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TURNING TO 'GOD'S TIME'

Christopher Dickey**NEWSWEEK**

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In Rome's magnificent Saint Mary of the Angels and Martyrs Basilica, what used to be called "God's time" is plain to see. Shafts of light penetrate holes in the vaulted ceilings, casting their rays on the days and the hours and the signs of the zodiac embedded in the floor. The building, designed by Michelangelo within the walls of ancient Roman baths, is an enormous solar clock, a vivid reminder that through most of human history, we synchronized our lives with the heavens.

No longer. Since the advent of railroads and the telegraph in the 19th century, the rate of change in our lives just keeps accelerating. With "always on" Internet technology, the global workday is 24 hours long, and the memory of a natural rhythm to life seems the last true luxury. What is more satisfying than a sense of control over time? The feeling may be as simple as the act of setting your watch slow or fast, to your own personal pace. Or it may involve a great escape, like sailing beneath the stars or on an open sea, in tune with the cosmos.

Often it seems that only the very rich (or very eccentric) dare to make such contrapuntal moves. But if you have been trying to re-imagine, or perhaps reset, your sense of time, you are not alone. Several scholars, artists and authors are working to help us rediscover temporal dimensions outside the boundaries dictated by global commerce and communication. "People basically are trying to connect with more-natural time cycles, trying to reconnect with human rhythms," says David Rooney, the curator of timekeeping at the Royal Observatory, Greenwich, England. British writer Carl Honore, author of "In Praise of Slow," sees a growing challenge to the "cult of speed," from the slow-food movement in Europe to the rise of meditation centers and spas. In life, leisure and, not least, love, he suggests the challenge is "to make the moment last."

Musician Brian Eno, author Stewart Brand ("The Whole Earth Catalog") and computer designer Danny Hillis have dedicated their Long Now Foundation to making people think of time on an epochal scale. The centerpiece of their plan is to build an enormous mechanical clock in Nevada designed to run for 10,000 years. (It could be repaired with Bronze Age tools if, heaven forbid, there's a little civilizational setback during that period.) A three-meter-tall prototype is on display at the Science Museum in London. British artist Laura Williams has designed a huge illuminated sculpture to track the phases of the moon, powered by the ebb and flow of a tidal river.

These projects reject what the Long Now folks call the "faster/cheaper" mentality. But they're also a reaction against artificial times, as set by international conventions and governments. A reasonable system of time zones was established in 1884, the hour changing with every 15 degrees of longitude, starting at Greenwich. Ever since then, governments have been fiddling with the system, trying to unify diverse societies. Central European time now stretches from the eastern border of Poland to the western tip of Spain. Dawn on July 15, for instance, arrived in Warsaw at 4:31 a.m., in Berlin at 5:02, in Paris at 6:03 and in Madrid at 6:57.

Yet, as the American anthropologist Edward T. Hall has pointed out, different cultures continue to experience time in radically different ways. Just think of the Spaniard going to dinner at 10:30 p.m., when a German, at the same hour, is getting ready to go to bed. More intimately, parents with young children learn quickly just how different biological rhythms are from those of the global workplace.

To rebel against the surfeit of synchronization may be inevitable, suggests Rooney, who is a trained physicist and the son of a clockmaker. "People tend to take a fairly fatalistic view of this time pressure; they submit to it too easily," he says. "They can make choices. You can take control." Indeed, to balance one's inner clock with God's time and the demands of global business: that's not just a luxury, that's the key to a good life.

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