

Clock: Essays by readers

We gave our readers a one-word writing prompt: “Clock.”

Readers Write in the [October 10, 2021](#) issue



Illustration by Daniel Richardson (from source images at Getty and Unsplash)

In response to our request for essays on Clock, we received many compelling reflections. Below is a selection. The next two topics for reader submissions are [Threshold](#) and [Eye](#)—[read more.](#)

In my travels, I've seen clocks and watches that once stopped suddenly. Not because someone forgot to rewind them or their battery ran out. They were stopped by a traumatic event.

A watch stopped at 8:15. A town clock stopped at 2:28. A mantel clock stopped at 9:26. Hiroshima; Mianzhu, China; Kumamoto, Japan. Time came to an abrupt halt in these places, with the detonation of an atom bomb and two devastating earthquakes.

The Hiroshima wristwatch sat in a glass case, inches from my eyes, among other artifacts and images of that horrific event. The Mianzhu clock was still in its tower in the city square; I craned my neck to see it above me. And the Kumamoto clock lay askew in some rubble right at my feet. I almost bent to pick up the sleek modern metal and glass clock that lay there, shattered, but it was not mine to touch. It was a testimony to a certain moment in time.

I can only imagine the horror of these moments when time stopped. Survivors say that Hiroshima was like the flash of the sun burning around you. The survivors I know were somehow fortunate enough not to have been vaporized, or to have suffered horrible burns or severe radiation sickness, but they carried emotional scars all their lives. Survivors in Mianzhu wept while describing how whole buildings collapsed around them, trapping them in rubble. When I stepped through the flattened remnants of homes in Kumamoto, supposedly built to Japanese earthquake standards, I couldn't imagine how so many survived.

If we view time as linear—as *kronos*—then these moments signify a stopping of time, an end. The stopped clocks mark the snuffing out of human lives, the burial of homes, the erasing of memories. I imagine that the people in those places experienced what seemed like the end of the world, even the end of time itself.

But what if we thought of such disasters as *kairos* moments for decision or action? In God's *kairos* time, we see conversion and transformation, a change of life. This is not stopped time, but a moment living in movement. Discerning disasters as *kairos* moments is not about God causing tragedy. It's about God coming into our lives at the moment of tragedy. We have witnessed countless disasters, and we often observe that politics, economics, and human greed get in the way of the best of us. But sometimes we do see the best of humanity, responding with aid, compassion, and care.

In Kumamoto I saw relief groups carefully picking through the rubble, gently lifting even broken furniture as if to respect what each piece meant to the survivors. In Mianzhu I talked with a pastor, exhausted as she was, who had planned to go to graduate school but remained to aid her community. She and other church volunteers were sleeping in makeshift bunks on the church grounds to be ready at all times to provide care. In Hiroshima, a Lutheran church was chosen to display sketches by a survivor who captured their memories in time.

The stopped watch and clocks that I saw marked tragedies, but they also gave me hope. Hope prevails when we step in with the best of our abilities to meet the needs of the people. That hope is borne out living in God's *kairos*, which starts as a moment of grace.

Y. Franklin Ishida
Elmhurst, IL

I looked at the clock in the waiting room of the mental health clinic a few blocks from the hospital where I was an intern. If they couldn't take me on time, I might have to get back.

I'd been working 36 hours on, 12 hours off continuously for months. I faced life-and-death situations daily. I slept in an on-call room and didn't get out of the hospital for weeks at a time. I was often sad, at times on the verge of tears. My appetite was poor and I had lost weight. On nights when I was not working, I had trouble falling asleep.

The year was only half over. Could I finish it? The mere possibility of failing to complete what I had worked a decade to obtain had forced me to overcome my reluctance and make an appointment with a psychiatrist.

It was 1970. The preceding decade had been a tumultuous but hopeful one for African Americans. In the health-care field, civil rights groups took concerted actions for African Americans to obtain better in- and outpatient care and to attend White medical schools and train in White hospitals. Having graduated with honors from a top midwestern medical school where I was the only African American in my class, I had obtained a coveted slot as the first African American intern at a top Harvard teaching hospital. If I had to disrupt my training, it would be a disaster—not only for me personally but also for the progress of other African Americans seeking postgraduate medical training.

A young psychiatrist called my name and offered me his hand. Seated in his office, I related my story. His manner was sympathetic and kindly. As our 50 minutes drew to a close, he laid out a plan for us to meet weekly and reassured me I would be able to continue to do my job. Despite recurrent struggles with depression in the following decades, by God's grace, I was able to complete my internship and go on

to obtain specialty training in internal medicine, cardiology, and public health. I researched racial disparities in heart disease outcomes and access to care.

