

# Stopwatch: Time's captives

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [September 20, 2003](#) issue

There was a time when people lived without clocks. They awakened, ate, played, slept in a rhythm maintained by the seasons and the rising and setting of the sun. But then something happened, socially and technologically. Now we are expected to be places and do things at times designated by others, and now we must have a timepiece in order to accommodate these expectations. Receiving one's first watch is a kind of introduction to adulthood, though kids usually don't know it. (I can remember how thrilled I was to get my first wristwatch.)

I can see now that entering the world of watches and clocks involves a kind of captivity. I've been wearing a watch longer than any ring, and my most frequent gesture of the day is to rotate my wrist and check the time.

Some of us live more easily than others with our clocks. Some people I know actually don't wear a watch and depend on public clocks, digital dashboard displays or passersby to provide the time. And some of us have taken happily to our captivity to the clock and become almost obsessive about where we are in the day's progression. We awaken, eat, work, play, sleep, not according to physical or emotional need or inclination, but on the basis of what the clock tells us to do.

I even know a man who in his dating years used to consult his watch as he was kissing his girlfriend. He is still doing it as he kisses his wife goodbye in the morning. After all, the watch is right there on his wrist, behind her neck, staring him in the face, as it were. For such people, life without a watch is a frightening thought.

A crisis occurred to me on vacation: my watch stopped. It happened on the very morning I was reading, as part of morning devotions, an anthology of the writings of Abraham Joshua Heschel titled *I Asked for Wonder*. Rabbi Heschel wrote: "The passage of hours is either an invitation to despair or a ladder to eternity. This little time in our hands melts away ere it can be formed. Before our eyes, man and maid, spring and splendor, slide into oblivion. However, there are hours that perish and hours that join the everlasting. Prayer is a crucible in which time is cast in the likeness of the eternal. Man hands over his time to God in the secrecy of single

words. When anointed by prayer, his thoughts and deeds do not sink into nothingness, but merge into the endless knowledge of an all-embracing God. We yield our thoughts to Him who endowed us with a chain of days for the duration of life.”

After reading that, I removed the now-useless watch from my wrist and determined to hand over my time to God. It was not easy. Liberation never is. But I’m going to stay with it. At least until I take the watch in for a new battery.