

'Few books are truly life-changing. *On Time* is'

Rachel Kelly

'Elegant' *Guardian*

# ON TIME

FINDING YOUR PACE

IN A WORLD

ADDICTED TO FAST

CATHERINE  
BLYTH

'Excellent advice' *i Newspaper*

# **Catherine Blyth**

## **On Time: Finding Your Pace in a World Addicted to Fast**

### **Аннотация**

Why has time sped up?

Why is there never enough?

How can you make it yours again?

On Time reveals why time sped up, why there never seems to be enough, and how to make it yours again.

We have more time than ever: each of us can expect a thousand months on this planet, if we're lucky. Yet we feel time poor.

This is because our world is addicted to fast and we have become its servant. Instead of grasping the liberating potential of technology, many of us are stuck in a doomed race to outpace hurry.

Catherine Blyth combines cutting-edge research in neuroscience and psychology with stories ranging from Leonardo da Vince to Anna Wintour, Kant, and Keith Richards, to reveal timeless truths about humanity's finest invention and how it shapes our lives.

Angry, witty and enlightening, On Time is a handbook for navigating a fast-forward world that asks the questions productivity

guides ignore such as why time speeds up when you long for it to slow down, how to reset your body clock, and what hours suit which activities best.

So stop clock-watching and quit chasing white rabbits. Rediscover how time can be your servant.

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# Dedication

For Saskia and Rafael

## Epigraph

‘I would have written a shorter letter,  
but I didn’t have the time.’

Blaise Pascal, 4 December 1656

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## Introduction

There is enough time

Hurry up.

Is this your catchphrase? It used to be mine. I lived like a criminal, always on the run, but perpetually running late. For the life I never got around to living, there was never enough time. Each day I climbed onto an accelerating treadmill, and each evening my to-do list grew longer, just like Pinocchio's nose. It was as if all my good intentions were lies whose only productive property was to create more of themselves.

Until I realised that there is enough time – if you stop trying to outrace the clock. This book explains how such a change is possible, even for a hurry slave like me. It is for anyone who longs to understand time better: what it is, where it goes and how to get it back.

Time is a dangerous subject to tackle. Once you begin exploring this thing that permeates everything, where to stop? But I had to take it on; I was too time-boggled not to. It was also increasingly clear to me that my problem, as personal and painful as it felt, was not mine alone.

Rising numbers of us rattle through our weeks, feeling like the inadequate servants of an insatiable mob of commitments. On the rare occasions that we leave work on time, we slink out, guilty as adulterers. Many friends, outwardly successful, appear

trapped in a busy loneliness. Life passes in a blur of images glimpsed from their runaway train.

At first I imagined this was a generational issue. Now I see it is systemic. Our world is on fast-forward – bursting with miraculous new ways to be speedy, spontaneous, melting the boundaries of time and space. We are barnacled by gadgets that let us contact anyone, instantly, in any time zone, without stirring from our chair. Countless products promise to save us time. Yet time hunger is the defining challenge of our age. If we flounder, we feel as if we are failing personally, because living in conditions of extreme time pressure has come to seem normal. In fact, this situation is both odd and new.

How do we respond to the challenges? I know exhausted souls who nevertheless haul themselves out of bed at 5 a.m. to meditate, to calm themselves in preparation for the day's onslaught. One acquaintance calculated that since the week contains 168 hours, she can fit in the travel required for her job and sufficient face-time (her phrase) with her sons – provided she forgets about me-time, and her partner, and rations her sleep to four hours per night. Another working couple meet on Sunday nights to argue about how to cudgel in a minimum of one fun evening together the following week. I am not sure why they do not have fun on Sundays, although I am fairly certain it is not anything to do with religious scruples.

Stealing time, stretching the day, haggling over minutes for companionship. On paper it looks absurd. In life it feels

wretched. And these are people at the luxury end of time poverty, able to afford meditation classes, travel, dates. But time poverty is not restricted to the well-heeled. The misconception that being time poor somehow makes you cash rich has arisen because only the wealthy are silly enough to brag about it, mistaking it for a mark of success.

The truth is that time poverty, like every other variety of poverty, is a form of powerlessness. And how easily, how devastatingly, we give our power away. This book invites you to think a little harder about why time has become so complicated, and how it could be simpler.

