

WATCHING TIME

December 8, 2003

Frank J. McGavran

I never imagined that a broken wristwatch would destabilize the universe and set me beside God outside time and space. At 9:38 PM on Saturday, September 17, 1993, I was winding it before bed, when something snapped. In a silence like that between the heart stopping and death, I stared at its still face. How could the mechanism that had measured my life for fifty years fail me now? Alone, I felt a nameless terror, like the time tornadoes hovered over the Mill Creek Valley or the flood rose above the old riverfront.

I breathed deeply to calm myself. Rationally, neither the event nor the obvious solutions presented unusual difficulties. Inexpensive digital models had flooded the market, and anyone could get along until a new watch was selected or the old repaired. I awoke the next morning at the normal time and was ready when Martha arrived to drive me to church, as if nothing extraordinary had happened.

For me, however, a new watch was out of the question. Mine had been in the family since my father retired in 1927, and I had worn it every day after his death until I, too, left the firm. Indeed, the fact I already had a firm watch led senior management to reevaluate our retirement policy. If I had been eligible for the new plan, I would have received a small pension instead of a crystal decanter embossed with the company logo.

Only a person on a fixed income can understand my predicament. The watch had to be fixed, but how could I work it into my budget? I called several jewelry stores for estimates. To my surprise, I learned that jewelry stores no longer employed watch repairmen.

"Try calling the manufacturer," a clerk suggested.

The manufacturer had gone out of business in 1969, when Japanese electronic watches ravaged the industry.

Martha suggested I try a kiosk at the mall, where she bought batteries for her watch every few years. I invested an entire afternoon on the bus and wandering amongst teenagers until I found the stand, only to be told they could not get parts for a watch more than five years old. My disappointment must have showed, because the attendant added they could replace the old mechanism with an electric drive.

"What about the phases of the moon?" I asked anxiously.

For five decades, the changing yellow moon against the deep metallic sky had provided color and mystery to my life. I looked forward to the waning of the moon, when a far away star appeared to signify the mysteries that lie behind appearances. The attendant withdrew to consult a catalogue.

"For an extra ten dollars, we can do the moon," he reported. "But the hands will have to go."

How could anyone replace those bright gold arrows that had bound two generations to their desks more securely than shackles?

"There's no way to attach the old hands to the new mechanism," he explained. "It won't cost any more. They come with the motor."

I think he was disappointed when I declined.

I still believe I made the right choice. After all, history only has meaning for biological systems; in the cold world of physics, every process is reversible. It doesn't matter to an electron whether it is jumping forwards or backwards from one orbit to another, or how often the process is repeated. To be alive is to have an irreversible past, and for my father and me, that past was the watch. I could no more replace the mechanism than I could recover our tenements lost in the depression, or the bonds grandfather took out of the vault and buried somewhere on the farm two weeks before he died.

Without a functioning timepiece, however, I did not know when to leave the warmth of the mall for the bus stop. Then I did not know whether to vie for a seat under the enclosure or remain standing. The ride back to my apartment was the loneliest since I left the office at 5:37 p.m. after my retirement party on Friday, February 15, 1980. Unmeasured time is a torment.

The next Sunday, I was nearly late for church. I should have known I was sleeping later; by Friday, "Morning Edition" was half over before I started breakfast.

"Don't you have an alarm clock?" Martha asked incredulously, when I explained the delay.

As a schoolteacher she had taught that promptness was a virtue.

"There is an alarm on the watch," I explained. "It was all I ever needed."

"Perhaps the Rector will know someone, who can help," she said.

That seemed such a good idea at the time. At coffee hour after the service, the Rector suggested I consult Edward Symmes, a retired banker who repaired old watches as a hobby. I had known Symmes well enough to say "Good morning" for thirty-seven years, but I had never heard of his hobby.

Symmes was delighted the Rector had recommended him and asked to see the watch. He was disappointed I had not brought it with me.

"Parts can be quite expensive," he cautioned. "Without seeing it, I will have to charge \$100 in advance."

I should have declined on financial grounds. But the request seemed so reasonable, I could not refuse, although it meant wearing my shirts for three days instead of two and not going out to dinner for two months. He gave me his address and promised to get started as soon as my check cleared. We agreed to meet in the undercroft the next Sunday.

