

Impatient Pendulum

Hanging in the atrium of the Smithsonian Museum of American History, in front of the Star-Spangled Banner, is a great pendulum stretching 52 feet from its suspension point in the domed roof to the bottom of the second floor. The 240-pound brass bob makes an unhurried swing every two and a half seconds, its path slowly rotating as the earth turns underneath during the course of a day.

This Foucault pendulum is a great crowd pleaser, although I am convinced it is for reasons having nothing much to do with Monsieur Foucault, nor with the principles of physics demonstrated by his pendulum. A patient observer, watching the spectators gather around the pendulum, will occasionally hear parents discuss those topics with their children, but the explanations are always short and usually false.

What is striking is not so much the conversations but the lack of them. The pendulum inspires silence. The same family of rambunctious children and bedraggled parents that races through the Ceremonial Court as if it were an obstacle course will stand in awe at this swinging bob of brass for minutes at a time. I suspect that the real reason that the pendulum is so well loved is because it is slow. Its leisurely swing, just slower than the human breath, calms audiences and entrances them with a slower beat.

When I was a child, the pendulum swung even slower. It was longer then, too. It was shortened (and therefore quickened) in one of those paradoxical compromises of museum management: People stood mesmerized for so long that they blocked the flow of traffic. To me, this speedup of an icon of slowness is symbolically fitting. The tempo of life has quickened.

But it is not just the slowness that attracts the crowd, it is the promise of order. Temporal disorientation is an unwanted side effect of modern life. We are dazzled by progress, rushed by events, and disconnected from the stable rhythms of time. Our technology has isolated us from the natural cycles (day, month, year) that once governed the pace of life.

Anyone who has survived a long power blackout or a camping trip knows that the proverbial difference between night and day is much more dramatic without electric lights. In true darkness, the stars become important. In a world without flashlights, the lunar month governs what can be seen and hidden. A full moon allowed our ancestors to work all night to bring in the harvest. A new moon kept them from travel. Not so long ago life was ruled by the moon's phases, yet today we are hardly aware of them.

The year, too, means less than it once did. In a world with artificial climate, even the seasons lose their power to regulate. We go about our business much the same in every season. The shortening of winter days is a curiosity, not a serious constraint. The patterns of rain and temperature, once issues of life and death, are now reduced to topics of idle social banter. In the dead of winter, we play tennis and eat strawberries shipped from the other hemisphere, where it is still summer.

One might suppose that weakening our ties to the natural cycles of time would cause our artificial substitutes to gain importance, but as nearly as I can tell, these too have lost authority. Our annual cycle of holidays now serves more to stimulate commerce than to regulate lives.

Feasts and days of fast mean little in times of plenty. Rituals, once our most powerful device for restraining the passage of time, seem to have lost their potency.

In the time of my childhood, Monday was wash day, Tuesday was market day, and Sunday was worship and a day for rest. In this age of 24-hour- a-day, seven-day-a-week convenience, I have begun to lose my bearings. I fly from time zone to time zone, living in CNN time, out of touch even with the rhythms of my own flesh.

I have a recurring dream of a big, slow clock in a faraway place- somewhere empty and difficult to reach, perhaps in

the middle of a desert, or on a mountaintop, or in a deep, cool cave. This is the clock that connects the motions of the sun and the moon and the stars to the mundane calendars of humankind. Wound by human caretakers in quiet ceremony, it patiently counts the millennia.

This is the clock that provides what the pendulum only promises: the calibration of the rhythm of life, the definition of Now. I am certain that if I could only visit it...I would regain my sense of time.