As the grandson of two men born as slaves, I am thankful to God for the opportunity to pursue a career in medicine so I could minister to the sick and help reduce the inequities faced by African Americans that lead to poor health outcomes. The pandemic has exposed the glaring health inequities African Americans still face. Although the clock is running out for me in my eighth decade, God is allowing me to persist in this fight and to mentor young physicians in training who can continue it when I am gone.

Richard Gillum
Washington, DC

Monday morning—the countdown clock begins. Sunday afternoon has been sabbath, rest, relief, a reminder of what life is like without carrying the weight of the sermon within. Monday morning arrives again, and with it the anticipation of the next sermon. There is prayer group and returning emails, preparing for Bible study and editing the bulletin. I long to begin preparing the message. I set my intention to give it attention each day, to not leave it until last.

But Tuesday brings Bible study and children's church, a hospital visit, and running the kids to the orthodontist. I make it through one commentary in the waiting room. Everywhere I go, in the back of my mind, the text is working on me, asking for more time, to be crafted into a relevant message, to be made real in my life and ministry.

Wednesday morning reality check—how is it Wednesday already? One more commentary read, some prayer and a few notes jotted here and there between meetings, planning, Wednesday night programs, details for confirmation. And the newsletter . . . surely it's not newsletter week already?

The sermon is pulling on my sleeve, hoping to speak to me, asking for my time, even as the minutes and seconds on the countdown clock speed by in a blur. My heart races along with the numbers. Will I have enough time to prepare in a way that blesses, challenges, opens a pathway for hearers to connect to this sacred text, to

enter holy space and have their own conversation with God?

Thursday at last, sermon day, protected time hidden away in my own world among the white noise of coffee grinders and espresso machines. Time slows. I can actually read the numbers on the clock again as I get lost in the text, the prayers, the commentaries, form ideas into an outline, and grasp the direction so that on Friday I can write and review and allow the message to become a part of me, to flow out of me guided by a few quotes and notes.

Life resumes. The weekend is here, with everything to be savored and accomplished—family time, activities, chores. The message lingers in the back of my mind. Is it worthy, helpful, transformational? Do I know it well enough—the ideas, the pacing, the passion?

The countdown clock reaches zero: Sunday. Preaching time, the greatest moment of privilege—and faith—in my week. It may be the time when others watch the clock. But for me, in that preaching moment, the clock stops. Time is transformed. I receive the gift of sharing the word of God with the people of God. If only I could linger in that sacred space a little longer.

But worship ends. Now it is time to rest, a few hours free of that weight.

Until Monday morning when the countdown clock begins again, and I gladly carry it with me because this is my sacred calling.

Suzanne Allen
Loveland, OH

I do not yet know how to read roman numerals, but I know that seven is the marking just to the left of the bottommost marking on the clock that hangs in my bedroom. It is not yet seven o'clock on a Saturday morning, and so I am not allowed to go downstairs.

I lie back and tap my feet to the ticking of the clock. It's incredible how loud such an otherwise unnoticeable sound can be while you're waiting. I stare at the clock, willing it to speed up. In the middle of the clock face is a locomotive, blue and maroon—a steam engine. The image appears ready to barrel down the tracks, right off the wall, yet it's frozen in time. You and me both, train.

I keep time with my toes, mind wandering. *I can't wait until I'm old enough to get up before seven on a Saturday*, I think. Dad often tells me that time moves more quickly the older you get, that before you know it a year doesn't feel like such a long time.

Did you know that on Mercury, the planet's rotation takes longer than its orbit around the sun, making a day there longer than a year? Mrs. Southard taught our first-grade science class. Suddenly, this information seems applicable. At seven years old, a half hour can feel like an eternity.

Eternity. There's a concept I struggle to understand. As long as this bedroom isolation seems, it's perhaps comparable to one of the dust particles floating over my head, illuminated by a sunbeam for one moment, gone the next. My understanding of eternity comes mostly from things I hear on Sundays in church, where we sing songs, wait while Mom talks to people I don't know, and learn about God and his son—Jesus, the Jewish man who was perfect yet was killed on a cross and then resurrected, so that I might spend eternity not sitting in my room but with him in a new heaven and on a new earth.

Sitting in my room, I remember that Jesus did really hard things that his father asked of him. Comparatively, sitting here on my bed doesn't seem all that bad. *I wonder if Jesus ever felt like this, waiting in the tomb before the stone was rolled away.* Before seven o'clock. My stomach rumbles.

My thoughts return to the God who is bigger than me, bigger than time, than eternity, yet knows my name. *Good morning*, I say silently to the sunbeam, which is the closest thing I can think of to a supernatural, present being. I check the clock and it's 7:05.