I have been researching time poverty for most of my life – probably since my father drove me into town for my first day at kindergarten. It was my first encounter with rush hour and I was the last to walk into a room full of strange little girls. All had tangle-free hair tied in shiny ribbons, but my hair was not long enough for ribbons. It turned out that these little strangers also knew each other; they had all attended the same nursery and been braceleting themselves into little girl gangs from the age of three. I was late not by ten minutes but by a year.

The lateness habit, this out-of-step feeling, lingered, becoming as familiar as an old friend. But it was corrosive. As a student (80 to 95 per cent of whom procrastinate, according to the American Psychological Association) I had a textbook case of what is classed perfectionist, tense-afraid procrastination. Fear of spending time on the wrong thing paralysed me.

Thankfully the internet's tentacles had yet to reach me then, so I managed to graduate. I fought back, first becoming a workaholic, then learning to relax. Lateness gave way to last-chance-itis (the technical term for flying by the seat of your pants). As deadlines whooshed by I consoled myself with the Spanish proverb 'Tomorrow is often the busiest day of the week'.

Today I have no house room to spare for procrastination; the space is occupied by two charming time thieves, my daughter and my son. After their arrival life entered a reverse time zone. Like many new parents, we battled to meld competing schedules: for sleep, work, eating and the endlessly streaming coughs and colds. Amid this biological and logistical warfare, I often yearned, late at night, for a 48-hour day. Except this was pretty much the hell I was already living. There was the hoped-for day – the one that I rose each morning intending to enjoy – and there was the reality: bugged up by delay, disruption and incessant, insidious distraction.

Friends agreed that if there was one thing that might improve our quality of life it would be a time machine. But I had one of those already, vibrating in my pocket, and another on my desk. My husband had three. Did they help?

No, what I needed was two of me: one to accomplish everything that I tried to do, and another to parry the demands that routinely torpedoed my plans. Unfortunately I could not afford a clone or a wife. So I was stuck with busy.

Then I discovered the extent to which busy is a state of mind.



It makes time our enemy by turning us into the servants of fast.

When I told people that I was writing about time, most assumed that my true subject was productivity – in other words, how to squeeze more juice from our bitter lemons. It is not. It is freedom.

Talk of free time is usually a gripe. As in, Where is it? And why does it go so fast? I try to answer both questions. But what interests me most is freeing time – the verb.

We treat time as a thing: to spend, save, waste, lose or kill. But time is not a commodity: it is a dimension of experience and in the final analysis, it is all we have – it is our only vehicle to be alive in. It is also a wonderfully adaptable instrument, like a compass, that humanity invented to organize itself. It can help us navigate this fast-forward world, if we appreciate how it works.

Book after book promises to salve our pains with time. Peel back their surface differences, however, and most are transfixed by the mantra of doing or getting more. Arguably, it is the compulsion to consume time, and then to produce evidence that it has been consumed, that causes many of our problems, not just in how it interferes with our motivation, but in how it makes us inattentive, passive and parsimonious.

This book offers neither a New Age manifesto nor a recipe for speeding up. Instead it sets out how our sense of time shapes our life, and how little it takes to improve its quality – or ruin it. It may help you to work time harder. But it is also a call to savour the time you have. How you spend your one-stop trip to

earth is up to you. Still, many would benefit from more of that vital pastime, doing nothing. How much is lost if you never forget time? Like Friedrich Nietzsche, who repined, not long before he went mad: 'One thinks with a watch in one's hand even as one eats one's midday meal while reading the latest news of the stock market.'

I wanted answers to the big questions that productivity guides ignore. As captivating as the spangled wonders of atoms and stars are, great mysteries lie in the muddy foothills of everyday time. Why does it crawl when you ache for it to hurry? Why do we procrastinate when we can least afford it? Why is each hour of the day different? Holly Golightly really is not lying in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* when she protests, after a barman refuses to serve a third cocktail (it is not yet noon), 'But it's Sunday, Mr Bell. Clocks are slow on Sunday.' These complexities are fascinating, and also uncover practical tools that will let you spend less energy on managing time, the better to luxuriate in it.

