



ILSE GSCHWEND

### **How do we construct time and our experience of time?**

*The journey begins with the first step* they say, but logically, nothing is said about the length of the way. When I agreed on delivering a statement here on the topic of time, the first step was taken, but I had no idea that this way would lead towards a horizon that could never be touched. The time span of 15 – 20 minutes given to me, thanks God, has limited the distance to go, so that I will limit myself to a few aspects, which came to my mind when I was looking for constructs of time and related experiences of time. They are all to be found on the psycho-social level, due to my profession as a psychotherapist.

Our experience of time and our orientation in time are located in our memory of emotional experiences, which – according to scientists – starts its activity as early as in the fifth week of gestation. It is very important for our ‘coming into contact with the world’, it helps us in taking decisions, it substantially contributes to how we perceive ourselves in the world, how we experience and describe ourselves, and it is constantly being enriched with information about new experiences. Some experiences are being written over, they are no longer valid or useful. We know, for example, about the changes in the experience of time on the path from childhood to old age.

Constructs of time as aspects of how we create relationship with ourselves and with others can – depending on culture and society – put us into states of security or insecurity, and they push aside the one experience that is at our hand since the beginning of our life, which is: **I grow in my own time without having to push myself.**

**Which constructs of time make it so difficult for us today to trust this development?**

Pondering the question: *Do I still have enough time until July 16<sup>th</sup> to be able to say something sensible and meaningful on this topic?* I asked some friends: *What does it mean to you **having enough time** to do something specific?* The answers were, as I had expected, different between persons, but they were also – what came as a little surprise to me – different within the same person.

One such construct of time is time as a **personal belonging**, as an **investment** and as something to **barter for**. We utilize time like we utilize capital, without being really conscious of it. If time is constructed as capital (*time is money*), it has to be managed like capital, it has to be defended against *thieves of time*, it

mustn't be sold off cheaply, it has to be used in the best of ways. If one doesn't act skilfully or if one deals with the capital time in a negligent way, one may have to run after that lost time trying to catch it or else one may sadly have to watch it getting out of reach. To illustrate this I will quote some well-known idioms:

*Can **you spare** a moment of time?*

*For the moment, I **haven't got much time left**.*

***Give me** two minutes of your time, please.*

***My time hasn't been stolen**.*

*How much time **could you spare**?*

***I'll give you** five minutes.*

*My time is **precious**.*

*How much do **you charge** for an hour?*

*If there's one thing I **haven't got at the moment**, then it's time!*

*You just behave as if you had **all the time in the world**.*

*Next week I will **have more time**.*

Another construct of time is that of **time as an enemy** that threatens us, cheats us, that makes us move along quicker. It seems that we have to run a race against this enemy, and unless we pay attention he'll make us lose.

***Time has escaped me**.* In time management trainings we learn how to deal with this foe and we learn to confine him by allowing him only a limited **space of time**.

***With this we're only going to lose time*** is a phrase that we are familiar with from our private and professional lives. *Time-saving technologies* help us shift

amounts of time from *here to there* and the profits resulting from these shifting activities, in turn, will be invested in something profitable.

We all know and have a personal experience of this, of how much time-saving technologies can create difficulties for us, because now we have still more in store that could be done – be it work or leisure activities or multiple relationships, etc.

We feel the urge to stuff in *everything* (whatever this *everything* may contain) and to get on to it, so that we finally will have enough time for the ***real thing***, though we no longer are able to say what this real thing is. Recently industrial medicine has offered us a helping hand with their constructs of ***on-line-time*** and ***off-line-time***. But they are warning us not to go into off-line-time too abruptly, unless we want to provoke the so-called ***deckchair-depression***, which is a depressive state that hits us when we spend too much time in the sun lounger.

The construct of ***it'll just take another little time*** is comforting, because it suggests that we are very close to a turning point, where things will get easier. In consultations, if we question verbal constructs of time like ***at the moment / haven't got time but soon it will be better***, if we ask how long this *moment* has been going on and when the *soon* will be, we get answers of time spans that have no relation whatsoever to the actual meaning of the terms. But autosuggestion helps to keep it going, and it helps to ignore the tightness that the body in most cases can already feel.

Then there is the construct of time as **a personally calibrated unit**, that evaluates events, plans, successes, periods of life already lived, things worth

striving for or things that we want to reach at any cost. They are evaluated in terms of a *successful outcome or of failure*. These constructs of time are based on experiences in one's personal past and they give us orientation for the present and the future.

Selective processes in the perception of time lead to corresponding emotions and acts. What does your eye catch, when your nose is turned to look at the past?