Bus schedules presented more of a problem, because they assumed the user knew the time. I could cope, I reasoned, if I confined my route to stops near public clocks. So

I spent a day on the bus checking the barbershop, laundry, bank and grocery, only to find there was nowhere I wanted to go near a public clock. Friday I was awakened by a call from my doctor's secretary, reporting I had missed an appointment the preceding day. That was the first time I lost a whole day because I did not know the date.

Edward Symmes was waiting for me beside the coffee urn after the service. He grunted in surprise when I handed him the watch.

"It has an alarm," he exclaimed. "And the date. And the phases of the moon! That means four separate mechanisms."

There was the same tremor in his voice as when a resident learns that he must perform his first quadruple bypass alone, while the chief of surgery attends the annual golf outing with the hospital trustees.

"This is your lucky day," he reassured me, placing my watch in his jacket pocket. "If I had known about the alarm and the moon, I would have charged you more."

Like a partially anesthetized patient, I grinned encouragement through the fog.

Edward Symmes was not at church the next Sunday. During coffee hour, his wife Dorothy approached me.

"Your watch is quite a challenge for Edward," she said in the same accusatory tone my friend Martin's wife once used when we lingered too long over coffee after the men's prayer breakfast.

"Is he working on it now?" I wondered.

"He was up late writing away for parts," she snapped. "Edward has always needed his sleep."

Across the undercroft the Rector's wife appeared, wearing a serape from a visit to their missionary son. Mrs. Symmes left me to condemn this outrage to a more appreciative audience, who still wore mink stoles or Persian lamb jackets on festival Sundays. At least something was happening with the watch, I comforted myself. I had always been a very patient person.

Unmeasured patience, however, is meaningless. So is unmeasured frustration, as I discovered when I arrived a week early for my rescheduled doctor's appointment. They were very happy to see me, but the file clerk always left at two. Without my chart, doctor would be unable to distinguish my case from his many other patients. Could I return the next week, when they would be sure to have everything ready?

Riding back to the apartment with the after school crowd, I had an inspiration. Many young scholars carried boom boxes, while others wore ear plugs connected to a device like an external pace maker on their belts. How could I have forgotten that radio stations announce the time regularly throughout the day? All I need do is keep PBS on as background and pay attention when they announced the date and time.

My theory appeared to work, as long as I could tune out Linda Wertheimer at the beginning and Bailey White at the end of the hour. It was at the beginning of the hour, however, that they announced the date and time. Unless I paid close attention, a whole hour of National Public Radio or baroque lute concertos would be endured in vain.

Another problem was portability. I was too old to be seen in public with a boom box or a Walkman. Besides, I had started listening to the programs. National Public Radio presented a pastiche of disasters and deceptions, from massacres to compensation for the grandchildren of victims, from the administration's latest outrage to the angry response of the senate minority leader. Carl Kassell described court decisions and legislation that had been pending for months with the same surprise and alarm as earthquakes and airline crashes. Sandwiched between were moments of editorial reflection that never kept the same events from repeating themselves the next day. If a person missed a day, a month or a decade, he missed nothing. NPR was a powerful argument that events had as little meaning as the date and time they were announced.

Edward Symmes was in church the next Sunday. After the service, he broke away from Dorothy to report that all the parts had been ordered; it was only a matter of time now. I had not seen him so excited since Nixon's reelection in 1972. Dorothy, however, did not share his enthusiasm. Taking his arm, she led him away like a disapproving mother, who catches her little boy in the sandbox with the wrong sort of playmate.

The next week I did not try to know the time. The Emperor Marcus Aurelius said that all we have is the moment, a thin, bright line that cuts through the universe like a laser beam, separating us from everything that has passed and all that is to come. Caught up in Symmes' enthusiasm, I was content with my own perceptions, certain the call would soon come that the watch would be ready on Sunday. Who needed a watch anyway, if the instant that just passed is as far away as the time of Abraham, and the next minute as distant as the great wall of galaxies?