Your brain is always playing games with time. Be aware of its tricks and you can reset the pace. Read on and you will learn plenty about your mind and body; how fast food and bright colours change your tempo; why deadlines can kill, but inserting the words 'if' and 'then' into a plan ups its odds of success; how autonomy takes the stress out of time pressure and cunning time thieves take your good intentions for a walk; which activities best suit particular hours of the day; how we turn into habit zombies; ways to speed up, or slow down, or become an early bird; why you

sleep when you do; and how to harness momentum, by making time simpler.

Feel free to skip ahead to whichever chapter seems most relevant. I have tried to satisfy not only readers who like to curl up with a mind-expanding topic, but also those who read guerrilla-style, snatching what they need on the run.

Philip Larkin wrote:

This is the first thing

I have understood:

Time is the echo of an axe

Within a wood.

It seems that way, if you let it. All too easily we overlook the role that our attitude towards time plays in how life unfolds. But raise our awareness and with minute changes we can transform our outlook. And it is worth it.

In Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Virgil drags Dante up the mountain to Paradise, away from the terrible waiting room of Purgatory, as fast as he can: 'He who best discerns the worth of time is most distressed whenever time is lost.' Those who best discern time's worth are generally those who have brushed the crust of mortality – the survivors, the bereaved, those staring down the barrel of a terminal diagnosis. Like my parents' friend, Henrietta, who described the gift she had received, after safely emerging from a life-threatening illness. 'My husband and I became acutely aware how little time there is. There is no point deferring. When we wanted to do something, we just did it. It was the best time in

our marriage.’ Their joy lasted two years, until his sudden death. His final words to her were, ‘That was a really lovely day.’ I would like them to be mine.

Years of my life have been cramped by the inhibiting belief that I did not have enough time. Writing this book reminded me that we can all take greater pleasure from what we have. Why wait until its sands are low? ‘In truth, there is enormous space in which to live our everyday lives,’ wrote Buddhist thinker Pema Chödrön. It is never too late to seek this sense of abundance.

Now is the time of your life. What might happen if you spent your day only on what was necessary or delightful to take you where you want to go? Millions have been inspired by Marie Kondo’s advice to tidy up, and to ditch possessions that do not serve a purpose or spark joy. How much more might we gain from decluttering time?

Imagine a day in which you accomplish everything that you intend, as well as coping with all the unanticipated demands, without getting thrown off track. A day in which you feel one step ahead, not constantly behind, trapped in a reactive cycle that seems to drag you backwards. A day of hours that feel satisfying, not cramped. A day in which the minutes for dull tasks dash by while hours for pleasure meander. A day that exploits the give in time’s elastic, giving you more time off. A day of miracles?

Not a bit. Your definition of time rich might mean working more effectively, or elegantly doing less. Whatever your goal, if you cease to feel like time’s slave then everything improves.

The mistake of rushing is to imagine that your time is not your own. The solution is to live in your own good time, at a pace that suits you. So quit chasing white rabbits. Stop stockpiling self-reproach. Set aside a few minutes, perhaps a few hours, to ignore the clock, and rediscover what time has always been, since the first hominid tracked the day's passage by the slant of his shadow in the sun: your servant.

# THE TIME TEST

Here is a question. Give yourself three seconds to answer. Do not scratch your head, worrying about getting it wrong. There is no wrong answer. You want your first response, because the purpose of this experiment is to open a window into your mind.

My birthday party is not happening on Saturday due to a scheduling clash with my midlife crisis. The party will go ahead, but has been moved forward by three days.

What day will the party be held?

Did you answer Tuesday? Or Wednesday?

If the first, then you have what psychologists define as an ego-moving perspective on time. This means that you see time as a track that you run along. You are a forward-moving agent, racing towards your future.

If the second, your perspective is time-moving: you stand there, facing time's incoming tide.

These two ways of perceiving time are not simply spatial metaphors. They express divergent psychological dispositions. I always give the second answer and rather wish that I did not. But it is fine to regard time as a mighty force, so long as you do not feel like its victim. View it as the vehicle of your life and it is easier to drive to your chosen destination.

Part One

# How Time Went Crazy

Includes: how time created consciousness; why Singapore is faster than New York; why delivery boys feared the noose; how wealth accelerates us but the costlier our hours, the poorer they feel; why we should listen to Steven Spielberg; the battle of the eyeballs; and what Socrates had in common with Thomas Edison.

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