Brice Mitchell
St. Paul, MN

My grandfather Cashen was a punctual man. Time was important to him. He lovingly introduced my grandmother, still very much alive, as *the late Mrs. Cashen*. She was oblivious to time and was always late, and so was dinner.

After dinner, regardless of the season, my grandfather and I would slip away and climb a ladder to the roof, where he had made an observatory platform. He would set up his nautical brass telescope by pulling out its three expandable wooden legs to make a sturdy tripod, and we would look at the night sky. He would point out Venus, the Big Dipper and the constellation of Cassiopeia, then the Little Dipper, Orion, and the vast Milky Way. He taught me how the stars could be used to tell time: "Begin by first finding the North Star, then the Big Dipper and the Little Dipper, and then you can use these to make a star clock in the sky." He explained that the earth turns on its axis, giving the appearance that stars are rising and setting. Each clear night presented a new lesson in astronomy.

But there were other rooftop lessons. Time is the most valuable thing there is, he'd tell me. It is life's greatest treasure. Make the most of every minute. Time is the one thing you cannot ever get back. Once it's gone, it's gone. It's not a renewable resource like tomatoes or string beans.

An ancient grandfather clock stood near the entry of our Tampa home. It had been my grandfather's wedding gift to my mother. As a child, I understood, perhaps more than she, why his gift to her was a clock. After my mother died, it was the only thing I asked for from among her piles of possessions.

Now that clock stands in our house. Every chime is a melodic reminder that another valuable hour is beginning. I am then transported back to the rooftop and the little observatory, and I am reminded of my grandfather's lessons to treasure the time God has given me.

Jean Dodd
Jacksonville, FL

From Frederick Buechner, *The Alphabet of Grace*:

Creation is underway. Breakfast is underway. Steam from the tea kettle is fogging up the windows. . . . With my ear to the radio, I try to catch what the weather will be. Somebody is crying while somebody else says it is her own fault that she is crying. We

break fast together, break bread together fast, with the clock on the wall over my wife's head tick-tocking our time away, time away. Soon it will be time to leave for school. Soon enough it will be time to leave.

On the inside, it looks like any other modern timepiece. A small battery excites a quartz crystal to vibrate at a rate that will establish an almost, but not absolute, reflection of the correct time—which for supreme accuracy is measured by the cesium atom's vibration, the world's most absolute time standard. The vibrations of the crystal cause the hands of the clock to move. The second hand sweeps the dial once every minute, and the minute hand rounds the dial once every 60 minutes, but the hour hand makes its journey only once each day rather than the expected two trips each day.

This clock is set to Coordinated Universal Time, the time found at the prime meridian. Around the dial are the names of cities and other locations around the world: London, Paris, Cairo, Moscow, Karachi, Bangkok, Tokyo, Auckland, Anchorage, Denver, Caracas, South Georgia Island, and the Azores. I stop and face it for a few moments of reflection each day.

I have been an amateur radio operator for more than six decades, and UTC is the only way to report contacts in a format that matches other amateur operators around the world. In my late afternoon, it is already tomorrow in Sydney. But I am not only part of a worldwide amateur radio community, I am also part of a worldwide church. Both beckon me to be aware of things larger than my local realities. This clock helps me remember these realities and calls me toward others.

During the pandemic, I have wondered if I knew any of the patients in the ICUs of Italy, on the streets of Wanjū, buried in a mass grave near São Paulo, recovering in London after a drug cocktail, or receiving a vaccine in Minsk. I also think of those who have helped me to keep a small part of my sanity during this year of limited in-person social interactions. A group of us have talked by radio almost every night for the past year. That 02:00 hour (9 p.m. EST) has become more valuable with each passing evening.

To embrace what is on the dial is to recognize that God loves the people in each time zone, the people in each of those divergent locations, the people on high

mountains and those on islands hardly rising five feet above sea level, the people who are conscious of that love and the people who are not, the people whose worldview is severely limited and those who are truly global citizens. God even loves me. All human relations are ultimately family relations, for we are all part of one human family scattered across the earth. Oh, that I may learn from the face of this clock that life is more than just a measure of time.

David E. Roberts
Emporia, VA

One of my few keepsakes from my childhood home is an antique mantel clock, a mahogany Seth Thomas. It sits above me on a high bookshelf in my study while I write. Growing up, I liked the clock's early 20th-century provenance, an era when clocks had intricate mechanics and richly grained wood. I sometimes listened for its hourly chime. It stopped telling time some years ago, the coiled spring of the chime bell hammer full of unreleased energy.

Part of its significance is the fact that it's one of just a few mementos from the house where I grew up. Between my mom's encroaching dementia, my living thousands of miles away, and a span of estrangement that was over but still sometimes made communication with my family difficult, most of my parents' belongings were sold in an estate sale before I'd had a chance to consider what else I might retrieve.