My doctor, however, would not accept this as an excuse for arriving two hours late for my appointment. After a hurried series of phone calls, his secretary was able to put back his tee time, so he crowded me in at the end of the day. His anxiety was as infectious as Edward Symmes' enthusiasm. For him the moment is not enough. There has to be something beyond it, even if that something is a golf game. If there is no past and no future, there will only be darkness when perception's flashlight is finally snapped off. Stoic philosophy leads to existential terror. To live beyond the moment, there must be a mechanism to stimulate anticipation and overcome anxiety by measuring how long they must be endured. The watch had to be repaired.

I caught Edward Symmes beside the pastry tray on Sunday. He didn't wait for me to ask about the watch.

"Later," he said and hurried off after Dorothy.

"You should do something about that watch," Martha said on the way back to my apartment.

"I am exploring alternatives," I said to avoid criticizing Edward.

From the way other members of the altar guild sometimes looked at me, I suspected she had repeated my casual remarks at their meetings.

That was the week I realized that time and memory are not forever joined. Daniel Schorr's remarks on the Middle East peace process reminded me of a sentence from my ancient history course: "During the reign of Antonius Pius, there was a revolt in Egypt

that caused the Romans great difficulty at the time." I remembered Professor Troutman uttering that sentence and saw again the burning city reflected in the black waters of the Nile. We had brought all the ships from Alexandria to relieve the siege of Memphis. What I recall best is the smell of the fire and the crocodiles roaring as they fought over the bodies in the river.

After Marcus Aurelius succeeded Antonius Pius, and I commanded the Alexandrian flotilla, Avidius Cassius proclaimed himself emperor in Antioch. I carried his head to Marcus in my fastest ship. There's a peace process for you. We Romans are the only conquerors not to go soft in the East.

The next Sunday I caught sight of my watch repairman following Dorothy up the aisle after the service. He must have sensed I was staring at him, because he looked back once with that hunted look people have when they are trying to avoid you. That was the last time I looked into Edward Symmes' eyes. He moved his lips as if he wanted to speak, but before I could reach him, Dorothy grabbed his elbow and escorted him past the clergy and out the door. I could not follow because Martha always stayed for coffee, and I dared not disappoint her.

Symmes' absence opened my weeks to new meaning. For pagans, time was cyclical. We lived happily from season to season, which would recur endlessly even after the present participants passed. Time became linear when exilic Judaism and Christianity set us searching for a celestial city. Without Edward Symmes, what did I have to direct my time?

Teresa Judson drove me to church the Sunday before Veterans Day, because Martha had to serve with the altar guild at the eight o'clock service. We fell into conversation about recent funerals, and she expressed sadness at the passing of the World War II generation.

"You weren't in the service, were you?" she asked.

"Oh, yes," I said. "The Navy."

"Where did you serve?" she said, a little surprised.

"The Middle East," I replied and told her about my experiences sailing to Syria to put down Cassius' revolt. She was particularly interested in how we sacrificed a pig on the prow of my flagship at the beginning of the campaign.

"What were you saying to Teresa Judson about the Navy?" Martha demanded the following Sunday.

"I told her how dangerous it was to lie off an unknown coast at night, and how on our return the sailors smelled the Nile a hundred miles at sea."

"You never told me that," she said accusingly.

"I only just remembered."

I saw again the light that appeared at the far edge of the sea that night, still shining in the dawn.

"One of the wanderering planets?" I asked my captain. "The orb of Horus?"

How the sailors laughed. I, the seer, who so often saw the walls breached and the palace in flames, could not tell the lighthouse at Alexandria from the morning star. Now that I am old and blind, they must send one of the boys from the temple to lead me to my place beside the altar.

"I have a brass coin to pay Edward," I told her. "One I saved for Charon."

On Thanksgiving morning, during the reminiscence of a dental technician about holiday traditions in her family, I turned off the radio for good. Time compresses sentimentality, and for many the holidays are the only time they feel something besides basic bodily urges and wonderment at what the evening's reruns will be. For one seeking a substitute for time, reconstructed emotions are an impediment. Perhaps another medium would be helpful. My finances had recovered with my November Social Security check, so I decided to subscribe to a newspaper.

I did not do it for the news or the program guide. In the upper right hand corner was the date. I would have no more lost days or weeks now. At the back of the first section was a guide to the weather, river stages and the phases of the moon. For the first time since my watch stopped, I could follow the lunar cycle.

