

# The gift of time



Bombarded as we are with numerous means of instant communication, **Trudi Dargan** wonders whether the loss of genuine human contact may be one of the biggest unrealised social dilemmas of our time

*'Far more than the finding of time is the way we open up the minutes and invest them with meaning.'* David Richo<sup>1</sup>

**T**ime and again I have been encouraged by Richo's words when working with clients new to therapy who, for different reasons and perhaps understandably, are anxious to quantify from the outset what is largely an evolving process of self-discovery and hard to measure in concrete terms. I have been thinking about time or temporality in life generally and in relation to counselling for what seems like ages. Last March, whilst on holiday with my husband and parents, I was struck by my mum's frequent memory lapses and her more pronounced, childlike vulnerability. My dad's now permanently swollen arthritic foot was clearly making walking uncomfortable for him and I felt, and still feel, profoundly sad about these gradual losses – the silent, cumulative and persistent ravages of chronological time.

So my ideas for this article were already germinating when I read Charles Gordon-Graham's interesting article about time in last June's issue of *Therapy Today*.<sup>2</sup> In essence, he describes clients as having a specific 'temporal orientation' towards either the past, the present or the future. He details how he focuses on this propensity in his interesting, self-invented, time and temporality therapy approach with clients. My words are an adjunct to Gordon-Graham's and explore time in other ways.

The more I reflect on the nature and meaning of time and its inexorable passage, the more I realise how time infiltrates, shapes and colours the whole of our separate yet interconnected lives. Like the air we breathe and the water we drink, time is, without question, a vital resource. The words of St Augustine resonate with my musing: 'What then is time? If no one asks me, I know: if I wish to explain it to one that asketh, I know not.'<sup>3</sup> Time is dexterous and turns up in many guises, as a moment, an occasion, a spell, a period, an era, a duration, a season, an interval and more. We experience it immediately on a phenomenological level yet it is hard to get at. We have an inner time too, awesome circadian rhythms that synchronise our bodies with day and night.

## A time for therapy

It is not simply the linearity or cyclicity of time that fascinates me but the different dimensions of time in our lives – in our clients' lives. What does time mean to us? What effects does it have on us? What are our attitudes towards it? How do we treat it? And perhaps, most essentially, how is time lived and experienced as we develop, grow, age, go through change, and experience new attachments, separations, reunions and losses? Most clients enter into counselling at a significant time for them personally – a juncture, a phase or a stage of life, a time of crisis,

distress or change, a 'choice point' in their lives, or when unconscious archaic material suddenly breaks through and coping strategies no longer work. Others come when the clock is literally ticking, when the time remaining to have children or to make a significant life change appears to be ebbing away, or when facing other circumstantial losses such as abuse, injury or illness.

Time is everywhere. It is inescapable. We live in it. We live by it. And we can't live without it. It is invisible, untouchable and intangible, yet ever present. It is here, now, this very minute, today. It was there, yesterday, last week, a year ago. It will be here, tomorrow, next week, and 10 years from now. Whether fundamental or elemental, time just is. Our earthly, bodily existence, or so called 'physical' lifetime, is irreversibly bounded by birth and death, our 'two necessary losses',<sup>4</sup> containing and confining us like solid, immovable, immutable bookends. Time is at once finite and infinite. It will end for me and it will march on eternally.

Listen carefully and you will notice that time weaves itself clearly yet often imperceptibly through much human communication. 'I'll be a few minutes.' 'Yesterday we went...' 'I'll see you on Tuesday.' 'That was ages ago.' 'What are you doing later?' We have closing time, opening time, full time, half time, part time, summertime and wintertime. We can be behind time, in the nick of time, on time and ahead of time. We can be there in no time or in good time. It is consistent, not material, yet hardly immaterial either – a steady, ubiquitous reference point.

## The tricks of time

*'The joy of forgetting oneself and the world lasts only for brief moments, but the sorrow-steeped enchantment that rises from the miracle of beauty can endure for... a lifetime.'*<sup>5</sup>

Time can also be hypnotic and quixotic. I am writing this in what Mihaly Csikszentmihaly<sup>6</sup> calls a state of 'flow', oblivious to the hands ticking or display of any clock, concentration enabling my creative process to unfold without bounds, my sense of time lost. Yet 'flow' is an experience that can be confining and diminishing as well as liberating and expanding. How helpful is this deep state of absorption to the millions of young, and not so young, digital game players, mesmerised by their screens for hours on end? Loss of genuine human contact may be one

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of the biggest unrealised social dilemmas we are facing as a species, and therapy is pursuing the same trajectory with more counselling being done online – sort of alone together, connected in time and disconnected in place.

