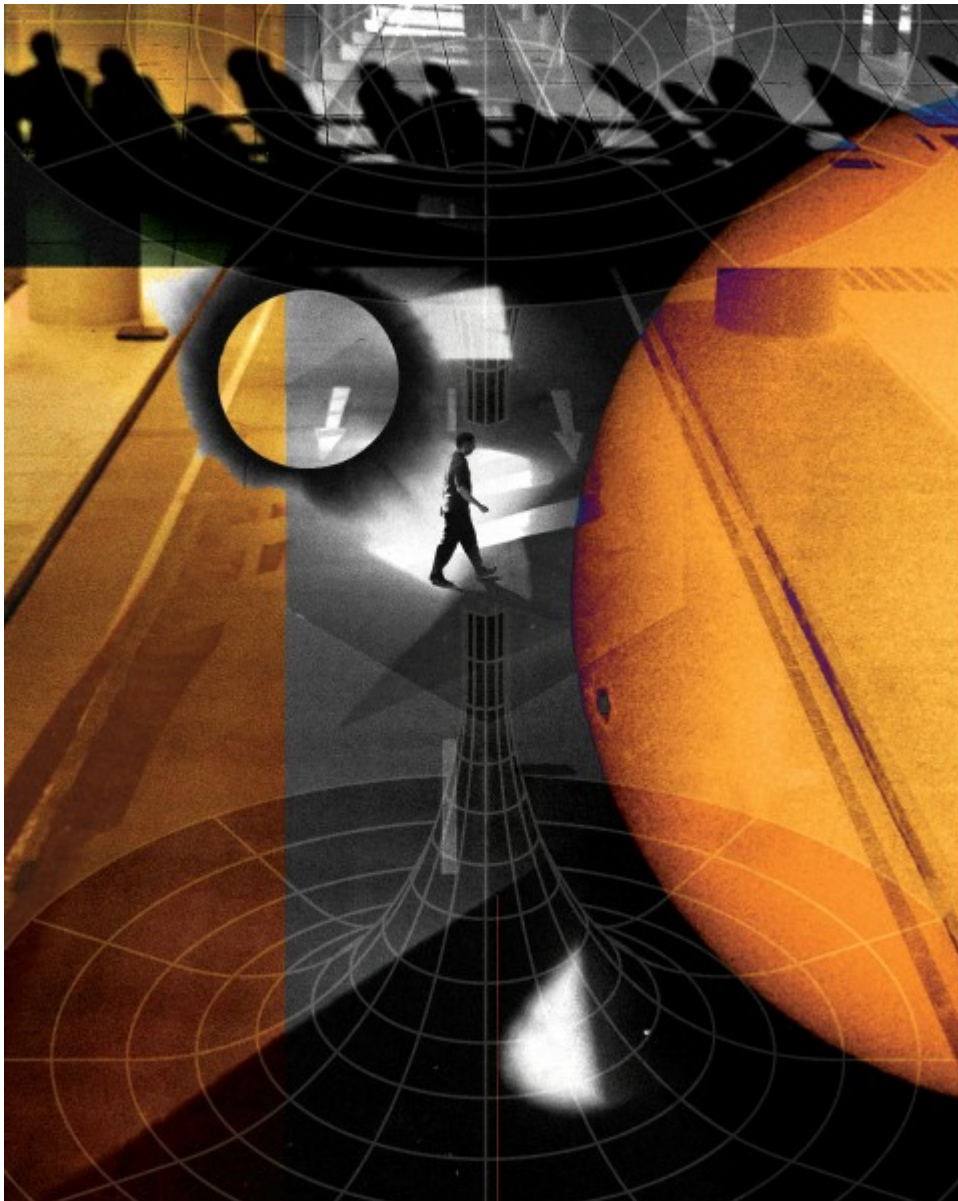


Stretched between life's verses

The future is scary: we simply don't know, and it flies toward us anyway.

by [Brian Bantum](#) in the [December 2024](#) issue

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(*Century* illustration)

Augustine once described the difference between our experience of time and God's experience as the feeling of being stretched between past, present, and future. He said time, for us, is like singing a song and being caught between recalling what we had sung, singing the words in the moment, and anticipating the words that will come.

As I sit and write this I am anticipating a new season of life, changes that were always coming but were never quite present. And now I can see the first glimmers (or shadows) of change on the horizon. I've been thinking of this feeling of being stretched, of trying to be present to the moment even as I hold what has come and what is to be. It's a feeling I often have writing this column, knowing the world may feel very different in the time between when I write it and when it gets published. Or the gap between writing a sermon on a Wednesday (or Saturday morning) and news that roars in on a Saturday night, or the plans we make in the spring before a very different life greets us in autumn.

But the future always comes, doesn't it? Metabolism slows, kids become adults, economies shift, people die, wars rage, presidents are voted in and out, change always comes.

I think this is what is scary about any future: we simply don't know, and it flies toward us anyway. I suppose that is the other side of the stretching, the grasping—we know life will change. As Octavia Butler reminds us, it's the change that is always with us: "God is change."

Sometimes we resist the change by holding on to memories of what was and trying desperately to re-create them in our children, our community, our nation. Sometimes we are confronted by problems so complex there is no simple theory or practice that can unknot them. Sometimes change feels so inevitable, the sweep of violence and evil so vast, that it feels like there is no point in trying to shape the future. Maybe we should just keep scrolling, keep surviving.

I wonder if these attempts to navigate the stretching we feel, especially in turbulent in-between times, are misperceptions of what we feel like we should be able to do. When we think of God as having perfect knowledge of everything that has happened or will happen, we believe that's what it means to have peace, to have some semblance of control. But I'm not sure time works like that. Change always comes; history is always with us. Even as we sing a song, we are stretched between its

verses.

We live in a current of time, a great river of being within God's life. While what was, what is, and what will be might feel segmented, in truth they are tethered and braided together, flowing like drops moving and twisting in a river. In a way, I don't need to know the specifics. I need to embrace the movement. I simply need to listen, to feel, to swim, to let the current move me and discover the subtle ways I can conform my life to move with it.

I don't know if this is what Augustine meant, but he said that God does not stretch between past, present, and future but rather holds them all in one moment. All the verses of the song are present to God at once. There was a time when I would have thought this is a kind of foreknowledge, that God knew what would come and because of this knowledge God also had a kind of control.

But I am beginning to wonder if, perhaps, the presence of all time to God is not because God "knows." I wonder if the knowledge God possesses is not about discrete moments of time. Maybe God is movement, song, dance. And if God is all of this, maybe our lives, in the face of an uncertain future and the inevitability of change, aren't about clinging to what was or floating or creating rails to try to determine how the future will come.

Maybe life with God is a kind of participation, a kind of swimming in which we feel all that was, all that is, and all that will be is swirling in our midst. And our life, our discipleship, is a being with: finding the threads of time, of what was and is and is to come all flowing in our already. Maybe when time is about our bodied lives and the flickers of God's presence, then we can begin to discover the possibilities of what will be in what we sing today. Maybe we can discover the tinges of what was in what will be.