The lunar cycle, however, led only to despair, because it marked nothing but itself. If I knew that tonight there would be a quarter moon, what did I know? Even my doctor did not schedule appointments on so imprecise a basis. When I was a Stoic, we believed the stars were gods. In our time, however, the heavens are a spectacle without an audience. Separated by science from human meaning, they whirl away in splendid isolation, dulled by our indifference.

That was the first Advent I felt the power of the candles. Even as a child, I had looked forward to lighting one purple candle a week for four weeks, then the pink candle on Christmas Eve. Now I understood that the candles did not mark weeks but stages of descent into a mystery. Why is it always forty days and forty years? How many mansions are in the Father's house? Are there three or seven heavens? Mere numbers say nothing.

As I waited in my pew, unseen hands lighted the candles until on Christmas Eve the sanctuary shimmered like a Byzantine icon. If I parted the golden altar curtain that separated us from the holy of holies, the whole world would dissolve in light. I was only vaguely aware of the Rector leading me back to my pew. From then on Martha sat beside me during the service.

After Epiphany, about the time Martha suggested I move into a retirement home, I realized I had not seen Edward Symmes for months. Once I caught Dorothy staring at me in the undercroft with a look of such loathing that I could not meet her eyes.

"Tell Edward the watch does not matter anymore," I should have said. "I have so many other exciting things to think about."

Not wanting to hear my voice, however, she had turned away.

Edward's name first appeared in the intercessions during Lent. Martha did not know what had happened to him.

"Everyone is so careful what they say anymore," she told me. "Even the Rector won't tell." Of course I suspected alcoholism or Alzheimer's. If Dorothy had just been a little more open about things, I might have gone to Edward and said: "I've learned to live without it." Depending on his diagnosis, this could have been very supportive. Dorothy, however, discouraged visitors. Then there was silence. At coffee hour I overheard one of her friends say that to avoid gossip, Dorothy had taken his name off the list of intercessions. There was no chance to reach him after he entered the Alzheimer's unit.

Martha was angry when I wasn't ready for the funeral on time. I was going to tell her that the person wasn't important; any funeral will do, if you wish to mourn. I thought it would be pleasant going to someone else's and thinking about Edward, to test the universality of the death experience. Her expression, however, discouraged confidences, so I withdrew to my room to shave and put on my shirt. We entered, as they say, after the casket.

I had the oddest feeling that Dorothy Symmes had been waiting for me. During the homily, she kept shifting in the front pew, as if wanting to turn around. She finally made eye contact while Martha was helping me up after receiving the sacrament.

"Here," she hissed, leaning forward and pressing an envelope into my clasped hands. "Take it!"

"Thank you, Dorothy," I whispered. "I wasn't expecting this."

I already knew what it was. I could feel the leather strap through the paper, and hear the parts move gently against one another, like waves on a far away sea. I pressed it against my forehead when we knelt for the closing prayer.

"Why are you so happy?" Martha asked me in the car, after announcing we wouldn't be going to the cemetery. I opened the envelope and removed the casing and straps. The casing was divided into three spaces. So Edward Symmes had been wrong; there were three, not four, mechanisms. Or perhaps the moon was so uncomplicated it did not need a separate housing. Could this discrepancy have driven a man who exalted in multi million dollar transactions to lose his self confidence? Had the man of finance finally questioned the meaning of numbers?

"What are you thinking?" Martha demanded, when I did not answer her question.

I was thinking that the divisions of the casing were like the divisions of the human skull, where brains, eyes, nose and ears are each encased in separate bony compartments. But I did not tell Martha this. Instead, I said, "Look here," and showed her an orange plastic vial for prescription medicine filled with the parts.

"I can't look now. I'm driving," she snapped.

Good, I thought.

"Poor Edward and I had something else in common," I volunteered, reading the label.

"What?" she asked suspiciously.

"Aricept. 10 mg. It's supposed to stimulate memory."

I held the cylinder in front of the windshield and shook it. The parts shimmered in the sunlight before tumbling back like a storm in a snow globe.

We did not speak again that day, not even when she dropped me off at my apartment. It was just a few days later that the Rector stopped by to report my application had been accepted at the Episcopalian Retirement Home. I did not remember submitting an application, but I did not tell him. He might think my memory was failing. We sat for a long time in the living room I had called home since my father died, watching the parts rearrange themselves in the vial whenever I shook them.

