

THE LAYERS OF TIME

Time as Pressure

The alarm goes off. I'm not ready to wake up. The pressures of the day are already pressing in before I've fully shaken off the threads of sleep or properly opened my eyes to the new day.

I grab an extra five minutes. It feels stolen. It also feels risky. What if I drift off again and five minutes becomes forty-five?

My diary tells me the day is already broken into sections — often unrelated — jarring awkwardly against one another. Meetings. Tasks. Appointments. Obligations. And my diary stretches far beyond today, extending both into the future and back into the past. Measured out. Rigid. Uncompromising. Unforgiving.

And much of it self-imposed.

We all know this version of time – it is the sea we swim in, the air we breathe; we live within it as if it were the natural order of things.

Most of us never question it. We simply count the days until our next 'break' – a holiday from time which becomes just another extension of it, because there is so much life we feel we must cram into such a narrow window. It passes before we even begin to relax into it and the countdown to the next 'break' begins. "Thank God it's Friday" becomes a mantra for the headlong dash toward a hollow future that promises release yet endlessly delivers more of the same.

This is 'fleeting' time. The thin sliver of 'no-time' squeezed between the momentum of a relentless past and the emotional expectations of a programmed future. It is gone before we can savour it because past and future meet so seamlessly that there is scarcely a Planck's width of existence between them.

We arrive at the moment of our death having barely touched our lives at all.

It is factory time. And we are the product rolling endlessly off the assembly line. And there is never the time to stop and realise exactly what is happening.



Except when a tiny window opens up — something inside has been slowly pressuring to emerge into awareness as a revelation or a vision of the future that is stark and, much like the alarm clock, really is a wakeup call.

In my early thirties, during what I would later recognise as a kind of quiet midlife crisis, I suddenly saw my appointment diary stretching all the way to the moment of my passing.

Week after week. Appointment after appointment. The same structures endlessly reproducing themselves into the future.

*“What is this life if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare.”*

The sheer horror of the realisation was like standing beneath a cold shower and shaking off the illusion of being comfortable. I needed more than a two-week holiday in the Greek islands. I needed to step outside the machinery itself.

Time as Space

So I took ‘time-out’ and began a slow overland journey from London to Kathmandu on a Bedford truck with twenty-five other intrepid adventurers.

And slowly, almost imperceptibly at first, time itself began to change.

Or perhaps more accurately:

time started to unfold...and I unfolded within it.

Days began to assume a different rhythm. There was still a schedule, but we inhabited it willingly now, rather than being driven by it. The richness of the experience filled each moment with newness and strangeness and, as we traversed different cultures slowly enough to genuinely engage with them, I began to feel the hard protective boundaries of self, loosening into something far more experimental, surprising and at times even wonderful.

There was time to breathe and properly inhale — deep breaths rather than the shallow gasps of forever chasing the next moment. Life was no longer experienced as a frantic dash toward some illusory finish line but as something textured, spacious and quietly alive.

Sitting on the back of the truck as it rolled for hours through immense foreign landscapes, often with nothing to do but simply be together, I gradually felt myself shifting from a creature endlessly performing for an audience into a being beginning to recognise something more authentic within itself — a centre with its own gravitational pull; not rigid or fixed, but somehow uncompromising all the same, no longer fragmenting so easily in order to please others.

Little details, normally too insignificant to capture an attention already caught by the next thing, became delights. Even moments of tension, friction and discomfort were no longer inconveniences obstructing the fastest passage to the next thing but part of the very fabric of existence itself. Even having nothing to do became a luxury to savour rather than a gap to be filled.



There was all the time in the world to get to know my fellow travellers — and for them to become lifelong friends rather than passing acquaintances. Spontaneous changes of plan became exciting rather than disruptive. Simple moments, like a roadside stop for tea, became experiences of embedded pleasure that had more to do with presence than with tea itself.

And perhaps that was the deeper shift taking place.

Time was no longer merely something to get through.

It had become something to inhabit.

Time as Being

This time was so transformative that travel itself became the pressure-releasing valve — not short breaks but extended intervals that became less planned and more spontaneous. And it felt like I had discovered a secret that few people were even aware existed — no — stronger than that — something people did not want to know existed because it threatened the structures around which their lives had been organised.

Whenever I tried to speak about this different relationship to time, I quickly realised that most people did not really want to hear. The conversation would gently but firmly drift back toward the fractured programmed life they remained deeply attached to.

But there was more to discover.

Before a major change in my life, I returned to Nepal for a trek and rafting trip. It was there, while drifting down the Sun Kosi River, that something shifted more deeply still.

I had not set out to meditate. I knew the word, but it meant almost nothing to me. Meditation belonged, in my mind, to a slightly suspect ‘woo-woo’ dimension of life that I had carefully avoided as not being for sensible grounded people like myself.

And yet it happened naturally — almost accidentally — as the raft drifted through long stretches of silence beneath towering cliffs, immense skies, exposed burning sun and slow-moving water; long intervals of stillness interrupted only occasionally by brief bursts of activity as we navigated the rapids.