And mindfulness, focusing and meditation bring us into the here and now in a very stilling way, heightening our awareness of the present moment, our stream of consciousness and our immediate sensory experience. Jon Kabat-Zinn<sup>7</sup> once called it ‘awarenessing’ – stopping, noticing and capturing time, to enter the moment. The aptly named Slow Movement of recent times has also alerted us to the quickening pace of our lives. As Ghandi said, ‘There is more to life than simply increasing its speed.’<sup>8</sup> The race to the end of life is perhaps a contest that very few want to win, where first past the post is typically feared rather than favoured.

So time can be a kindly or a hostile trickster, friend and foe. We can literally lose or suspend ourselves in it. Sometimes this ‘saves’ us. The time, space and state-altering phenomenon of dissociation enables temporary flight from physical terror and trauma, although the invisible traces are typically more enduring, embedded in implicit memory; a psychological and somatic shadow. Do psychotic episodes offer some protection too?

### Grief alters time

Those souls in the depths of grief or depression often feel stuck in or trapped by time. For those in shock, time may seem to stop completely, to stand still. A particular ‘moment in time’ may come back to haunt them again and again as they mourn, grieve and remember. In a touching personal memoir about loss, written after the death of her husband, Joan Didion writes: ‘Life changes fast. Life changes in an instant. You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends.’<sup>9</sup> Certain moments and events change lives – there is the before and the after. A life guillotined. And whilst death can happen in a moment, grief and healing take time.

Whatever one’s default ‘temporal-orientation’<sup>2</sup> there is no doubt that individuals shattered by bereavement find it hard to focus on the future; even to conceive of one. The present is hard enough to bear. Thoughts of the past are like a comfort blanket, a once safe haven of certitude. Forget fast forward, only pause and rewind make any sense now. For most, the death of an intimate other initially distorts and thwarts time and ultimately changes its very meaning. Following the sudden death of his 12-year-old son, Christopher Leach wrote: ‘Happy the man or woman who realises early that there is only so much time allotted to us and even that is gaining momentum.’<sup>10</sup> Time seems to pass more quickly as our lives lengthen. Its value soars.

### A client’s take on time

One of my clients is only now emerging into his new ‘present’ reality following a relationship breakdown over a year ago. Despite a tendency to withdraw, avoid and hide away, he has found the courage to dig deep into his story, a multi-



generational history shot through with denial, chronic depression, completed suicides, maternal unavailability and withdrawal. His process has been arduous and, at times, desperate. He accepted my invitation to think about time and to share his reflections for this article. For him, time is the enemy. Now is the only future. Distraction is the name of the game.

‘People keep telling me “time is a healer”. I don’t see it this way. All I can see is time stretching out in front of me in a straight line, endlessly going off into the distance. Nothing changes, so nothing gets better. It is difficult to explain but the only comparison I can make is to how a prisoner must feel on an unlimited prison sentence. I try and avoid spare time and I know this is avoidance, which I’m trying to stop. I put very little value on time. I have no future plans and I don’t have a diary this year. Any plans I had are gone. It seems strange to say that I don’t value time because I still hate being late.

‘One of the reasons I work such long hours is because I dread nights, so I put off leaving work for as long as possible, which explains why I did 250 hours work last April and 289 in May. The hour spent in counselling each week is almost the only thing I do that has any meaning. You help me try and understand why I feel the way I do. It is the only time during the week that I actually feel I achieve something. I am certain that without your help I would have committed suicide. Some weeks the hour flies by and sometimes it feels like about three hours. It is never easy because not only am I confronting subjects and feelings that are hard, talking about them is also hard for me.’

I wonder if his dread of nights has been lifelong. His promptness for sessions, unmitigated reliability and genuine aversion to lateness are an unsurprising response to perpetual maternal tardiness. As an infant, lacking cognition and former experience as a marker, time would have been ‘measured’ or endured in a completely different way – the wait for mother’s return may have felt interminable. I care about this caring man.

### Takes on time

William Penn, the 19th century founder of the province of Pennsylvania, said: ‘Time is what we want most, but what we use worst.’<sup>11</sup> Time managers might agree, yet maybe a little time wasting is not wasted time at all. Joy abounds in our leisurely and stolen moments. Time is our story, from once upon a time through to happily or unhappily ever after. We are quite literally ‘time-bound’. Time frames our actions and our narratives. And

we do so many things with it. We save it. We lose it. We make it. We spend it. We mark it. We bide it. We chase it. We can’t live our terrestrial existence without it. When our time runs out we are dead, yet paradoxically, at times we choose to kill it. ‘I was just killing time,’ we say nonchalantly. Murder most precious. As the 17th century philosopher Henri Thoreau held: ‘As if you could kill time without injuring eternity.’<sup>12</sup>

A client’s relationship with time is often part of their presenting problem. Some clients need to move out of the past, to face their fears and grieve their losses, notwithstanding the consolations of memory. The retrieval of the past is a process to be relished, especially for those in the early stages of dementia. Memory is identity, providing validation that one has lived. Contrarily, an unwillingness and inability to let go of what has been, begets stasis and unhelpful, even compulsive, repetition. Then, looking in the rear view mirror becomes a barrier to the route ahead.

