

## Dancing with Time, Dancing with God

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Many years ago on a dreary January day, two friends and I approached the vacant ticket booth at Nitobe Memorial Garden in Vancouver. As we peeped into the garden, we saw a senior gentleman sweeping the ground meditatively. When he saw us, he paused. I asked, "Please, when is the ticket person coming back?", assuming he was on lunch break. The gentleman looked at me thoughtfully for a second. Then twinkles in his eyes, he replied drily, "March."



### *"Time Differences"*

Time is a whimsical dancing partner.

First, there are different types of time. There is universe time, Greenwich time, and seasons of life. There is the past, the present, and the future. Philosophers call some time "sacred" and others "profane." There are time differences and different timeframes. There is "time" beyond time. Apparently, many dancing partners have the name "time."

Second, there are different ways of keeping time. Sundial, hourglass, the burning of joss stick have all been means of timekeeping. Metronome helps musicians keep the tempo. Calendars "number our days." For families with school children, each family member juggles several calendars. Birthdays, anniversaries or other milestone dates mark time.

Third, there are different perceptions of time. Newton thought time was absolute, i.e., it is unaffected by any system in space. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, it was observed that light did not travel straight line and was bent by the gravitational field, thus verifying a prediction of Einstein's general relativity. We now know that time is neither linear nor circular. Our perceived length of the same clock time can vary hugely. And time is not homogenous, as Eliade puts it; e.g., in my experience, the presence of our Lord is more palpable in the few minutes of silence after Communion. Some physicists, mathematicians, philosophers, and poets say that time is a mere human construct, though I have not been able to wrap my mind around; consider the reality of "deadline" – it's real and pressing.

Has time waited for humanity to emerge on the universal dancing floor or is this dance with time is a mere dream or illusion? Regardless, much of the time, we are clumsy dancing partners and are often stepped on the toes. Alas, how often we are blind to time and deaf to the music to which we are to dance.



## *Being Stepped on the Toes*

There are different attitudes toward time and different relationships with it. I know of a gentleman from Africa; in his tribe, people don't know how old they are. A friend once confided to me his frustration when greeted by classmates of certain ethnicity. Instead of saying "how are you doing?" and moving on, these classmates would take time to ask how each one in my friend's family was doing. This drove my friend crazy.

Modern people "use" time. We bribe time (the phrase "buy time" says it well). Or we race with it, leaving ourselves breathless. Or we cram in as many activities as possible in a limited amount of time, as if time is a turkey to be stuffed. We end up cutting corners with our sleep or staying up late watching TV/movie to de-stress. If St. Augustine was right by calling time "an extension of the mind", it is true that many of us have lost our minds. I know I did, for a long time. As a recovering workaholic, "staying sober" requires daily discipline of letting God love me.

God loves and redeems us in time and space. We are contingent beings, and holiness is formed in time. It is through encounters taking place in time that we are restored to wholeness. It is in the intertwining of *chronos* and *kairos* that we become holy. Thomas Merton writes:

... being attentive to the times of the day: when the birds began to sing, and the deer came out of the morning fog, and the sun came up. The reason why we don't take time is a feeling that we have to keep moving. This is a real sickness. We live in the fullness of time. Every moment is God's own good time, His *kairos*. The whole thing boils down to giving ourselves in prayer a chance to realize that we have what we seek. We don't have to rush after it. It was there all the time, and if we give it time, it will make itself known to us.<sup>1</sup>



## *Learning to Dance*

For some reason, I've found the topic of time a difficult subject; for one thing, the course material was dense, and I found myself losing joy in learning. I doubted if I would have anything to hand in until recently when two architect friends brought me to Pokfulam Farm (薄鳧林牧場); one of the architects was involved in the initial stage of the revitalization of the old dairy farm senior staff quarters. The experience of visiting the Pokfulam Farm was a vista into which I began to appreciate what I am learning in this course.

A young tour guide shared the story of the land. The Pokfulam Farm, originally a dairy farm, was established in 1886 to provide fresh milk for the city; Dairy Farm was the brand name.

