

Radu's Rides: On Timing

Radu Craiu shares his thoughts about time, and about timing:

I like mechanical watches because they combine precise engineering—the movement is built under tremendous constraints that have to do with the minimalist space it is allowed to occupy and its efficiency under minimal friction (it's not lost on me that I just described an ideal politician)—and its outer aesthetics produced by true artistry. Beyond its beautiful form and time-keeping function, there is the wonderful sound it produces. Listening to a mechanical watch, one hears an almost perfect type of order that comes very close to the way we imagine real life should be: mostly regular but with an occasional anomalous ding that serves as a sober reminder and puts the remaining time in perspective. As a kid with unjustifiable insomnia, I used to fall into a very happy and deep sleep with my father's watch ticking in my ear.

Beyond the immanence of their aesthetics and sounds, for the adults in the room, watches are the constant reminder that timing plays a crucial role in life. Whether you're measuring heartbeats or keeping a beat, cooking a meal or feeding the parking meter, you know that your success, in great measure, depends on keeping track of seconds, minutes or hours. And in even greater measure, it depends on the serendipitous landing of whatever you're attempting in that propitious time interval that can span seconds, minutes or decades.

Even though we may not be physicians, musicians or chefs, I will argue that time and timing plays a crucial role in our professional lives too. For one, anyone who taught a non-trivial class will confirm that the wrong speech cadence can wreak havoc in most students' minds, while the right one will turn a lecturer into a "Rate My Professor" legend. Of course, content matters, but take the best argument out there, play it at two times the proper speed and witness the ensuing chaos. I dare say you will not need a watch to detect the rapid increase of blinking rate in your pupils' eyes.

And as a former student who had an inexhaustible ability to frustrate my professors, I can confirm that even procrastination requires some form of time-keeping, whether it's the slow movement of shadows on a ceiling or the barking of a dog who needs to go out from time to time.

Later in life we are facing those 20-minute conference talks, where one can contrast the 15-slide talk, during which the speaker has time to pronounce all syllables and finish most sentences, with the 60-slide one that the speaker has prepared with the firm belief that time will stand still in order for these ideas to be fully conveyed to a mesmerized (pronounced as "stupefied") audience.

Changing time scales, research timing is perhaps one of the most spectacular things I have witnessed in my career. Short of

being the one that launches an entire research topic—and how many people like that do you know?—the next best thing is to catch the new shining idea as both you and it are leaving the world in the dust. Whether it is because your PhD advisor made an off-hand remark, or you had a hunch that made you spend two years on a paper that was cited only by the author's (academic) family, or simply because you found an intriguing couple of pages in the washroom, it doesn't really matter... because as far as timing is concerned you're dancing to the right beat. For those who are confused by what I mean, I'll say that if I had a dollar for every time I heard the expression "the low-hanging fruit" in a research context, I could buy a Patek Philippe and still have money for a fruit salad.

We often think of time as working against us—"I wish there were 30 hours in a day so I could write more papers"—which is understandable in the current climate in which household-name researchers are publishing 30 to 60 papers a year. Even so, I would like to propose an attitude reversal, in which time is what it takes for a good idea to ripen and bear fruit, be it low-hanging or not.

As I get older, I realize that time pressure is a social game. Rarely do I feel pressured by the ticking watch when I am alone at my desk. Far be it from me to suggest that the way of living time-wisely is to imagine that one is always alone. Perhaps a friendlier piece of advice is to really listen to that mechanical watch I hope you are still carrying around at all times, and realize that the seconds are ticking just the same whether you have three or 30 slides to cover in the remaining four minutes.

One of my good friends, an applied mathematician otherwise (no one is perfect), has the habit of slowing me down every time I come to him with a problem or an idea. And in that short period of time between his halting words and my catching of breath, something miraculous happens: I realize that I need more time to think things through.

