

# When Time Stands Still

By [Edward Curtin](#)

Theme: [History](#)

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*The intimate human experience of time standing still is universal, although rare. When we undergo it, we are stunned. Silence seems to enclose us. It is the correlative to the more common experience of time passing at different speeds, sometimes slowly, sometimes fast, despite clocks. These universal experiences do not accord with the teleology that underlies the modern world with its scientific principle that leads to entropic death triumphant. They are therefore, as John Berger, the English writer and art critic, writes,*

*“dismissed as subjective, because time, according to the nineteenth-century view, is objective, incontestable and indifferent; to its indifference there are no limits.”*

As a result of living within this scientific and technical presupposition that the background ticking of the clock is the only truth and time is a one-way street, we are now living inside a hopeless mind-frame of a scientific theocracy that says all will end in entropy. This is nihilism; for at the end of this clock time is nothingness, the infinite void. This is the unstated “future,” but a future that is also now, a noxious injection that surreptitiously poisons people at the well of their lives where cracks in the consensual reality open and other truths fly in, or as Emily Dickinson said,

*“‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers/That perches in the soul/And sings the tune without the words/And never stops - at all”.*

The one-dimensional finality of the view of time as death triumphant is the nihilistic future Nietzsche said was coming, and it is here. And being here, it tries to reduce any experience that transports us beyond time to personal lunacy and worthy only of dismissal. It reduces human subjectivity and transcendent joy and despondent suffering to the ravings of a madman. Facts are facts says this unstated premise, and if you don’t get that, you are a joker and will be rendered invisible.

In the new movie “Joker,” the suffering Arthur Fleck, the eponymous Joker, is abandoned by a cruel American society whose capitalist order cares not a whit for its regular people, and in a penultimate scene when Arthur is appearing on a late night television show where the snide and condescending host mocks him and his attempt at comedy, Joker says to the host:

*Comedy is subjective, Murray. Isn’t that what they say? All of you, the system that knows so much, you decide what’s right or wrong. The same way that you decide what’s funny or not.*

In that quote lies our current fate, the dark night that has descended on our world since

Nietzsche issued his warning. The system that knows and controls so much decides human truth and what is good and evil, always of course, deciding in its own favor, even to suggest that all is woe and all hope is gone while heading to the bank with its ill-begotten lucre.

No wonder all the media, mainstream and alternative, are today filled with headlines and titles screaming about our impending extinction, doomsday, and the apocalypse. The end days are near. Just as our fictitious “telling of time” with advanced technology has sped up since the simplest clock and speed has devoured space, so too have all the admonitions to prepare for the end of the world, as if you could. Just pack your suitcase and you’re off. These warnings are often accompanied by assertions that humans, having contaminated the planet, don’t deserve to survive; that humans are vermin; and that, anyway, it’s too little too late, we don’t have time. Extinction will be arriving shortly, even if we protest its arrival. It’s hopeless, so don’t have children, or, if you have them already, teach them that “life is a tale told by an idiot signifying nothing.” A one-way trip to dusty death where the trains run on time and the last stop is Nowhere.

Such political commentary, while often based on obvious problems caused by systemic structures of capitalist exploitation and technological hubris, implicitly rejects millennia of human experience and the testimony of the world’s great art and spiritual experience. It rests upon a metaphysical assumption disguised as science that brackets out any word to the contrary. It is the triumph of technical reason over the revelation of hope that is rooted in love, sexuality, and the human body, not abstractions.

“Our totalitarianism begins with our teleology,” writes Berger in his brilliant essay, “That Which Is Held.”

He adds:

What is ahistorical is the need to hope. And the act of hoping is inseparable from the energy of love, from that which ‘holds,’ from that which is art’s constant example.

Such as the painting of a plaid suitcase by a little-known artist that hangs in my mental museum. My father once went on vacation, and when he arrived at his destination and opened this suitcase, he found that it was empty. He had forgotten to pack and was overcome with joy at the realization. He wanted for nothing. This was his masterpiece, created when he wasn’t looking.

Just yesterday, I was being thought by these thoughts as I took an early morning walk by the neighboring lake. A group of geese, like battleships on the sea, greeted me with their honking, and as I dawdled along, they dove to show me their white asses, as if they were college boys out on a drunken lark, mooning anyone who passed. It seemed as if I were being mocked for allowing these thoughts to drift into my mind, guests that I did not summon but came uninvited. Many days I feel as though I am visited by words and images that transport me into reveries of time lost and time found and time beyond time. Rilke captures a bit of this with these words:

O longing for places that were not

Cherished enough in that fleeting hour  
How I long to make good from far  
The forgotten gesture, the additional act.

Who, among us, has not heard such words whispering into our silences?

