

Running out of time

by Jane O'Reilly

Reaching the age of acceptance and pendulous earlobes



Thirty-two years ago I wrote an article about managing time. One expert advised that no piece of paper on a desk should ever be touched more than once. It is perhaps my complete failure to follow that advice that explains the fact that I own a barn entirely filled with boxes of unanswered mail.

Another expert, the graphic designer Milton Glaser, offered me two more clarifying exercises. He urged me to design a perfect day five years into the future. He said that when he assigned that task to his design students quite a number of them showed up the next day determined to leave town, change careers, or change partners. I imagined living in Vermont, picking the first peas, editing the last draft of a book, being visited by my granddaughter, and packing for a trip to Europe. In fact, although it took a lot longer than five years, I have achieved such days. They seem perfect enough, so it was probably a good idea to have tried to visualize them.

The second exercise was to try to decide what I would do if I had only six months to live. Fully, if unconsciously, confident that no such absurd thing as death would ever happen to me, I immediately said that I would take my child out of school and travel around the world. My dearest friend astonished me by saying that she would lose weight and tidy her apartment. I suppose the things that haunt us as left undone are extremely variable. Now, I might spend the time dealing with the boxes in the barn, as a last act of consideration for my satisfyingly increased number of heirs.



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And then again, I might not. Now that I know death is the meaning of life, real if still absurd, I am not sure I want to waste time thinking about the jumbled archive of myself.

I am running out of time.

In fact, the very experience of time has changed completely.

For example, I was given a glorious week at Canyon Ranch for my birthday. I am in pretty good shape—way too fat, but fairly strong and limber. All those hockey games in school, all those drinks and cigarettes abandoned, all that yoga and walking have paid off. I won't be taking up kick boxing soon, but I am better off than some women my age. Not most, just some. But at the lectures and classes on nutrition and aging I had the eerie sense that most of the audience still believed the train was just leaving the station, with a long, long run of track still ahead. I have already arrived. Becoming has given way to being. The watchword is maintenance. Forget transformation. This is it.

My daughter-in-law is 32. When I tell her I am running out of time, she worries that I am announcing that I am giving up the fight. I'm not. I will, eventually, be like my friend Kay, who is 95 and ready for the slow creep of daily time to end. (She still reads and walks and thinks, however, still fighting.) I actually won't be surprised if I live to 95. It's just that I also realize that I truly, no kidding, *might not*. And even if I do, I probably won't be able to speak fluent Chinese, or earn a living in Provence, or get a pilot's license, or even learn to ski properly. I won't become a real artist, write a novel or two or six, learn to sing, or figure out how to work my cell phone.

But, on the other hand, now that I have written it down, maybe I will.

If I have, say, ten years left, I bet I can conquer the cell phone, and possibly the art of watercolor. Except that when I think about how little I accomplished during the last ten years, and how quickly they whizzed past, I wonder if I even have time to clean out my closets, much less the barn. Much less learn Chinese. Time goes fast when you are going downhill. When I think of the time it took to grow from two to three, and the much longer time it took to raise a child from two to three, when I think of the hours of my life I spent napping (my one truly, completely achieved art form) and bearing grudges and trying to control the outcome of things, I realize I am now living by an entirely different clock. Without such parameters as a school year, Saturday nights, and the monthly visitor, children seem to grow up overnight, and Christmas comes at least four times a year (What! Christmas again?!) Time just runs on, on its way out, and I don't want to waste it.

Rejoice in the moment. My friend, the artist Mary Kaye, says "Yes, living in the moment. That's all we have, really, lest we be dominated by the now loud sound of the falls over which we all must go. It seems just a few years ago that the sound of those falls was only a whisper which was heard only when the wind was right."

We can live every day to the fullest, doing things we really enjoy, making

the most of the time we have—if we can figure out what that particular platitude really means. I know a woman who thought it meant moving to six states in three years. She didn't really have time for that many new beginnings, and neither do I. But then, I feel a bit parsimonious about doing things for the future in any case. Like Mary Kaye, I want to plant a golden elm tree, which is said to grow eleven feet in a year, not a sugar maple that takes 30 years to look like a real tree.

My particular sugar maple was the women's movement and all that it meant. George Bush is sweeping away my life's work. My friend Mary Kay Blakely says, "I have outlived my optimism, and I miss it." We thought time was a continuum, ever progressing forward. It seems instead to be a cycle, and I doubt I have time for another turn. So we are left again with making the most of the moment. Mary Kay's sister, who is only coming up on 50, pictures us "volunteering for a kind of senior citizen draft. Whatever civilian outrage is in the offing then—NRA guys selling guns at flea markets, terrorists bombing abortion clinics, riot squads beating college students, school boards banning books—we'll march to the nearest barricades and make them shoot us instead of our teenagers." I like her vision of gray-haired furies. The very idea makes me realize that time spent acting together is time tripled.

Just for the record, I am now 67 years old. I looked in the mirror on my birthday and discovered that my ears had gotten old. They are no longer shell-like and appealingly pink, but pendulous and wrinkled, something like Hermione Gingold's ears in *Gigi* (and how many years has it been since I realized I had begun to relate to Hermione instead of Leslie Caron when I watch *Gigi*?) The spots and freckles, the flab and wobble, the folded eyelids and the stubby eyelashes, the creaky knees and crumbling teeth had, until the moment of the pendulous lobes, been matters for denial and half-hearted plans for renovation and disguise. Old ears were my turning point. I have reached the Age of Acceptance.

Just as well. I don't have time for anything else.



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