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Introduction

When I was alive, I believed — as you do — that time was at least as real and solid as myself and probably more so. I said “one o’clock” as though I could see it, and “Monday” as though I could find it on the map; and I let myself be hurried along from minute to minute, day to day, year to year, as though I were actually moving from one place to another. Like everyone else, I lived in a house bricked up with seconds and minutes, weekends and New Year’s Days, and I never went outside until I died, because there was no other door. Now I know that I could have walked through the walls.

— Peter S. Beagle, *The Last Unicorn*

I’ve spent most of my life feeling deprived of time. It seemed I never had enough time for the activities most important to me: creativity, visiting friends, travel, exercise, reading, dancing. In my quest to find more time, I tried many things: time management books, seminars, day planners, computer calendars. I even wrote my own computer program to keep track of my to-do list. Although I became skilled at the use of these time management tools, I was still frustrated. I complained constantly about being too busy to do the things I wanted, and blamed my lack of time on my forty-hour-a-week job.

Then, through the actions of Divine Providence, I lost my job. Did things improve? No. I woke up three months later and realized I still felt starved for

time. I was saying no to social outings because I was too busy. My creative work was pushed into the corners of my days which meant I often “didn’t get around to it.” And I wasn’t building bookcases, reupholstering chairs and baking bread, all the things I thought I’d do someday “when I had enough time.”

Early one afternoon, while preparing for a class that I would teach that evening, I looked out my apartment window and saw a crow hopping down the street, pursued by a cat. I ran downstairs and furiously shooed the cats (two of them by the time I got there) away from the crow, who seemed unable to use one wing. I spent the rest of the afternoon defending the crow, who took refuge in a low-lying tree, from the cats, who kept trying to sneak up from behind. My daughter came home from school and fed the crow with bits of cheese and milk-soaked bread, proffered at the end of a stick. She stood guard while I ran and photocopied my handouts for class. A friend came by to have coffee with me and I sent her off to get lattes which we drank standing beneath the tree. About the time I had to leave for my class, my friend, Jerry, who had always wanted to adopt a crow, came home from work and easily captured the crow by throwing a blanket over him. Jerry took off with the crow and I went off to teach.

Although I had spent a fraction of the time I thought necessary in preparation, the class went as well as any other and the students loved the story of how I spent my afternoon. My encounter with the crow shifted the way I perceived time. I realized that I was not making any progress, trying to corral time into neat little boxes on my schedule. Time was much more fluid and mysterious than I had imagined.

The crow is the bird associated with Chronos, the Greek god whose name became a description of one kind of (chronological) time. He was often pictured with a sickle, like our figure of Old Father Time. Chronos swallowed his children because he was trying to stop the natural cycle of life: it had been predicted that one of his children (Zeus) would dethrone him. I recognized that like Chronos I was trying to control time, rather than letting it flow (a kind of time the Greeks called *kairos*).

I began reading books on the subject, trying to figure out more about concepts I had taken for granted, like hours and weeks. How did these concepts develop? How did people in different cultures experience time? Reading Jeremy Rifkin’s book *Time Wars* was a revelation. Rifkin compares our practice of quantifying time to our relentless domination and exploitation of the natural

world. Our pillaging of the environment can be linked to our artificial sense of time. We can use up the resources of the earth faster than they can be replaced and produce waste at a pace too fast for the slower process of recycling. Just as we bought the spatial myth that “bigger is better,” we have been trained to believe the temporal myth that “faster is better.” Living this way alienates us from our environment and causes physical and spiritual distress.

Rifkin talks about the growing number of people who are challenging these and other cultural paradigms. He calls us “time heretics.” We are the sort of people who aspire to a simpler and slower life, who are willing to give up income for the luxury of time. Some of us home-school our children, preferring to let them learn by living life rather than in the artificial environment of the school system. Some of us look for a place to put down roots into the land, or connect with the place we live through gardening. We cultivate our neighborhoods and create community. We enjoy establishing new holiday traditions and reviving old ones. We savor food that is grown locally, cooked with love and shared with others at a leisurely tempo, the agenda of the Slow Food movement. We do yoga, we meditate, we choose activities that slow down the body and the mind. We dwell in the present, rather than always looking ahead towards an unknown future.

Studying in the School of the Seasons

The crow I rescued stayed in a dark closet at Jerry’s house for two days. At dawn on the second day, he hopped out onto the sill of the window Jerry had left open for him. Another crow was cawing outside and they exchanged cries for a few minutes. Then, with one backward glance, the crow spread his wings and flew off, apparently healed by his days of rest.

Like the wounded crow, I realized that time itself could heal me. I began to focus my attention on natural time and noticed that every cycle has a rhythm. Unlike artificial time, which is usually charted on graphs, with grids and boxes, natural time is cyclical, with periods of work and rest. Instead of being productive all the time, I began to allow myself time off.

At first, I experimented with the lunar cycle. Short and simple. About the same length as a month. I found I could time my projects to take advantage

of the rising energy of the waxing moon, then after the full moon, focus on research and evaluation during the waning moon.