And perhaps, somewhat arrogantly, many of us simply ‘assume continuity’, planning and organising as we do for an expected, unquestioned future time. Having something to look forward to certainly boosts the spirit. Yet, if it is simply escapism, a socially plausible means of avoiding change in the present, it can be a spurious temptress – a way to disavow the pain of here and now existence. However, ignoring the future leaves us drifting along without hope, meaning, goals, dreams and ambitions – leaving innate potential and opportunities undiscovered and untapped. We can end up nowhere rather than somewhere. Andy Warhol said: ‘They always say time changes things, but you actually have to change them yourself.’<sup>13</sup> Yes, what we do today determines tomorrow, creating a future narrative. Serendipity itself may be partially engineered.

So is the ‘present’ really where it’s at? This moment, being the only opportunity we have to experience time directly, on a phenomenological level? Still, some people fill every minute, without savouring a single moment, like workaholics who fill their time to avoid having spare time on their hands, maybe driven by their inner critics, by *musts*, *oughts* and *shoulds* or by a need to be perfect, strong or pleasing. Other busy individuals may be filling an existential emptiness with action or keeping ‘temporal-life’ anxiety at bay, never stopping to taste the day, to ponder, to question or search within. David Leach’s words are affecting: ‘If tomorrow we go into the dark, how achingly

poignant is today... but we are thinking underlings and are not content like the rest of creation to merely taste the day.’<sup>10</sup> The present really is all there is today.

A part of me concurs with Chief Rabbi Lord Sacks, who bemoans the pre-eminence of the contemporary focus on what is happening at this moment, bombarded as we are with texts, tweets, emails, updates and viral videos – what he aptly describes as living in ‘the continuous, clamorous, attention-demanding now’.<sup>14</sup> This isn’t such a mindful now and can leave us with a sense of collective unmooring. It can be useful too to get a sense of how clients structure their time in terms of contact with others. How much time is spent with others and doing what? How much time is spent hiding the true self, masquerading as the presentational self? How much time is selflessly given to others? One of my pet dislikes is the notion of ‘quality time’. The phrase is thrown around like confetti at a wedding, often by guilt-ridden and so-called ‘time-poor’ parents and partners. Who decides that it is quality time? Is it the generous time giver or the ‘fortunate’ recipient? If we want time, we really do have to make it.

### More time in therapy

Hands up, I have a bit of an arbitrary approach when it comes to time in my therapeutic work. I permit clients to turn up early and rarely inform them that there are only a few minutes left. My therapeutic hour is best described as 60 plus. For me, the giving of time is what therapy is about – that most vital resource: undivided time, perhaps the most precious gift from one to another. Many have missed out on time. Whether coming for short- or long-term counselling, clients arrive with many concerns that are in some way time related, such as procrastination or rushing to action. These can shackle, and Richo’s words are sensible: ‘Both haste and delay are interferences.’<sup>1</sup> Others have issues with things such as overdoing and burnout, too much routine or lack of routine, fear of spontaneity, guilt about leisure or relaxation time, fear of intimate time, or sleep-related problems like insomnia. Time presents itself in the room in a myriad of obvious ways that do not need repeating. Undisputedly, therapy happens in the present, yet we are often exploring past experience and potential futures. Frequently, we are working with adult-children, those individuals whose developmental needs weren’t fully met;

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who may be 60 yet feel about five. Chronological, psychological, emotional, social and spiritual ages are by no means one and the same. So there is fixation and regression, what Petruska Clarkson calls 'the flight backwards in search of security and a new start'.<sup>15</sup> Some believe in re-experiencing and re-parenting, others fear re-traumatising. Yet looking back enables more integral movement forwards. Many therapists habitually explore potential futures with clients, using creative interventions like timelines, guided visualisation and psychodrama, all of which serve as useful tools to cast forward, however tentatively.

#### Time to go

I see the past, present and future as inextricably linked, each having an essential role to play in living with wellbeing. Today needs a yesterday if we are to prepare for tomorrow, even if the latter is a promise to pay and not cash in hand – think delayed gratification. 'Time is a created thing,' as Lao Tzu, the Chinese father of Taoism, said.<sup>16</sup> As I write this I am grateful that my parents are still alive and any time that I spend with them now is precious to me – time to be together, experiencing simple things, old issues acknowledged and accepted. We still have a present and a future together and one day, if I survive them, my memories of many times shared will be golden, reliving the past without turning back the clock, enjoyment of the moment enhanced by thoughts of the past. I will end with more moving words from Christopher Leach, a line that could well be my own: 'I have learned to be wary: the time that is left is savoured now, dwelt upon and treasured.'<sup>10</sup> ■

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