Then I stopped by a swampy area at the end of the lake and took a look through the gently swaying bushes. A blue heron stood stock still on the far side, as if it were a statue or a silhouetted profile on an ancient Greek vase. I froze and watched intently, lost in the sight of the bird's eerie stillness. For an instant I was that blue heron. Its immobility and my stop-time staring seemed to fuse us in the way one is transported into a cataleptic state when watching dust motes in a flash of sunlight or unexpectedly seeing the full moon hanging on the world's edge when stepping outdoors with night coming on. It seems at these moments that a crack opens in the conventional reality machine that runs the world and one shivers with an erotic happiness that transcends description. Berger calls these "enclaves of the beyond."

When I finally shook myself loose from being the heron, I walked on by myself but with many voices whispering in my ears. Kris Kristofferson, whom I had recently seen in a documentary on country music, was singing "Me and Bobby McGee," which took me back to a night years ago when a woman I knew played the song over and over for me as she drank wine in her low-cut dress, coming on to me, even as my then wife sat with us.

There is an infinite sadness in this memory, the loneliness of her yearning, not just for sex but for love, for a relationship, for tenderness, for "that which is held," and while I remember the night vividly, I sadly can't remember her name and she slips into the penumbra of the dreamy past. But vividly alive, present. She walks with me as I head down the road, where the sign reads: Rough Road Ahead. The words live:

Then somewhere near Salinas, Lord, I let her slip away/She was lookin' for the  
love I hope she'll find.

Just a moment of time out of mind. A moment the time-keepers can't imagine.

We know it. We live it. We use and are used by our memories and forgetteries in equal measure, thinking we control the flow of life, which we don't.

There is an experience that lovers, writers, singers, and athletes have. Everyone has it at least once in a lifetime, or so I hope. It is called by some "being in the zone," by others "being unconscious," by others "ecstasy" and "inspiration"; in all cases it transcends clocks and the underlying bias of our age. It is hope incarnate. It is time out of mind. By discounting it, we embrace hopelessness, nihilism.

Living in the age of abstractions, we tend to abandon the body, the earth, and the chance that we might redeem this sordid era. By remembering that hope lies in the shadows, in the unexpected places and faces that flash through our times even when we are induced to believe we are only dreaming, we have a chance. But only if we reject the belief that entropy is time's arrow. Therein lies the real danger that will result in our forgetting of how

instantly time can stand still in the ultimate sense, as it did for the Japanese victims of America's murderous rage on August 6, 1945. Galway Kinnell, in his poem "The Fundamental Project of Technology" reminds us to remember:

The children go away. By nature they do. And by memory,  
in scorched uniforms, holding tiny crushed lunch tins.  
All the ecstasy-groans of each night call them back, satori  
their ghostliness back into the ashes, in the momentary shrines,  
the thankfulness of arms, from which they will go  
again and again, until the day flashes and no one lives  
to look back and say, a flash, a white flash sparkled.

Where was the lightning before it flashed? To us it wasn't. Its flashing was it. It was its act. But the nuclear weapons that we once used and are now preparing to use already exist and if they flash again all time will be extinguished and we will be gone with it.

The road ahead is rough indeed. A despairing teleology will not save us. We need to see it for the trap that it is.

Rhythm, melody, and movement: from these life is born and sustained. They are also integral to art - music, writing, painting, sculpture, dance, etc. - even when they are apparently absent, as with my distorted perception of the seemingly immobile heron. They lie at the heart of spiritual experience, as breath is the inspiration that carries us along.

As I walk up the hill past the lake and my respiration increases, I see Alberto Giacometti's sculpture, "Tall Walking Figure" in my mind's eye. Its immobility implies movement, just as the ticking of the turning clock down through the ages has implied the earth's solid resistance to time's final victory, as the seasons turn and renew themselves timelessly. Movement and stasis, time and the timeless. Such paradoxical inclusiveness pertains to still-life painting as well. While seemingly immobile, and defined by some as dead life encompassed by the presence of the absence of movement and change, the essence of all living things, such paintings come to life in the encounter with the living. Relationship is all. To grasp the paradoxical nature of art - and life - one must approach them as an artist and see the wholeness in broken pieces. "Everything is broken," Bob Dylan sings, "take a deep breath, feel like you're choking."

It seems that way. But I am enjoying my walking reveries and so will let John Berger have the final word:

There is no question of looking away from the modern world and its practices. There is no question of a Pre-Raphaelite flight back to the Middle Ages. It is rather that Dante advances toward us. And in the specific purgatory of the modern world, created and maintained by corporate capitalism, every injustice is grounded in that unilinear view of time, for which the only relation conceivable is that between cause and effect. In contrast to this, in defiance of this, the 'single synchronic act' is that of loving.

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