

The Feeling of Time

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The study of time in personal perceptions and social lives is hardly a new enterprise. A rather large body of literature on these subjects exists, and much of the material is utterly fascinating. People have examined orientations to the past, present, and future, the tempi of living, cycles, biological and social rhythms, the meaning of expectation, and of course memory. One of the more popular areas of research involves categorizing people as past, present, or future-oriented. These so-called temporal orientations are associated with various personality traits, as for example the heightened past orientations of anxious people, or the characteristic future orientations of highly achieving people. It has also been common practice to label according to various social classes within a society: the poor, present-oriented; the middle class, future-oriented; and the affluent, past- or, more precisely, tradition-oriented.

The implication of much of the research undertaken on perceptions of time is that social and cultural features may affect an individual's perceptions of time. To examine one's own life is essentially to examine one's being in time. When we as social scientists or psychotherapists ask people to speak of their lives—past, present, and future—we are asking them to think about their lives in temporal terms. Indeed, when we say that a case study or profile attempts to explore the way life is led, we are in effect addressing explicit and implicit aspects of time. When, moreover, we study a population of people who have undergone major changes in their lives—as, for example, immigrant families—time assumes a special significance. When a person wonders when things will change, why life has come to this and whether it has always been this way, he or she is immersed in matters of fate, history, time.

To speak of personal identity, as the philosopher Martin Heidegger and the psychoanalyst Erik H. Erikson have done so eloquently, is to speak of a person's sense of *change* as well as his or her belief in the

continuing sense of *sameness*. The concept appears paradoxical, yet we do feel that as we grow older we are, in part, what we always have been, as well as something slightly different than what we were. But again, this highly personal sense of identity is constantly being influenced by cultural and social phenomena. Disaster, as an extreme example, can alter our concepts of self, just as a wholly unanticipated miracle may change us and our identities. For families who immigrate to a new country, time plays its hand in many ways.

As important as the study of time is, it is inaccurate and politically unwise to say that temporal concerns are *the* central concerns of the families I have visited over the last ten years in the course of doing research on poverty. The poor are necessarily involved with the day-by-day matters of survival. There is simply too much work to be done just to get through the day. True enough. But a conception of the poor as people occupied *only* with survival to the extent that they do not or cannot contemplate philosophical issues or issues of personal and collective identities is equally inaccurate.

For the past two years I have been speaking with poor West Indian immigrant families in London in an effort to learn directly from them and, in their own words, how their lives are being led. Clearly, issues related to racism, racial integration, the economy, housing, employment, schooling, the procedures and ramifications of immigration, and relations with the police are what matter most to the majority of these families as they seek integration into English society. Yet despite the importance of these issues, questions of time, history, fate, the experience of remaining the same for the rest of one's life or seeking change of a social as well as psychological nature have become such prominent themes in these conversations that the families themselves have encouraged me to make their words and accounts public. Margaret Jayner, for one, a seventy-eight-year-old grandmother and great-grandmother, born in Barbados and living now in Hammersmith, would be disappointed, to say the least, if her thoughts on time, or the thoughts of one of her neighbors, were not found worthy of reporting.

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Margaret Jayner knows all about the daily problems of black families living in England, where she has lived for almost forty years. She knows all about the conditions of certain council homes, the high cost of food, the often inefficient services of hospitals and law courts. And she knows about racial discrimination in schools and on jobs. She has lived through these problems by herself and with a large family and with many, many friends. But it is history and fate, the many faces of time that she speaks about most with me; not that she is inured to the day-by-day pains of living and the omnipresent racism. She is not inured to these pains, even though she is accustomed to them. They hurt her now as they hurt her when, as a mature woman, she immigrated to England. But she prefers to speak of other issues, not necessarily greater issues, and not necessarily less painful ones.

