

# Hurry and the Willingness to Be Creatures

BY KELLY S. JOHNSON

The days that unfold are not a scarce resource slipping away, but they certainly are finite. Our time is God's terrible, mysterious patience, in which we meet what is beyond us and come to know ourselves as beloved creatures.

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In a now-classic interview, comedian Louis C.K. notes, "Everything's amazing right now, but nobody's happy."<sup>1</sup> He recounts hearing a man whine when, on a plane traveling through the air at six hundred miles per hour, the high-speed Wi-Fi connection broke down. To people frustrated with their cell phone's surfing speed, he cries: "Give it a second! It's going to space!" It's all unbelievably fast, but it is still not fast enough for us.

And although we are capable of greater speed than any generation of humans before, in the face of life-threatening crises, we drag our collective feet. We get instantaneous reports of major melting in Antarctica, but global talks to limit greenhouse gasses are stalled. Video coverage of brutality against black bodies goes viral in minutes, while the United States has never commissioned a study of the possibility of reparations for slavery.<sup>2</sup> Companies that trade stocks in milliseconds still have not eliminated the gender wage gap, and our amazing cell phones include metals that may have been mined by slaves, though we thought we left slavery behind in the nineteenth century. How can we be hurrying so much and yet changing so slowly?

We hurry, but we are not getting satisfaction from our greater speed. We hurry, but we do not change. Hurry, it seems, is not a propensity to move quickly toward a goal. Rather, it is anxiety about time: fear of losing it, shame about wasting it, ambition to produce more in it than the competitors do, or a struggle just to keep up. That anxiety can be a very effective way of avoiding anything outside its own scope. Being in a hurry inflames my sense of the importance of my agenda while it shrinks my attention to a

narrow field. That's good, if I am hurrying to rescue a drowning man. But it also makes hurry a supremely useful tactic for those who want to avoid painful realities. We are running to stand still, racing in an attempt to avoid change. The moral problem of a hurried culture is not its love of speed, but its collective evasion of the truth about ourselves and our world: we are creatures, living in an unfolding time whose purposes we do not create.

### **WHAT IS TIME FOR?**

Scripture teaches us that time has a divine purpose. "God has made everything beautiful in its time; also he has put eternity into man's mind, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end" (Ecclesiastes 3:11).<sup>3</sup>

Yet the idea that time has purpose sounds strange to us. The modern mind sees reality as composed of facts, raw materials that have no meaning until such meaning is created in them by human intentions. Time is not *for* anything; it is only the blank page on which human beings write their stories.

The sense that time is a raw material to be filled with meaning by human productivity is not a fact, nor even an idea, but a social reality that has evolved through history. According to scholar Jacques Le Goff, anxiety about time existed well before modern timekeeping – for example, in the Christian concern to make good use of time before death and judgment. That anxiety focused on the particulars of a life or even of a community, looking toward its end. The anxiety about time, however, took on a different character beginning in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.<sup>4</sup> In Italian cities, particularly with the rise of competitive textile trades, urban producers initially relied on monastic bells that called those communities to their canonical prayers to break up their day. Tensions regarding laborers' working hours and pay, however, created a demand for a new way of marking time, uniform enough to account for multiple schedules, including over-time and night work, while also precise enough to content both bosses and workers that they were not being cheated in the calculation of wages. The sort of bells that emerged to govern work hours differed from the monastic bells, marking the community's commitment to the liturgy of hours, and also from the old bells of the cities, which had rung to warn of a crisis or announce a festival. Those bells served and preserved a sense of time that was *for* the purposes of seeking holiness and fostering the life of the town. The new bells created ordinary, predictable divisions to everyday life, unrelated to any specific purpose. This turn created a sense of time much more akin to our own experience of the objective, relentlessly ticking backdrop to our days.

This way of marking time makes it universally measurable, predictable, and exchangeable, which is to say it makes time capable of functioning as a commodity. "Time is money" only makes sense when time has this objective character. Every second is the same as every other, although we can fill each with terror or delight or washing the dishes. Once this kind of timekeeping

is widely accepted—a long historical process in the West, still continuing worldwide—time functions as a resource to be managed, not intrinsically related to particular human lives or to the end of life. It becomes a factor of production that can be traded, conserved, maximized.

This empty time creates the problem of “opportunity cost.” In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas commented on the nature of time in his discussion of usury, that is, making profit from a loan. He described the sin of usury as a way of selling what no one could own, time. To those who claimed that taking interest on a loan was a way of reimbursing the lender for the lost opportunities he or she might have had for use of their money, Thomas argued that such opportunities were purely hypothetical. No one could know what would or could have happened had the owner kept the money instead of lending it out, and to charge someone else for such a fantasy was a form of theft.<sup>5</sup> Time, in his way of thinking, could not be an abstraction, could not be quantified apart from the actual days we live. Time, to his way of thinking, was the particular path of a human life and a human society, not an objective reality apart from them.

