain that our many labour-savings devises and 'advancements' haven't given us greater free time or leisure time. It's easy to assume that the rest of the world operates with similar pressures. Yet much of it must be self-imposed, for in western Europe free time has been increasing while ours decreases.

As the book Rebel Sell notes, in North America we have "casual Fridays" when people can wear jeans to work. In France, they just have "no work" Fridays. In France, most workers have 2 – 4 weeks more vacation time than the average American.

So enough about the challenges of time. What are some solutions?

It's not all about having a 'system.' Many "time management" systems fail to account for personal and personality differences. Designed by people with great attention to detail and a preference for visual learning, the systems are often lost on less linear, oral learners.

One book that *does* look at this area is "How to Be Organized in Spite of Yourself," by Sunny Schlenger and Roberta Roesch. The authors look at personal work styles and how you can manage your time (and space) accordingly.

Do you recognize yourself in one of these time styles?

- "Hopper" – jumps from task to task
- "Allergic to Detail" – impatient with follow-through
- "Fence Sitter" – can't make up your mind what to do
- "Cliff Hanger" – only motivated by deadlines

A number of other time styles are also identified. The strategies for each of these aren't surprising or complex. Hoppers are told to reduce distractions by closing their office door and turning off their phone ringer and so on.

While any such categories will have their limitations, they are a good prompt for thinking about your time style. That's why most time management workshops start by having people diarize their use of time. It can be an eye-opener to see what we *actually* do with our 24/7, as opposed to what we *think* we do. For example, most people significantly underestimate the amount of time they spend watching TV, perhaps because TV-watching is so widely considered to be 'a waste of time.'

So track your time, but also note your thoughts about time. A diary with space for the time, the activity, and your thoughts / observations can be useful. You don't need to diarize your time for too long to achieve some big picture learning.

In my case, I discovered a strong tendency to:

- overestimate how much 'free time' was available in the future; and
- underestimate how long certain tasks or initiatives would take.

A classic example is the Christmas holiday season. During my years of College teaching, the Christmas holidays were a welcome reprieve from the grind of marking hundreds of essays, reports, and end-of-term exams. Invariably, though, I overestimated how much free time I would have during the holidays. In my mind, I imagined days of reflective musing about this project or that relationship. I imagined hours of skiing or walking. I imagined a few hours of writing on a favourite idea that had been in the back of my mind for months.

Of course, those imaginings added up to about 25 days. When I tried a more objective review of available time, after deleting family gatherings, social events, shopping, decorating, un-decorating, and snow shovelling, the free time amounted to about 1.25 days.

I also tend to think that I can write the fabulous article in three hours (really, it's seven), shovel the walks and driveway in eight minutes (actually, 28), and so on.

Gradually, over time (funny how time teaches us about time), I have come to learn that things take how long they take. And how long they take adds up to more hours than I have in a day.

Still, there is hope. After years of tinkering, I have become more satisfied with how I work with time.

The key to all strategies is twofold: recognize the nature of our relationship with time, and recognize your own time tendencies.

My own system – which I will always consider a work in progress – seems to work reasonably well for my personality. It is based around setting aside blocks of time for different stages of planning.

My system, when I manage to follow it, involves:

- ✓ 1 day every 6 months to consider and set long term goals
- ✓ 2-3 hours, once a month, to set a strategy for meeting goals
- ✓ 1 hour at the start of each week (or on a Sunday evening) to set my weekly priorities
- ✓ ½ hour at the start of each day to decide what I will do that day

My long term brainstorming sheet looks like this. I don't get too worked up about the categories down the left hand column – they are just prompts to get me thinking.

	Goals	Ideas / Initiatives
Financial		
Business		
Fun		
Relationship		
Personal		
Health / Fitness		
Contributions to community		

For me, the key to these is maintaining some carry-over from long term to medium term to short term. My personality is such that I am continually interested in new things, new possibilities, new projects. So in order to ensure that my six-month goals don't get totally forgotten, I have created a simple planning sheet. It looks like this:

	Goals	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4
Financial					
Business					
Fun					
Relationship					
Personal					
Health / Fitness					
Contributions to community					

The goals from my main brainstorming / goal setting sheet get noted, in very brief point form, down the left hand column and then I write in the dates for each coming week. At the start of that week, I note what specific actions I will be undertaking to move me towards those goals. Each week has a focus on just one or two of the goal areas – to keep things clear and achievable.

As many writers have noted, managing our use of time is really about managing our selves. The book “The Power of Focus” does a good job of showing how entrepreneurs and others with significant independence in their professional lives can better manage their activities.

One key is recognizing that you can’t expand time, so you have to cut down activities. You have to choose. “The Power of Focus” suggests a 4-D approach to help you prioritize:

Dump It – say no and cut things from your list

Delegate It – ask who else could / should do this task

Defer It – many tasks jump to the front of our consciousness but properly are much lower priority

Do It – get working on important projects, now.

And perhaps one “solution” is to recognize that the notion of solving time is antithetical. One needs to maintain a certain good humour about the fact that time is bigger than us.

We can manage ourselves, at least to the degree that humans have self-control. We can not manage time.

In closing, attached are a couple poems about time that I enjoy. One is by my favourite poet, Billy Collins. The other is a poem that I wrote, 'back in the day.'

By the way, this article took a few months of reading and a few hours of writing to create. It only took you – what? – 10 minutes to read. See how much time I "saved" you?

You're welcome. Thanks for reading.

Lorne Daniel

PS – don't forget the poems on the following pages

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Kate Has Learned to Count

It is Eric's second year of number facts
and Kate has been listening.

When he is done reciting his sums
she proclaims with all the wisdom
of her five years
"Daddy I can count to 100 you know."

"So what" Eric says
"Numbers go way past 100."
"I know" Kate adds
"I know numbers never end.
Numbers never end until you die."

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While Eating a Pear

After we have finished here,
the world will continue its quiet turning,
and the years will still transpire,
but now without their numbers,
and the days and months will pass
without the names of Norse and Roman gods.

Time will go by the way it did
before history, pure and unnoticed,
a mystery that arose between the sun and moon
before there was a word
for dawn or noon or midnight,

before there were names for the earth's
uncountable things,
when fruit hung anonymously
from scattered groves of trees,
light on one smooth green side,
shadow on the other.

Billy Collins

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from "The Art of Drowning," University of Pittsburgh Press