“What I have seen. And what I have heard. The young ones, you know, they make all the noise, but it's the old grandmothers and great-grandmothers who have it all in our heads, you know. How many great-grandmothers you think there are still walking around, on their own, I mean? Oh, my God, what I have seen, God and me. Coming to this country so long ago now, it seems it all happened in another lifetime, at least it does on some days. Other days you would think it was still happening. Strange, I think, how those memories stay with you. But how can I tell you what we were thinking thirty, forty, *fifty* years ago when we decided, Why not, why not go to England. I tell you, it goes back farther than that too, because I heard people talking about leaving, running away, starting new lives, giving up old lives, and I was a little girl then. People were always talking about how they had to make a change, had to make a change. Even the old ones. No one seemed content just to stay where they were, holding on to the little they had, and I can tell you it was little. Change, starting life all over again, as if they were going to be reborn, was always on their minds. You could see it on the faces of the children. Don't talk to me too long, it was like they were saying, I might be gone somewhere before you even finish what you were starting to say.

My family—and I can go back with them a lot of years—they talked about it. Should we go, shouldn't we go. What will it be like. They almost spent so much time talking about it they didn't have enough energy left over to make the trip. But you know, you plan just so far, just so far. You make the current to begin with, you could sort of say, then the current takes you the rest of the way. Current was being prepared about the time I was born. Poor families plan out their histories; they don't do it with money, but they do it. Too many people forget that. Maybe it's all being planned by God. I sometimes wonder about that. Maybe, you know, God decides the only thing He can do with certain folks is have them move, start again. So He chooses a generation and gets them to move away from their homes. The children of Israel. One generation comes and goes, a second generation comes and goes, and everybody prays that the third generation is the one that will be ready to take hold in the new land. I suppose it could work out this way. I suppose

it could. Sometimes I believe it, you know. I feel God looking down on us and telling us, I'll find you a home. I'll find you a home. Give me time. Give them time.

It does take time, too. All these years must pass while people are just getting used to the idea of a new people coming into their midst. It's all in the Bible; it's all there. It's all happened before, thousands of years ago, hundreds of years ago, and now again, now again. So many people have been through it, this migrating, moving from place to place, trying to find a home where people will let you live the way you want to, which isn't all that different, you know, from the way these other people are living themselves. But the time must pass, the time must pass; no one can do anything about that. And *we're* the time, *we're* the people whose lives are being used to help the time pass. It's my life, my children's lives, my grandchildren's lives that are being used up with time. These are enormous changes in the world, these people coming and going. How many generations have to pass before the job is completed? Two or three, or four even. And that's us. Our task is to be the generation that starts the move. Our lives are meant to help the time pass. The children cannot see this, they aren't meant to. But as you get older you see it so clearly it begins to frighten you. You don't have to talk about it with people your own age; they know. They figured it out the same way you did.

People's lives, you see, are like a human bridge. Instead of going across a valley or a river, this human bridge goes across time. One generation starts the bridge, the next one carries it on a little farther, the next one a little bit more after that. No one knows how long the bridge has to go. It could end soon; more likely it's going to go on a very long time. No one sees the end, no one even feels for certain when the end is coming. Everybody knows when it comes, but not until it gets there, and by then the beginning of the bridge is a long time gone to their graves. People have their work, then, and their families, and their dreams of what they wanted to be or still might want to be, but their biggest and most important job is to be a member of that bridge. Each person lives out his life, does his work, but he knows his biggest job is to be a link in that bridge. He knows what he's doing, too, because he can see the bridge, even if many people can't, people his own kind, too. People say: What good is living, staying around as long as I have when families like ours are doing the way they're doing here? What good does it do, they want to know. Or you'll hear people arguing. Every day another argument, over this and over that. This is the right way for our families to act. No, *this* is the right way for our families to act. They even argue over what to call themselves; everybody does it.

Then you have another group of people, they're trying to soothe everybody. We musn't argue among ourselves, they say that all the time. We have to work together, get ourselves organized. We musn't have rows. Then it's the young ones, then it's the old ones. Then they look to this one or that one to lead them. But in the end they ask the same old question: What's the use, what's the point of it all? The answer is right there before their eyes: The answer is it doesn't make all that much difference which attitude you take because the point is to survive. That's

what we all must do: survive as long as we can, because of that bridge. Of course I have to care about my own flesh and blood, but I know I'm part of that bridge, and that means we're all part of that bridge. I have to take care of myself and my own flesh and blood, but I have to take care of *everybody*, because that bridge needs as many people as it can get.