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<sup>1</sup> John Griffin, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Visual World of Thomas Merton*, (Houghton Mifflin, Boston), 1979, p.49. Quoted from Esther de Waal, *Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict*, (The Liturgical Press: Collegeville), 2001, p. 155.

Across the Farm, on a sloping hillside is Pokfulam Village. The villagers have been closely connected to the dairy industry in Hong Kong. Over the years, the villagers formed a deep bond with the farm and the land. After Dairy Farm was closed in 1983, the land was largely abandoned for 30 years. The Village itself was threatened by potential development plans in 2013. The villagers staged protests in which they mapped their houses on a big banner: the residents wrote down their names and addresses next to the colorful stamps with the shape of houses and the words “留住.” The villagers also partnered with Caritas-Hong Kong to advocate for revitalization of the Senior Staff Quarter of the old Dairy Farm. Pokfulam Farm was reopened in 2021 and has become a place where villagers hold workshops for visitors and share their stories – part of the Hong Kong story. It has become a gathering place in the community. The community endeavor has brought the villagers closer together. Every year at Mid-Autumn Festival, the villager would gather for the dance of fire dragons. On certain occasions, each family would bring a dish, and the whole village would share a meal.

I was moved by how in a time of exodus, folks at Pokfulam Village would choose to stay together, to care for the land, continue writing their story, and welcome other people to participate in this growing story. I looked at my friend who was involved in the initial stage of revitalization of the Senior Staff Quarter. She was reticent about her contribution to the project, but I saw quiet excitement and satisfaction in her eyes. How many more unsung heroes, I wondered. If no one remembers them, God will. For this farm, this village, and the many people who have labored for the wellbeing of this land are part of His story. In a time of dispersion, these people chose to stay. In a time of division, these people chose to work together. I don't know about their faith ground but I believe they are in the flow of God's grace.

After the tour ended, my friends and I huddled around our tour guide, a young lady who spoke Cantonese with an accent. We wanted to know what brought her to this place and what was behind her enthusiasm for sharing this story of which she became a part of only recently. She told us she was from Anhui (a province in the Mainland). One of my friends exclaimed, “Anhui! You come from a place with rich culture.” Letting these words sink in, the young lady replied, “Yes… maybe when I get older, having been in Hong Kong for a while, when I return to Anhui, I will be better able to appreciate my culture.”

Indeed, time is not all the same. The encounter with the land, the people, and part of God's story that afternoon both connected me more deeply with this city – after nine years, daily I learn new things about its language and people – and expanded my horizon to the possibility of dancing to the music of the Spirit.



To end this reflection, I would like to quote from Madeleine Delbrêl's poem and prayer, “Dance

of Obedience.” God is the eternal now. He danced the world into being, and He invites us to dance with Him moment by moment. And some of His friends gladly say “Yes.”

To be a good dancer, with you as with anyone else, it's not necessary  
That we know where it will lead.  
We only need to follow,  
To be cheerful,  
To be light,  
And above all not to be stiff…

But we tend to forget the music of your spirit,  
And we turn our life into a gymnastic exercise;  
We forget that, in your arms, life is something to be danced,  
That your Holy Will  
Is inconceivably creative…

Lord, come ask us to dance.  
We're ready to dance this errand for you,  
These accounts to do, this dinner to prepare, this vigil to keep  
When we would prefer to sleep…  
If certain melodies are often played in the minor key, we won't tell you  
That they're sad;  
If others leave us a little breathless, we won't tell you  
That they knock the wind out of us.  
And if other people bump into us, we'll take it with a good laugh,  
Knowing well that that's the sort of thing that happens when you're dancing…

Make us live our life  
Not like a game of chess, where every move is calculated,  
Not like a contest, where everything is difficult,  
Not like a math problem, which makes our head hurt,  
But like an endless celebration, where our meeting with you is constantly new,  
Like a ball,  
Like a dance,  
In the arms of your grace,  
In the universal music of love.

Lord, ask us to dance.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Madeleine Delbrêl, *We, the Ordinary People of the Streets*, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids), 2000, p. 72-74.