Aquinas lost that argument about usury, not because it did not make sense but because the social practice of time was making his claim unreasonable. If, in societies such as ours, time functions as a universal and predictable commodity, then charging for lost opportunities makes sense. Those who lend money or its equivalent for a certain period of time lose possibilities that can be calculated in terms of the hours and days of the lending period. We no longer live in Aquinas’ time, not to mention his era.

All this is to say that time became for European society, the seedbed of global capitalism—not the course of human life in relation to its Source and End, but an objective, scarce resource to be used to maximize utility, filled with whatever content the owner chose for it. It became an item for exchange, rather than an aspect of creaturely life.

This being so, of course we feel anxiety about time. It is the scarcest of all resources. Once gone—and it is constantly (tick, tick) going—we can in no way get it back, and no amount of good management can prevent its running out for each of us. Time is the essential and fragile commodity on which whatever we will make of our lives must be built, and as we lose it,

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we lose the possibility of making our lives mean something. We must control it, which means that we must deny the truth that time is not ours to control.

This tragedy – that what is most necessary for us is constantly running out – gets neatly sidestepped in the myth of endless economic growth. Although every economics textbook explains that goods are scarce relative to human desires and we see all around us well-documented evidence that such growth is destroying not only itself but the conditions for human life on the planet, still we continue to operate on the faith that economic exchange can continually and infinitely expand. While we each hurry to make the most of our own hours, we trust in an infinite cosmic flow of new opportunity to produce new goods, to fill more time with what we take as meaning. John Maynard Keynes's reminder, "In the long run, we are all dead," rarely affects operational decisions, overshadowed as they are by this faith in a future that is both infinite and without given purpose. Our urgent need to keep expanding allows us to ignore the evident truth that both individually and collectively, we cannot keep expanding.<sup>6</sup>

If it is unlikely that individuals will take the painful step of giving up comforting evasions that allow us to reconcile our tragic loss of the resources of time, Reinhold Niebuhr reminds us that it is far less likely that social bodies will do so. We reinforce each other's self-deception and build up social patterns that give them credibility. We avoid making friends and family uncomfortable by referring to this trouble. We struggle even to recognize the problem, since our frame of reference, our hurried world, is so good at evasion. Hurry becomes a social practice, useful as evasion and necessary for maintaining our place in the world of empty, objective time.

### **BEING CREATURES**

Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'*, "On Care for Our Common Home," quotes Romano Guardini in a telling passage about creaturely existence.

Modern anthropocentrism has paradoxically ended up prizing technical thought over reality, since "the technological mind sees nature as an insensate order, as a cold body of facts, as a mere 'given,' as an object of utility, as raw material to be hammered into useful shape; it views the cosmos similarly as a mere 'space' into which objects can be thrown with complete indifference." The intrinsic dignity of the world is thus compromised. When human beings fail to find their true place in this world, they misunderstand themselves and end up acting against themselves....<sup>7</sup>

This insight about the creaturely reality of space is all the more true of the creaturely reality of time. Scientific studies allow us to imagine a scale of time in which human civilization is only a flash as eons of geological time pass. The wonder and horror of finding ourselves so small can give rise to a sense of our own meaninglessness, and we are tempted to cope with that

knowledge by making all the meaning we can in the time we have.

In contrast *Laudato Si'* speaks of “the intrinsic dignity of the world,” which is grounded in a vastness that is beyond our knowing but is all beloved by God. The world is vast but not meaningless, beyond our knowing but not empty. The time that stretches behind and ahead of us is not ours to control, but it is neither a void nor chaos. It is the gift of God. To live well in it, we have to begin to encounter both the wildness of creation and the tender intimacy of its Creator to it. As we come to terms with a loving creator who makes the wild and vast, we may begin to come to better terms with the wilderness of time, the dark complexity of memory, and the uncertainty of the future.

The human creature, in any era and any culture, struggles to trust such a creator. While the creation is beautiful, it is also terrifying. It can hurt us. Our own nature rebels because reason wants to govern itself and flesh wants to live forever. Our war against time is a war against being a creature.

Christianity sees in this struggle the discomfort of a natural creature with a supernatural destiny, a beloved creature broken by sin, a redeemed creature not yet brought to fulfillment. Evasion of that discomfort is not the solution. Any denial of our situation as mortal creatures in time is to build on sand. We are creatures, and the Christian story of time is not the succession of uniform, fungible seconds on modern clocks, but the unfolding of God’s friendship with creatures, and it is moving toward fulfillment.

Gustavo Gutiérrez urges us to resist the tendency to think salvation history unfolds above or apart from the ordinary history of humanity.<sup>8</sup> There is, he claims, one history: a history of salvation that is present in human lives and societies, and which moves toward the fulfillment God has promised. Salvation is not an escape from or reward after time; it is why time exists. Working out the gift of our redemption by discovering the give and take of love is what time is for.