We are all history, each of us, little bits of history, which God insists we carry on. When people fight us, we're used to that; there is nothing new under the sun about any of that. These people who hate our being here so much, they think we're hearing them for the first time, but we're used to all that. They don't know it, but they only make the bridge a little bit stronger and a little bit longer. That's all they're doing.

So the people ask: What's the sense of anybody going on? Or they say to me, Aren't you afraid to die, seeing how your life is coming to its end? I say, No, I am not afraid to die and you don't want me to die either, because you and me, we both know we need all of us, all we can get just to make certain our bridge is still there. Someday, maybe, we won't need a bridge any more, although I suppose everybody thinks they belong to some bridge or other. But that's good. That's what keeps you from being scared. You're your most scared, you know, when you're alone, or you think you're alone. People want to be part of other people's lives. That's why they live close to one another. It's unusual for a person to spend his life all by himself. We're together, we're God's flock. I sort of like that idea, it makes me feel less scared, and let me tell you I have a lot I could be scared about, a lot of things people in my own family don't even know about. But I'm with them in my way, and I'm quite happy, you know, staying close to them. I don't even mind that it troubles them that I stay so close. Let them talk and complain about it. There's no sense me trying to tell them what I think about. If I told them about my history bridge, I'm sure the young ones would laugh at me. But they'll learn when they grow to be my age. And that's the point, you see, to all of this. The longer I stay alive the better the chance they'll have of staying alive. My living a long life shows everybody how strong we are, how we can survive in places that don't exactly protect us the way they should. I get in the way of my grandchildren, I know that. But someday they'll think, She wasn't all that bad, really. She helped us. Then later on, when they're older still, they'll think, Just her fighting to stay alive should have been a lesson for me. She had her little place in the bridge, because they'll understand the bridge idea too when they get older, much older, of course.

They'll learn something else, too. It will take them time, but it will come to them. They will see why people want to believe in God, and history, and being a part of that bridge. It's hard to say, but when you get older you see how wrong it is for people to go on leading their lives as though they were the only people in the world, or even in their little communities. Too many people when they're young believe they have to be alone, separate individuals. They think being a part of other people's

lives will slow them down, keep them from getting where they believe they *have* to get. You can't tell people they're wrong about this; they have to find it all for themselves. People say there are too many people on the earth. I say there are too many individuals, not enough families, big families, countries of families. Too many people are working all alone, by themselves. So, when they are like this, then some of the rest of us who don't think like this, we have to show them how other people walk the face of the earth with them, whether they see these other people or not. We have to show them how living is just a part of being in history. Each of us, like I said, is a little, little bit of history, which is nice because it means we're sort of holding hands with the people who came into the world before us, and all the people who are going to be coming after us. That's the way it goes too, you know. When you're in that bridge you don't even know who's standing alongside you, on either side, I mean. That idea makes you a little sad sometimes, because you want to know who you're standing with, sharing the time with on the earth, you know. But it can make you feel a little hopeful, too. You feel hopeful because you say to yourself, No telling how far along this old bridge is going to go. Maybe, even, it goes forever. Now that would be nice, believing you are part of history going all the way back to the Bible at the one end, and all the way forward into forever at the other end. That is the sort of hope you can think about if you take the idea of God just a little bit serious, like I take the idea of the history bridge serious. And I do too.

Tell you something else that I think about. I think how nice it would be if everybody believed in the same bridge. People don't have to be the same, mind you. No one wants them to be the same. But with everybody being different and still all of them believing in at least one bridge, you would have a bridge no one could ever tear down. I think when *that* day comes, we would stop worrying about just surviving and start thinking about living for maybe the first time in all our lives. All our lives. And old God, he might even begin to relax a little bit with us, maybe even take a few days off and let the sun shine for days at a time. No telling what could happen. That would be some magical bridge now, wouldn't it! ”

Five weeks after this conversation took place Margaret Jayner died. One week later a little boy named Donal Jayner Witside was born in a London hospital. He arrived a mere seven days too late to know or even share time on the earth with his great-grandmother. Now almost seven months old, Donal is a handsome baby with large eyes and a wonderful grin. But the feature his mother remarks on most often are his large hands. Grandmother Margaret, Donal's mother says, smiling faintly, would have loved his large hands. She always trusted people with large hands because it was easier to hold hands with them. She always liked the idea of people holding hands.