

These Bright Ends of Time

by Otilie Stafford

The bond of time that holds our lives together, giving them continuity and shape, makes it possible for us to place ourselves in history. Memory also makes possible our sense of our own histories. Time measurements have always been of great significance. Rituals that mark off segments of time tie our todays to our yesterdays and our lives to those of others. In rituals, the world stops and remembers, for memory is a central part of our time-recording. It is an important part of our New Years, our birthdays, our anniversaries, our Sabbaths.

We have many ways to record time, some solemn and some festive, some private and some public. We follow annual rituals around the birthday cake, singing familiar songs and blowing out tiny candles. Whatever for? Every December 31 a strange ritual takes place. The daily movement of the shadow of night around the earth is followed, a number of hours later, by a movement of sound, an edge of noise, a blast of horn-blowing, shouting, band-playing, balloon-bursting celebration moving around the earth at the exact pace with which night's

shadow has moved. Why do we follow such a strange custom on New Year's Eve? Why this annual piping in of midnight?

We know that 12:01 of January 1 will be little different from 11:59 of December 31. But, nevertheless, much of the world stops to direct its attention to the new notch being put on the record of our passing years, the numbering of our days. Weeks and years say the story of our lives and take us back to their beginnings.

Centennials and bicentennials mark longer lives — those of nations and of cultures. We cannot ignore these occasions; they remind us of what we have been, of how long we have been traveling this way. But throw away our clocks and calendars and historical chronologies, and the sun would rise every day to tell us it is time to work; the darkness would descend every night to tell us it is time to sleep; we would know the time for planting gardens, the time for shoveling snow, without marking off weeks, counting years, measuring decades, cataloguing centuries. Life would tell us when we have matured, when we are growing old, when we have lived out our lives.

Do we think perhaps that by recording in a diary the record of our lives' precise dates, by the careful measurement of time with accurate instruments, that we are, by measuring

Otilie Stafford, a SPECTRUM consulting editor, is head of the English department at Atlantic Union College. Her doctorate is from Boston University.

it, mastering it? Yet, time eludes us, we cannot arrest its advance, we cannot forget its cold blast behind our backs. We try to humanize it, to place controls on it, to record it in measured segments, but all we really do is observe it; still it eludes us.

For it is not a human dimension. We can master space. Put an individual in a wilderness, and he will immediately make a clearing, build a hut, plant a garden, make a part of its space his own. He can live in it, wall it in, protect it from invasion, put up signs: KEEP OFF THE GRASS. TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED. The law protects his space. What law protects his time?

“We are always fascinated by the mysterious, the unknown, the unfathomable. . . So it is time that obsesses us. It is time that we are distressed by. It is time that calls forth the great human cry of sadness or of protest.”

Put him in a cave, and he will paint pictures on the wall, put down carpets, measure off an entrance that is his. Put him in a college residence hall made up of identical rooms, and he will rearrange furniture, hang up posters, set personal possessions around the room as symbols that *he* is the master of this space; his personality alters it, possesses it, asserts his dominion over it.

Even around ourselves we set up controls over space. Invade an individual's personal space, the room he must have to feel comfortable — invade it too closely and he will give you a shove, back off or step on your toes and threaten worse violence to protect the space which he must have in order to be comfortable.

And we master space in more permanent ways. The architect encloses spaces in great structures, puts domes over football fields, encloses shopping malls, throws up serpentine walls to shut out sounds, builds vast worship areas of stone and stained glass,

sends up into the skies vertically stacked housing, tunnels down into the ground to store cars, puts a colossus over the harbor entrance and an arch as an entrance to the West. We marvel at the great stone structures standing in circles in the middle of a stoneless English plain, built by a lost civilization as their own way of marking off time. The space they mastered still records their efforts, but time has erased all record of who they were and where they came from and why they constructed Stonehenge.

We are always fascinated by the mysterious, the unknown, the unfathomable. We cannot look out far nor in deep, but we would rather gaze at the unfathomable than explore the familiar. So it is time that obsesses us. It is time that we are distressed by. It is time that calls forth the great human cry of sadness or of protest.

The Hebrew felt it in Old Testament times:

Man that is born of a woman
is of few days, and full of trouble.
He comes forth like a flower, and withers;
he flees like a shadow, and continues not.

The sixteenth century felt it as the century neared its close:

Beauty is but a flower
which wrinkles will devour;
Brightness falls from the air;
Queens have died young and fair,
Dust hath closed Helen's eye. . .

The seventeenth century, in particular, felt it, perhaps because of the breaking up of all its certainties:

Golden lads and girls all must,
As chimney sweepers, come to dust.

How small a part of time they share
That are so wondrous sweet and fair!

The bright day is done
And we are for the dark.

Time sweeps through Shakespeare's sonnets, toppling monuments, carrying individuals into oblivion, covering civilizations with the sediment of ages. It moves through the

works of Proust, Tolstoy, Thackeray and Faulkner as well as those of scores of their fellow writers, forcing us to admit the “change and decay in all around I see.” And it is most forcefully found in “The Great Dirge of the World,” the ninetieth Psalm:

For all our days pass away under thy
wraith,
our years come to an end like a sigh.
The years of our life are threescore and
ten,
or even by reason of strength
fourscore;
Yet their span is but toil and trouble;
they are soon gone, and we fly away.

That psalm used to bother me. I preferred Shakespeare’s fatalistic statement:

Men must endure
Their going hence, even as their com-
ing hither.
Ripeness is all.