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And so creatures live *in status viatoris*, as wayfarers. The wayfarer is on the road, not at home. We are not industrious entrepreneurs who are building our homes with limited opportunities and maximizing return on raw resources including time; rather we are travelers who are heading for a destination we do not altogether know, but following the road toward it in trust. The wayfarer has to live in the awkward, unrehearsed new encounter of

each moment, always incomplete, never quite satisfying, because time is not a possession and not a home. It is the way to fulfillment.

The scriptural story of Simeon and Anna (Luke 2:21-38) shows people who lived with creaturely trust in the uncertainty of time. "When the days... were completed," the gospel of Luke says, Jesus' parents took him to Jerusalem. There they met Simeon, who, filled with the Spirit, knew that he would

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not die until he had seen the Messiah. He had waited "for the consolation of Israel," while he was aging himself and watching the world age. If those days of waiting were frustrating, he did not resort to pretending that God had abandoned him, nor that the Messiah had already come, nor much less that he had to rush to make some meaning for himself before his time ran out. He did not make himself busy, hurrying to avoid his fears for Israel. He waited and watched. When

he saw what he waited for, he praised God, spoke the words given to him, and declared his readiness to die. Meanwhile the prophet Anna, who at eighty-four never left the Temple but lived each hour in praise of God, gave thanks and spoke to all about the change God was bringing, the redemption of Israel.

This pair, standing in this part of Luke's gospel for the faithful poor of Israel, clearly understood that they were in a story not of their making. There were on a road rather than at home. They knew themselves and their world to be lacking, and rather than turning away from that distress, they were willing to stay in the midst of it, hoping for salvation. They trusted that the full story was in the hands of one who means us good, one way or another. And that trust meant that they were among the few who could act quickly, effectively, and wisely when the new moment demanded it. Their patient attention to the gift of time meant they neither hurried nor delayed, but recognized the gift of each moment already full of meaning.

### **LIVING WELL IN TIME**

Given the forces, economic and cultural and personal, that drive us to hurry, we will not be able simply to think ourselves out of our trouble. How can we begin to live well as creatures in time?

The obvious solution to excessive hurry is "slowing down," and for

those of us fatigued from living in a hurry, slowing down sounds very appealing. We harbor visions of gentle mornings of sunrise and bird songs, long walks with loved ones, home-cooked meals, and long restful sleep. We long for a restorative break in our stresses; and those whose hurry has produced enough wealth to allow it, indulge in such breaks from time to time. The need for a break assures us that we are the kind of people who have to hurry, who are important, and who do not have time to be concerned with anything other than the very important matters we are racing to address. The romance of slowing down hides from us the reasons we do not want to slow down for long, the reasons we cling to our hurry.

Encountering the God who gives days and nights is costly. Whether it is the voluntary act of entering into a silent retreat or the forced pause of unemployment or illness, in stillness people confront whatever their hurry helped to conceal. Hurry creates and thrives on spiritual noise. Hurry protects us from noticing how rarely we address the real struggles of our lives and our societies.

We who find ourselves captive to the false pride of hurry, for whom being in a rush is a sign that we and our affairs are *Very Important*, may be in less need of the vacation that reinforces our pride than of noticing that Jesus stands among those who have no choice but to wait: the hungry, the ill, the imprisoned, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst for justice. The culture that rushes to fill seconds with profit pushes aside creaturely needs and relationships as slow, clumsy, and unproductive. It excludes those who do not play the game of infinite growth. But if time is already charged with meaning, full at every turn with God's presence and action, then our task is not to make our mark on our limited time but to encounter the God who walks with creation in time. Communities that recognize this can cultivate practices of conversation and prayer that require stillness and patience, not to evade reality but to discover it. Encountering God and each other in time is the basis of any prudent action. To do that, we must be willing to stop acting the part of the hero who makes meaning within the tragedy of scarce time. We must face ourselves as creatures in time.

The days that unfold are not a scarce resource slipping away, although they certainly are finite. Our time is God's terrible, mysterious patience, in which we meet what is beyond us and come to know ourselves as beloved creatures. Living as creatures in time we do not create or control, we may be able to discover the meaning of St. Catherine of Siena's statement, "All the way to heaven is heaven, for Jesus said, I am the Way."

## NOTES

1 Louis C.K. interview with Conan O'Brien on *Late Night with Conan O'Brien* (NBC Television, 2008), [www.youtube.com/watch?v=akiVi1sR2rM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=akiVi1sR2rM) (accessed November 3, 2015).

2 Ta-Nehesi Coates, "The Case for Reparations," *The Atlantic* (June 2014), [www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/) (accessed November 3, 2015).

3 This translation is from *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church*, §114, [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/justpeace/documents/rc\\_pc\\_justpeace\\_doc\\_20060526\\_compendio-dott-soc\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html) (accessed November 3, 2015).

4 See "Merchant's Time and Church's Time in the Middle Ages" in Jacques Le Goff, *Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 29-42.

5 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, 78, 2, reply 1.

6 Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 3-4.

7 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §115, [w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_encyclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_encyclica-laudato-si.html) (accessed November 3, 2015).

8 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, revised edition (Marynoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988 [1973]), 86 ff.

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