"Look," I interrupted our thoughts. "Can you see it?"

The tiny hour hand had risen to the top. Carefully I handed him the vial.

"Yes," he said in the tone reserved for a child with his first grasshopper or a widow favored by an apparition of the Blessed Virgin. "I see it."

Shot from the big bang, that arrow penetrates every particle as it speeds away from every other particle into the swelling void. The second law of thermodynamics dictates that energy always moves from greater to lesser concentrations. The universe will expand until it dribbles off into nothingness, unless there is enough mass to bring it all crashing back together again. Then we will live our lives backwards, beginning at death and regressing toward youth and the womb. Will memory roll up behind us, as it does now? Will we fear becoming a sperm and an egg again as much as we once feared becoming dust?

That was about the time I discovered different times existed simultaneously in my apartment. In my chair, it was always 6:17 p.m. on February 15, 1980, when I sat down exhausted after returning home from my retirement party. If I moved to the bookshelf, it was November 1815, when news of the great battle at Waterloo first reached us. The couch was May 1940, the week mother died.

Now that everyday conversation was failing me, I started to move from time to time while visitors were present. I had hoped different times would bring different memories to stimulate me and my guests, but Martha found the practice disconcerting. My doctor asked me very pointedly to sit still, when he dropped by for a surprise visit. Fortunately I was on the couch enjoying the last decade that doctors made house calls.

I held the vial in both hands as the Rector drove me to the retirement home. St. John of the Cross says that we must give up every possession including memory to enter the dark night of the soul. Only when we are wholly alone can we encounter God. The center has a façade like an apartment complex and elevator doors that close very slowly, so residents will not be left behind or crushed returning to their rooms. What if instead of God, anguish for what has been forgotten and what has never been overwhelms us? But I must not despair. How can I confess and be reconciled to the church, if I cannot remember my sin? The Rector patted my arm and left me in my chair while Martha and the other women unpacked my things. There was only one window, and it overlooked a Dumpster.

"Oh, look!" Martha exclaimed when they were finished. "It's just like home." At home my bed wasn't in the living room, and the bathroom door wasn't beside my chair.

Nevertheless I expressed complete delight, so they would leave. Smiling like mothers at a poorly attended birthday party, Martha and her friends departed.

I was lying on the bed, holding the vial up to the ceiling light, when the door opened and a big boned woman in puffy white trousers entered, followed by a young man in pale green pajamas and a hair net.

"I'm Emily, and this is Teddy," she said. "He'll be helping you with your bath and things."

Through the vial, Teddy was sallow and distorted, and the woman was shaped like a blow up clown that could not be tipped over. Then I saw the wheel with the phases of the moon and the star. Very carefully I set the vial on the table.

"Awaken me early on Thursday, Teddy," I volunteered. "I will take my trained heron, and you the nets, and we shall go hunting for waterfowl in the marshes along the river."

Teddy bent over and looked at my vial. "Hey, man, you really into that Aricept!" he cried happily.

"Cool," I said to complete our bonding.

They were so delighted by this reception that I let them go. Save until later the negotiation over serving all meals in my room so that random conversations would not disturb my concentration. I was just lying back down, when I saw the half moon through my window. Some month was half spent, but what was that to me now? The times here are different from the times in my apartment, and seem concentrated on the deaths of prior residents. To avoid those places, I take a circuitous route to the bathroom, which Teddy disapproves.

Einstein demonstrated that gravity compresses space and time. Crawling along the surface of the earth, we disintegrate faster than if we are jogging on a skywalk, or orbiting in a space ship. Time is relative to every individual's position and speed. If I lie on my bed all day, I will live an infinitesimal fraction of a second less than if I move about or fly to India. I must pay better attention the next time Teddy shows me how to use the walker. If I can persuade the staff to move me from the second floor to the third floor, the distance from the crushing earth will preserve my life.

Do not argue with me about fractions of time. Achilles can never overtake the tortoise, because he must first cross half the space between them. In that time the tortoise will move ahead, presenting Achilles with another half space to cross, and so on throughout eternity. Death, like the runner, can never reach me, if I withdraw a little more each day. I shall speak with the head of nursing about changing my room tomorrow.

