

2020 has me thinking about how we experience time

Time ignores our every attempt to harness it.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [December 30, 2020](#) issue



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Most people seem glad for 2020 to end. The isolation, political anxiety, and constant guessing of who around us may have COVID-19 have all taken a toll. Our friends at the International Earth Rotation and Reference Systems Service are doing their part to get 2020 over and done with. There was a possibility that the world's atomic clocks would add one second of time to the end of this year—something that happens every few years—but scientists at IERS have delayed that adjustment until at least June 2021. I'd like to think that a desire not to prolong the pandemic was behind the postponement. But the greater truth is that, while the moon's gravitational forces continue to put the brakes on the planet's speed of rotation, Earth will have to slow down a bit more before it makes sense to add another second of time.

At the turn of every new year, I think of how baffling our experience with time is. Time never seems to serve us; it always seems to be the other way around. Not exactly the way prisoners "serve time," locked into the sameness of days. The rest

of us simply tend to think there's a way to manage time, yet we discover that time ignores our every attempt to harness it. We can yank batteries out of a clock, I suppose. But that just pushes us further into the debt of time that just keeps moving relentlessly forward.

The pandemic has created a few bright spots with respect to our use of time. For years, I've been observing our American love affair with busyness. A jam-packed life has acquired certain social status. We've linked busyness to personal importance. But this year, limited travel, expanded opportunities for working remotely, and more than enough social isolation have stripped a "busier than thou" attitude from a lot of people. Already by the end of the first month of the pandemic, out-scheduling one's neighbor ceased to be a competitive sport.

I'm also convinced that the pandemic has greatly reduced the amount of time some of us allot to thinking about how many things we have to do in a day. To be sure, essential workers are managing a lot of extra pressure and stress, as are parents of young children. But for many others, personal scheduling shifts in 2020 have meant freedom from feeling mentally beleaguered by the sheer breadth of daily responsibilities.

Still, there's no doubt our experience of time in 2020 has been bumpy in the main. Why does time seem to grind so slowly when we're sad, impatient, or worried? Why does time seem to speed up when we're in a happy place with our lives? Neurologists have no perfect answer to these questions, because there isn't a compartment in the brain that records the passage of time. Researchers believe that various brain mechanisms, which control things like metabolism and memory, emit pulses that our brains then subconsciously tally. Personal moods and surroundings alter the number of pulses per minute our brains discharge.

An interesting phenomenon happens when we focus on things we enjoy, according to brain researcher Marc Wittman. Our brains stop tracking these pulses, which is why time seems to fly when we're having fun. Given all this, how shall we experience time in 2021? Perhaps the beginning of the Westminster Shorter Catechism offers an idea: "[Our] chief end is to glorify God and enjoy [God] forever."

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