Marvell, I thought, had a better answer to the problem:

Though we cannot make our sun
Stand still, yet we still make him run.
Even Dylan Thomas’s protest seemed some-
how more humanly defensible:

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.
Psalm 90, that great dirge, seemed to me to be one of the most mournful of all human responses to time’s destructive power. Its ending did not solve any problem, nor move in any direction that was comforting. Placing the eternal God at the beginning and the ending of the psalm only underscored how ephemeral man’s life really was. But the psalms keep speaking, and the longer they are listened to, the more they have to say. Gradually, the meaning of Psalm 90 grew in my mind.

That God is He who masters time, who bridges it, who towers over it like a colossus from everlasting to everlasting — spanning all rising, falling and obliterating of individuals, of nations, all the endings and beginnings of days, weeks and years — the psalm makes that point clearly. But that makes even more poignant the human impermanence, the short puff of vapor that is each person’s existence. That life can be happy some of the

time, even though it is short, *is* no answer to the problem.

Then, one day I was listening to the eighth psalm being read, and heard these words:

When I look at thy heavens, the work of
thy fingers,
the moon and the stars which thou hast
established —

In my mind there was an echo of something, something I was reminded of that I tried to recover . . . that word *established*. That was where Psalm 90 ended:

Establish thou the work of our hands
yea, the work of our hands, establish
thou it.

Does God, whose creation included the very establishment of time, who set the great timekeepers in the heavens, whose structures mastered and formed the days, weeks and seasons that act upon men’s lives, does that same creative power whose creature I am, take the work of *my* hands, the work of his creatures’ creations, and set them in His time-less architectures?

Every year’s end I hear echoing in the back of my mind a poem of Richard Wilbur. He compares the perfection of a fern

That lays its fragile cheek against a stone
a million years
to the people who were caught in the destruc-
tion at Pompeii, where
the little dog lay curled and did not rise
But slept the deeper as the ashes rose
And found the people incomplete, and
froze
The random hands, the loose unready
eyes
Of men expecting yet another sun
To do the shapely thing they had not
done.

The shapely thing we have not done. That is what haunts us at the end of weeks, years, decades and centuries. What beautiful structures we intend to create with our lives, with our work, and how seldom we finish the shapely thing we would do. Wilbur goes on:

We fray into the future, rarely wrought
Save in the tapestries of afterthought.
More time, more time.

We fray into the future. Perhaps our need for anniversaries of the past and celebrations of

the new comes from wanting to shape, to structure what we are doing. Yet, we are always caught at the sudden ends of time with random actions and with unready minds.

But Psalm 90 contains the answer to Wilbur's cry, to the desire to shape a life that keeps slipping and sliding and being filled with imprecision and inadequacy, fraying out around the edges, never what was intended.

The great creative God, whose presence from everlasting to everlasting completed all his creation, can complete with his creative power the lives and the works of his creatures. Then, change and decay are the illusions; changelessness, the reality. Inadequacy and imperfection are pieced out by God's creative goodness; and the great dirge of the world, the human cry that has echoed through the centuries from every civilization, can be turned into a song of joy.

Those reflections return us to the Sabbath and the meaning caught up in its symbols.

We all think of the Sabbath as a reminder of God's creative power. His presence at the beginning of time when chaos and disorder were shaped by His word and the formless seas given dimensions, when the moon and the stars were established, is told anew every seventh day. The mastery of time is implicit in all the Sabbath symbolism. God shapes a period of time as we shape a dimension of space, constructing the great architecture of the Sabbath as we construct a dwelling place, filling it with evidences of His nature, as we fill our rooms and houses and spaces with objects that speak of our personalities. It is His holy time, filled with quietness and sweetness and power, where we enter and worship. We prepare our own spaces for the Sabbath, clean our houses, light the candles, lay the fire, prepare the special meal; but He prepares the time, and we enter that time not to fill it up with our concerns, our work or our wishes, for it has already been filled by

Him with holiness and the worship in which the joyous creation sings.

But the Sabbath is not only a day of remembrance of creation, it is also a day that rejoices in the completion of the creation. It is God the completer, the finisher, who rejoices in the Sabbath rest, the day of perfection. All the days of the week have been incomplete and unfinished until they are shaped by this last day. It is the day which promises us not just a future re-creation, but a completion of all that is incomplete in our lives, that promises the establishment of our lives and of our works in the timeless creation of the holy one, that promises our restlessness will find rest in God's rest.

The ninetieth psalm intends the sorrow of the world's change and decay to conclude in joyous recognition of what God's creative power does in our lives and with the work of our hands. Then, how carefully that work must be done by God's creatures. How finely we must work, how thoughtfully, how thoroughly. How can God establish in His glorious creation what has been done with carelessness, with shabbiness, with indifference, with contempt? We may not be able to escape the sense of incompleteness, of fraying into the future; but we can, in our own fragile and fleeting work, make it as honest, as beautiful and as good as it is humanly possible to make it.

Each recurring Sabbath brings a reminder of God's power to accomplish and to complete. Each Sabbath is a prayer, a turning to the Creator. By our Sabbath worship, we say: Make us worthy to be a part of your creation. Make our words poems, psalms of hope and praise. Make our acts a part of the order and brightness that your presence calls forth. Help us to enter into the holy time of your holiday with hope and with the joyous knowledge that what we cannot complete you will finish; that what we cannot comprehend you will illuminate. And out of all that seems to be failure and change and decay, teach us to pray: Oh, Thou that changest not, abide with me.