

Radu's Rides **The Vise of Urgency**

Radu Craiu writes:

Time is a strange instrument capable of doing many things to us, but if I had to choose its material impersonation, I would probably choose the accordion for a number of reasons. We all learned at some point that time can make us sing with joy or howl in pain, just like the accordion is, in many parts of the world, the musical instrument used in both weddings and funerals. And so are many others, you will correctly say. But time has also the strange tendency to dilate or contract, just like an accordion, making minutes seem like hours—and vice versa—for all sorts of reasons. Its speed is not the only aspect of time one gets to experience in a rich life. Just like the linearity of time seems to be abandoned in high pressure moments, the movement of the treble and bass follows the non-linearity imposed by the movement of the bellows. Whether the equations of your time wasted reading the previous paragraph match those of the instrument is anyone's guess, but my point is approximately made.

When choosing a job in academia, I dare venture to say that many of us have put in balance the value of time spent thinking of things we want to think about, against the depreciation of time spent thinking of things others tell us to think about. All this thinking got me dizzy, partly because things are not that simple. For one, that initial calculation ran out of truth merely a few years into my academic job. Committees, supervision, editorship duties, and my own inadequacy made it so that I was constantly seeking a moment of peace and quiet to think about my "stuff". In a typical Darwinian twist, I became a bit more efficient, so time seemed to dilate and all of a sudden, I had some room to breathe and congratulate myself on choosing the right career. Alas, a couple of ideas later I could recruit some students who filled

my spare time with the diligence one expects from young hungry minds whose lives depend on it. Again, pushed against the inexorable floating of the planets or the decay of my tired atoms (how do we decide what time it is anyway?), I had to increase my efficiency, or to better hide my inefficiencies. This tug-of-war against time has continued and my ability to adapt to it carried me over parenthood, professional ups and downs, and whatever came in between waking up and collapsing at the end of a day. But just like that accordion, my strategy has been adaptive, non-linear and far from perfect.

At the beginning of time—by which I mean 2001 when I started in my job—I used to make long-range plans. Conferences and visits were planned as early as possible, time chunks devoted to various research projects were carefully scheduled months in advance. I was taking walks devoted to thinking. More importantly, any extemporaneous professional request or life complication triggered a minor mental breakdown. Having to carefully reassemble that house of time-cards because my gas pipe was leaking or my teeth were falling out was a calamity.

Fast forward 25 years and I barely recognize myself. Forget myself, I barely recognize my calendar. Not that it happens often, but I sometimes stop for a precious minute I don't have just to savour the disbelief. Like many readers of this column, I have stopped looking for a time of peace and quiet and learned to think on the go, usually as I walk into a meeting with collaborators or students. At some point I have been cured of the brain's short circuitry that used to happen when facing a large set of tasks that are temporally clustered. Now I watch in a somewhat detached manner the avalanche of things that need to be done by D-day (D stands for doom or deliverance, depending on how much coffee I've had)

and do what needs to be urgently done. Planning ahead happens rarely and only for things that usually concern other human beings still living in a paradisiac state where forethought is within reach.

Strangely enough, from time to time, the vise of urgency loosens, and I regain the optimism of yesteryear. And yet, instead of enjoying the smell of the roses, I recidivate. Perhaps it is that being busy is preferable to being idle; the latter may put ideas into my head, but they may not be statistical. Or maybe I know that if I wait long enough, someday I will look on today's crazy agenda as reasonable. Which I guess brings me to the last point, the most optimistic one in this Ride. Perhaps the metaphor of the accordion is about molding our abilities and expectations to fill and empty time as we see fit. It is our talents and coping mechanisms that make the hours sing victory songs or howl in defeat. And like an accordion that can never function with airless bellows, so we cannot let our days be without meaningful time, whatever that may mean.



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