So while relatively small, the clock has a large place as a reminder of both happy times and harder moments. For the brokenness in my relationship to my folks had to do with a choice I made, while away at seminary, to marry against their wishes. There were a couple of years when I had to brave my parents' rejection of me, their threats to disown me. And then, with the patient passing of time, eventual reconciliation. That the clock finally moved from their household to mine, to reside with a family forged at first against their hopes, represents part of that mending.

Our movement through life, of course, has to do with more than the measured ticking of any timepiece or the sweep of its hands or the haptics of our smartphones. Time brings change, sometimes pain and loss and hardship, sometimes the joy of new steps, like the new household I forged, even with the emotional costs. Our best

spiritual traditions remind us that eternity has to do with the everyday, the vast with the quotidian, the infinite with this instant. God speaks in what transpires in moments, so I try not to let time slip by unreflected.

A memento, like the one from the household that raised me, is a reminder of such handbreadths of time, whether misspent or seized or simply endured. I think also of memento mori, the unflinching consideration of death—the spiritual practice of pondering the end of our earthly moments. My clock's Gothic arch comes to a peak like a cathedral window, as though pointing to the one who is above time while within it: a loving presence beyond our kindred notions, not limited in any way by the ticking of the hands on a dial.

Timothy Jones
Halifax, VA

Several years ago, on a trip to Florence, Italy, when I climbed the narrow stairways to the very top of the cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore, I noticed the word *ora* appears on each window. I had learned to translate the word as “hour.” *Che ora sono?* Mario would ask Professor Baldi on my language tape when he wanted to know what time it was. I recalled from my rusty Latin that *ora* was also the imperative of *orare*, “to pray.” The convergence struck me.

Brunelleschi, the architect of the magnificent cathedral, was also a skilled clock maker. A central opening in the drum of the dome allows a beam of light to shine on the floor of the cathedral 90 meters below, where, at least for a few months of the year, it crosses a meridian line etched on the floor, enabling a precise determination of noon. The cathedral itself is one of the largest clocks in the world.

I wondered about the connection between the monastic practice of praying the canonical hours and the division of the day into hours. My curiosity was further piqued when, after consulting a Latin dictionary, I discovered that *ora* is also a noun which means “boundary.” Was the roof of the cathedral, where light enters, the boundary between heaven and earth? And when we pray, do we cross a mysterious boundary from a world where time reigns to an encounter with a timeless God?

Much ancient religious worship practice was intrinsically connected with time—Stonehenge in England and Mayan temples in Mexico are notable examples. The names of the old gods still wink at us from the names of the days of the week. Yet despite that, for us time is almost wholly secular. Our days are rigidly governed by time. “Time is money.” “Time is of the essence.” In today’s world, timelessness is more likely to be associated with the spiritual than time is. Experiences when time seems to lose all meaning are often regarded as transcendent, mystical events.

I admit clock time has become a master I’m all too willing to serve. But maybe the solution isn’t in achieving states of timelessness but in redeeming time, recognizing that each day, each hour, each moment is a gift of God. In my house, a grandfather clock sits in the corner of our dining room, an audible reminder of the passage of time. I have resolved that each time I hear the four chimes of the quarter hours, I will think *I thank you God*.

Roger Kruger
Omaha, NE

I rarely look at clocks, but I keep time consistently. As a percussionist, whether on my congas, cajón, steering wheel, or desk, I’ve got the beat. Being on time however, is not in my genes, or so the family legends go.

My grandfather came to America from England as a young boy with his family. The story goes that they were to cross the Atlantic on the *Titanic*, but the clock where they were staying wasn’t working properly, so they were late and unable to board. They had to reschedule their journey on the next ship to cross the pond, and so they lived to tell their tale.

His son, my father, served three years on a boat in the Korean War. My dad never liked sharing much about his army days, but I once overheard a story about his return from his tour of duty. He was shopping for souvenirs for family and friends with another soldier before they were to be shipped back stateside, and neither of them took the time to look at a clock, so they missed the plane from Seoul to Los Angeles. As they waited for the next flight, they heard that their original carrier had crashed in the Pacific.

Thereafter, being late seemed to become a core value in our household. When Sunday came around, I woke at 4 a.m. to stuff the ads into the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, and we were still late for church, arriving just in time to hear the pastor preach.

My wife finds it ironic that my favorite song is Pink Floyd's "Time," which begins with clocks chiming and ringing. A few cynical friends have said that I will probably be late for my own funeral. I tell them I wasn't planning on being there anyway.

Ron Drury
Firth, NE