It took me much longer to recognize the possibilities offered by the cycle of the seasons. And yet I had a deep affection for them. I was raised Catholic, a religion whose liturgical year is rooted deep in the seasonal cycle. I had trained as a folklorist and spent years collecting information about how people celebrated holidays in various cultures and religions. And I taught workshops called *Rituals of the Season* for people hungry to bring celebration back into their lives. In these classes, I laid out, as on a banquet table, all the symbols and metaphors employed in the holidays celebrated across the world and invited students to help themselves. "Choose the ones that have meaning for you," I suggested. "Try creating your own traditions." I shared my experiences with seasonal holidays, the beauty of the table I set for Persian New Year every spring, the pleasure of feasting on fruits under the full moon of Tu B'Shevat, the drama and magic of an act as simple as lighting candles on winter solstice.

But while I celebrated the seasonal holidays, I was slow to recognize the value of the cycle of the seasons. Once a year I teach a class based on the book *Wishcraft* by Barbara Sher, a wonderful workbook about figuring out what you really want to do. Towards the end of the class, I ask students to think about what they hope to accomplish and make a plan for the year ahead. As I stared at the blank calendar grid which I handed out, I realized that it represented artificial time, in which one month is assumed to be equal to any other. Knowing how different June is from November, I thought; why not design my year around the seasons instead of the months? I drew a circle and filled in my ideal schedule: a burst of writing in fall and spring when I have the most energy, a time of hibernation and nesting in winter, a summer spent taking classes and traveling.

When I saw the joy with which I could approach the year, I thought of all those major items on my to-do lists and where they would fit. All those workbooks I wanted to work through? I could do one a season. Major house-cleaning? I could schedule that for spring and fall and then not feel guilty during the winter and summer. I'd been wanting to frame and put up pictures on my walls. What season did that feel like? Maybe summer. And I'd been promising to put all the photos in the photo albums for years. What season did that feel like? Autumn, perhaps right around Thanksgiving.

Over the next year I experimented with these concepts. I called it my School of the Seasons. And when I saw how much I enjoyed this slower ap-

proach to living, I began sharing it with others: through classes, workshops, a correspondence course, magazine articles and an online course through my website, School of the Seasons.

My students responded with the same enthusiasm I had experienced. They told me the concepts were transforming their lives. A woman in Maine who was suffering from Chronic Fatigue Syndrome was relieved of her symptoms. A busy mother in California recognized the destructive messages about time she was imposing on her children and completely altered their schedule. A Chicago man who took my workshop at the Take Back Your Time Day conference wrote to tell me “I can now see ‘magical’ happenings are the result of living and using natural time.” Over and over again, students tell me, “I’ll be working with this material for years.”

How To Use This Book

I wrote this book to help you explore your relationship with time, recognize your unique tempo and rhythm and align with natural time rather than artificial time. It is divided into twelve weeks and each week focuses on a different unit of time, from the minute, through hours, days, weeks, moons, months, seasons, years and finally a lifetime.

Each section contains exercises you can use to apply the principles to your own life. There’s a delicious irony in teaching a class on how to find more time in your life and asking you to take on new tasks.

It may be that you only have time to read the essays, the first time through. That’s fine. Let the concepts seep into your life. Notice how they show up as you move through time.

If you want to take a more active approach, invite a friend or a couple of friends to read each week’s essay and share their experiences. I’m always inspired by the creative ways my students interpret the assignments.

If you’re working through the exercises alone, read all of the suggestions, then choose one or two to try during the following week. If you find yourself bogged down because you want to do every one, let go of this expectation of perfection (while noticing that it might be a problematic approach to life which is adding to your time stress).

If one week does not give you enough time, stretch out. Give yourself a year to go through the twelve sections, one a month.

I've called the exercises Time Play rather than "homework" or "tasks" because I hope you enjoy them, rather than seeing them as extra items to put on an already full to-do list. A strong positive or negative reaction to an exercise is an important clue. Often the exercises students most resist are the ones that produce the biggest insights when finally tackled.

There is no right or wrong way to do the exercises in this book. I always applaud when my students tell me they've decided to skip the homework. Your time is your life and it's your choice how to spend it. I hope the ideas in this book help you enjoy it more fully.

Time Play

I. BEFORE PICTURE

Before beginning the course, I invite you to spend ten to fifteen minutes writing a description of your current relationship with time. You'll be returning to this at the end of the first week as you start shifting your attitude towards time. You'll also review it at the end of the twelve weeks to see what you've accomplished.

How do you feel about time? What's your biggest frustration? What aspects of your relationship to time do you find satisfying? What isn't working or needs improvement? Include specifics, for instance, "I usually arrive five to ten minutes late for appointments," or "At the end of the day, I haven't done half the tasks I expected to complete that day," or "Whenever possible I try to do two things at the same time, like reading while eating a meal." The more detail you can provide the better.

2. TIMELESSNESS

Reflect on the moments in your life when you've experienced timelessness, moments when you felt you had stepped outside of time or had lost track of time. Write a brief description of at least three of these experiences.

REFERENCES FOR INTRODUCTION

Fitzgerald, Waverly, *School of the Seasons*, Priestess of Swords Press 1991

Rifkin, Jeremy, *Time Wars*, Holt & Company 1987

Sher, Barbara, *Wishcraft*, Ballantine 1979

WEB RESOURCES:

School of the Seasons, www.schooloftheseasons.com