Instead of the head nurse, they sent Teddy. He carries an elaborate graph on which he records meals, medications and bowel movements. Sometimes my name appears on the chart, and sometimes that of Mr. Ernest Walker, who apparently resides in Room 237. Instead of Einstein, Teddy speaks of the importance of fiber in the diet and occasionally taking a common meal with the other residents.

"Goin' to lunch today?" he asked.

I started counting. House rules require them to leave you alone after three refusals. "They havin' ice cream fo' ever'body been here mo' than a year," he continued enthusiastically. "Balloons, barber shop quartet. No shit! Wanna check it out?"

"Will Mr. Walker be there?" I inquired to rebut any implication of anti social behavior.

"He died two months ago," Teddy exclaimed, exasperated. "Don' you pay no attention to nothin' I tell you?"

That, mon frere, is my cry to God every night. Like the psalmist I lie on my cot and rage until the hateful dawn arrives, knowing that only the knock of my attendant will break the silence.

Teddy does not deal well with abstractions. He counts each of his utterances as a request, and stops after the third. He helps me back to bed and closes the blind, so I will not be bothered by the sun.

Tomorrow, perhaps, I shall let him take me to crafts. I will show them how to embalm an ibis and seal it in a jar, so it will be there to comfort them when they die. Why waste time with Christmas ornaments and bangles for the grandchildren, when we can make offerings for the king of the dead?

I do not have other visitors now. The Rector, the Assistant, the Curate, Martha, the altar guild, everyone from church stopped coming, when I was unable to respond in real time during their visits. Someone would make a remark and I would reply after they left, or pick up their line of thought with someone else. It is unrealistic to expect such a diverse group to carry on a conversation where pauses last for weeks. After all, everyone's time is relative to himself. Who can communicate across such a chasm?

Without them to bother me, I range the universe like a free electron, back flipping out of orbit into nothingness. Sometimes I am a particle, sometimes a wave. I become whatever interests me. The memories I discover are not mine. Like neutrinos they pop in and out of existence as I cross the void alone.

I have stood on the walls of Troy and the battlements of Normandy and watched the dark ships cover the sea. Martin Borman and Cassandra were my intimates. For seven days and nights I sat under the pipal tree and saw Gautama receive enlightenment. Suffering leads to enlightenment. Oh, lower me into the Ganges, Teddy! Bath me with the waters of life!

St. Augustine, too, taught that time is a thing. Unlike Einstein, however, he believed time was created by God. Because God exists outside time, He can see how it began and how it all will end. Boethius took God's detachment to the extreme. If God exists outside time, He can have divine foreknowledge without destroying our free will. Like a little child, He must watch without touching. Apparently this comforted the philosopher on the eve of his execution.

It does not comfort me. Time is not a stream for me to go a-fishing in. It is a contrivance to excuse God from acting in the world, while we are free to slaughter one other and grow old and mad alone. What comfort can we take in a God who is the ultimate voyeur? Who can worship a Being that watches us in our separate times and

spaces, then changes channels as each little show flickers out? What shall I do with these prophecies, and to whom shall I utter them? Shall I run around the city naked to attract the attention of the new king? No, I shall bury them in ajar beside the walls of Jerusalem. When they discover them, they will say, "If only our fathers had found this, everything would be different. If only we had known. Now it is too late." Amen, says the Prophet. It is always too late.

I shall ask Teddy for a piece of paper, on which I shall write my last request. Mix the parts of the watch with my ashes, and strew them somewhere they will glitter as they fall. Burn these papers, too. If I am wrong and time is cyclical, I would not want to find them waiting for me at my next appearance. Far better to know at the end.

That is not Teddy in the doorway now. You walk too lightly. Did they send you from the temple with water for my ablutions? Yes. Today is the great festival. Have they finally found the perfect heifer for the sacrifice? Oh, be careful! I didn't think water could be so cold.

Which robe shall I wear, the purple or the white? You must tell me if the emperor looks in my direction, so I may acknowledge him. Now take my hand, my son. Help me to rise. Here is your coin. We will go early and find a place near enough the altar I can hear the old prayers, but not so close a clumsy priest will splash me with his victim's blood.