Time did not stop.

But it no longer felt compressed.

It seemed to open.

There was space within experience. A kind of ease. A deep intimacy with everything around me — the movement of water, the play of light, the silence between thoughts. There was no effort required simply to be present.

I remember writing in my diary that it felt like coming home.

At the time I even wondered whether I was having some kind of past-life déjà vu experience, because the familiarity felt so profound and inexplicable.



Looking back now, I think something much simpler was happening. For the first time in my life, I had fallen naturally into a deep meditative state.

And with it came an entirely different experience of time.

Lost in the depths of Nepal, away from civilisation and its busyness, the overwhelming experience was one of deep silence — barely a ripple from the water. And within that silence the moment acquired a sense of presence and immediacy that seemed to have neither beginning nor end. The flow of the river became the duration of an endless moment continually opening seamlessly into the next with no pressure at all.

I was released and, in that release, I found I could no longer fully recognise who I had previously taken myself to be. There was no real gap between me and what I was experiencing and what surprised me most was how natural this felt — so natural that I almost failed to recognise the significance of it.

And because the river carried us effortlessly forward, requiring only the gentlest occasional paddle, it began to feel as though life itself no longer needed to be chased or manufactured. Being itself seemed enough. More than enough. As though beneath all the striving and becoming there had always existed something already whole, already present, quietly waiting to be noticed.

Time as Eternity

The depth of what I had experienced in Nepal awakened a profound curiosity and before long I found myself living within a spiritual community where meditation and inner transformation formed part of everyday life.

This is an entire chapter of experience that I could devote a book to — the contradictions, inconsistencies and paradoxes surrounding freedom, authority, devotion and control — but that is not what this piece is about.

What I remain deeply grateful for was the opportunity to immerse myself in silence, contemplation and sustained meditative practice — something increasingly rare within modern culture. At one point this even included a ten-month silent retreat.

And it was here that I encountered yet another layer of time.

Or perhaps more accurately: the absence of it.

Until then I had discovered forms of time that felt spacious, flowing and deeply alive — time as whole-hearted participation in the extraordinary unfolding of embodied existence itself.

But in certain states of deep meditation even that gentle sense of unfolding disappeared.

Nothing was happening.

Or perhaps more accurately:

No-Thing.

It cannot even properly be described as ‘happening’.



There was:

no movement toward the next moment,
no anticipation,
no pressure,
no becoming.

And without movement there was no real sense of time passing at all.

Its overwhelming quality — if one can even call it a quality — was simplicity: an absolute stillness so complete that the mind, accustomed to measuring existence through movement and change, barely knew how to register it and became quiet in the face of the incomprehensibility of it.

There was simply presence.

Not the experience of a self having an experience.

Just Being.

Not the flowing duration I had experienced drifting down the Sun Kosi River, but something deeper and stranger still:

an eternal now untouched by succession. A stillness so alive that words like static fail to touch it.

Forever empty yet infinitely full — as though everything rested silently on the threshold of manifestation.

Time as Love

I was prompted to write this piece after reading a beautiful meditation on the nature of time by my close friend Patrick.

As his essay gently unfolded through the simple movements of an ordinary day, time gradually revealed itself not merely as presence but also as absence — pauses that deepen the moment into contemplative stillness; silence carrying experience without resistance; the subtle spaces between things giving shape and meaning to the whole.

Reading it, I became aware again of how impoverished our ordinary relationship to time often is.

Modern life tends to reduce time to measurement, productivity and succession — one thing after another, endlessly. But deeper forms of temporality reveal something entirely different: time as spaciousness, time as resonance, time as intimacy.

Almost like music.

Without pauses there is no melody.

Without silence there is no depth.

Without duration there is no possibility for love to unfold.

Perhaps that is why the deepest moments in life rarely feel hurried at all.



Moments of awe.

Moments of grief.

Moments of communion.

Moments of genuine presence.

In such moments time seems simultaneously to slow, deepen and even disappear.

Time was never the enemy, just our frightened relationship to it.

And perhaps the deepest realisation is that these layers of time are not actually separate at all.

They are always present simultaneously.

The pressured surface of fleeting time still exists — appointments, responsibilities, deadlines, movement, change.

The waves continue to rise and fall.

But beneath that surface there are other dimensions always quietly present:

space,

stillness,

silence,

duration,

eternity.

Perhaps what narrows our experience is not time itself but the contraction of attention — the fearful need to control life by endlessly positioning ourselves against an imagined future.

And as that controlling impulse begins to soften, existence gradually reveals its deeper wholeness.

Stillness and movement cease to feel opposed.

Busyness unfolds within silence.

The timeless reveals itself even within time.

One becomes both the storm-tossed surface and the oceanic depth beneath it.

And perhaps this is why the deepest experiences of presence feel so complete:

Nothing has been removed from life.

Rather, life is finally being experienced whole.