Do you see missed opportunities? (*I haven't used my time well.*) Do we evaluate past decisions according to their appropriateness? (*Had I known this earlier! Had I known this at the time!*) Do we focus on the failure? (*I can't turn the clock back.*) Or does the eye retrospectively also catch the beautiful? (*I like to dwell on the old times.*) One could also register one's successes (*I did recognize the signs of time when they were there*) and one could look at the opportunities taken (*time was ripe for that!*), not to mention some of those wonderful coincidences (*at this moment he happened to cross my way*).

Does this looking back into the past (*my parents never supported me*) construct a continuously negative experience of time that keeps me pulling back like an elastic band, as if everything was still happening? (*This I won't ever forgive them!*) And a resulting: *And this will stay the same as long as I live?*

How does time dwell in us? Irretrievably past is only that which has happened. The personal evaluation of that past time takes place in the present and plays on it with good or bad feelings in the here and now.

*In those days that didn't exist* – what is contained in this phrase? Something that we missed or something that, thanks God, didn't actually exist back then.

The memory of emotional experiences supplies the corresponding feelings in the current context in which the phrase is pronounced.

Do we reconstruct *in those days, back then* by constantly rereading the old texts and reading them to others in order to justify what we are doing or aren't doing with *our time now*?

Are we nursing a construct of time which leaves things undecided and plays again on the experience of *one never knows what time will bring*? The memory of emotional experiences has meticulously stored what *back then* happened differently than expected and what illusions/delusions have left us disappointed, so that we better stay on guard. This creates preventative caution in order to get disillusioned as little as possible in the present and in the future. Neither are we animated nor resigned, we literally *hold our breath*, we walk on a thin layer of ice that can break any time we aren't cautious enough. Each step bears potential danger for the future just ahead of us which this next step will reveal.

Can we *write* experiences *over*, can we delete old *time documents*, can we empty files? Can we re-write texts, so that in the present we can imagine a better, a more beautiful future, with something in it that can be still achieved? In the sense of: *it's time for a change, it's not too late yet, one gets cleverer as time goes by, the older we grow the better time gets.*

Experience tells me, that time documents can be overwritten, can be deleted, but they can also be forged or **falsified**. How can this happen?

In reconstructing the past we sit on a chair labelled present, and we look back with the experience of – in my case: a woman of 66 years – so with this

experience we look back and describe what a 14-year old experienced *under the circumstances of the time then*, but which is impossible to feel today in real time. We describe the time from a viewpoint of today, the present context colours the feelings for the time then, it is a **narrated** experience and **the narration creates** a feeling in the here and now.

How can it be that, regardless of age, people still think and feel in the same way about times past? What hasn't grown all along this time, what is still small and maybe expecting something? The repetition of stories furrows our emotional memory and our current behaviour is shaped accordingly. In German we say: ***it is oriented accordingly***, which gives me a last clue to some further aspects of time experience.

Experience of time follows the contents that we give to our present life. This is a comforting thought and yet a challenging one, because it brings us into a mode of self effectiveness which also includes responsibility for the self. We experience the agreeable force of transformation from being/feeling a victim into a state of participating creativity, we suddenly experience our self as being meaningful and we experience meaning in life. The question: *What is my share in the success and in the failure of a good experience of time?* allows within us a process of transformation from what seemed impossible to something possible and feasible. **And each relationship**, regardless of how close it is being lived, each opposite – be it a person, an idea or a thing, presents an occasion for trying out these expanding opportunities.

How can we, consequently, ***bless all that is time*** (*das Zeitliche segnen*), which is a German phrase with the meaning of *to pass away* without actually having to

depart from this life, acknowledging – as Viktor Frankl put it – that ***nothing can be lost that is safe and sound in the past?***

The formula as I see it would be ***to live in the here and now*** as our body does. It can't grow younger; it can't go back in time as much as we would like it. (***It's a battle against time***, some women say, knowing that they won't ever be the ones to win the battle.)

Neither is it of any use if we already start being afraid of dementia and illness that possibly could hit us some time to come – this construct of time as a difficult future enormously burdens our present experience of time.

The phrase ***time hasn't moved*** describes an almost excessive here and now, we use this expression with profound or tremendous events, such as with natural disasters or with great love stories, equally when a person dear to us has passed away or when a baby is just born. Living the moment in responsibility enhances our perception of what is beautiful in this world, of our relationships and of what they need to thrive well. Living the moment in responsibility sharpens our perception of opportunities that appear unexpectedly and of what can be done if we or someone else is in need.

Concluding, I want to recollect the saying ***comes time, comes help*** which is 100% true in my own experience. And every now and then we might want to remember Abraham Lincoln's advice: ***reserve 30 minutes a day for your anxieties, and in these 30 minutes take a nap.***



