

Photographs, Stopwatches, and Countdown Timers

The Magic Picture Frame

by Daniel J. Bressler, MD, FACP



WHEN I REVIEW a medical chart, it often feels like I am thumbing through a scrapbook. A scrapbook contains notes, photos, and memorabilia from significant events in the life of an individual or family. Here is a picture of the trip to the Grand Canyon during the kids' spring break. This is cousin Wendy's gaudy wedding invitation. Here's the thank-you letter that Bobby sent for his confirmation gift. Here's a picture of Grandma blowing out her 80 birthday candles. And, of course, this is the invitation list to Uncle Henry's memorial service.

The medical chart also steps through significant events and "mementos" of a life. Here's when we started you on allopurinol for gout. This is when you had the cholecystectomy complicated by cholangitis and

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I see the swirl of years go rushing by me
Scenes of disappointment and acclaim
Digitized and set in motion by me
Now showing in the magic picture frame

I watch the sudden scenes arise from darkness
Shadow puppets thrilling to a flame
A jumbled world of frolicking and starkness
Bound up inside the magic picture frame

Here my elders still are quick and agile
Before the blades of time could wound and maim
Oblivious that they'd become so fragile
Preserved inside the magic picture frame

Here's a former sweetheart turning forty
Tossing her bouquet and maiden name
Her husband (now her ex) was suave and sporty
Ironic smiles inside the picture frame

Here's a college pal naive and carefree
Who later died in tragedy and shame
Did he break those sorry bonds and tear free?
Still-lifed in the magic picture frame.

My grownup children here are seen as babies
Their futures then impossible to claim
A meshwork of contingencies and maybe's
Potentialized in the magic picture frame

I look away and miss a year or twenty
Yet know that they will circle back the same
An endless loop of panoramic plenty
Spooled within the magic picture frame

I tally up the roll of dead and living
A cheerless yet addictive parlor game
Each captured shot a gift that keeps on giving
Treasures of the magic picture frame

If Heaven's where the best of us live always
Eternity's celestial hall of fame
Where our timeless selves go tramping through those hallways
Heaven's in the magic picture frame

acute renal failure. There's the total knee replacement, here the community-acquired pneumonia that required a brief ICU stay; and from just last month here's the admission for acute coronary syndrome and a stent.

The human body functions as a stopwatch. Our heartbeat, like the second hand, bears witness to and defines the passage of time. It beats more than 100,000 times in one day, 40 million times in a year, and 3 billion times in an average lifetime. The slower metronome of our lungs counts out 20,000 breaths per day, 8 million per year, and a "mere" 600 million in a lifetime. If it weren't so numerically awkward, I could reasonably say that I had my wisdom teeth out at 680 million heartbeats and my meniscus repair when I was 400 million breaths old. We find it more economical to count the passage of time in cosmologic increments, taking as our basic unit the earth's circle round the sun.

So too the body acts as a countdown timer—the kind used to tell us when the casserole is ready, when the basketball must be shot or the football snapped. Our work in medicine is often geared to adjusting the timer. The antibiotics for my patient's pneumonia definitely prevented time from expiring prematurely, as did his cardiac stenting. We know, of course, that adding extra heartbeats or breaths or years is not the same as stopping the clock. Time continues to pass at exactly one second per second. Time is, for all of us, always running out.

The old joke that "time is nature's trick to keep everything from happening at once" seems to be at least as helpful as more formal and seemingly circular definitions. In the everyday world of "classical" physics (and hence the chemistry and biology on which modern medicine is based), time is a constant context in which physical objects move. In this context, time itself is intimately bound up with motion whether that be the cycle of a planet, the repetitive sway of a carefully measured pendulum, or the oscillation of cesium in an atomic clock. Classical time moves in one direction, from the past to the present to the future. A classical bell cannot be unringed, nor a classical clock made to reverse. The human biological self moves in the context of time through the stages of conception, growth, development, decline, and death. Our different organs move in a way we call "aging." As they all move, they all age. Skin thickness, lens clarity, forced vital capacity, creatinine clearance, reaction time, intima medial

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thickness, and bone density all mark the movement of specific parts of our biological selves through time. They also have become known through medical science as the variable clocks that help determine the length and quality of our lives.

But the human biological animal is also the creatively conscious human being. Through imaginative consciousness our species has the capacity to conceptualize beyond the boundaries of its own physics and biology. In our imagination we are not limited by the context of classical linear time. In our minds, time takes on a fluid and flexible quality. We can juxtapose moments from our childhood with scenes from last week. Our mind's eye can see people that our actual eyes have not glimpsed for decades. We can conceive ourselves and others freed from current readings on the biological countdown timer. We can dream up people as they were or how we might want them to be. Our minds, even in their everyday humdrum functioning, bend and fold time like a science-fiction writer steeped in modern postclassical physics.

On the side table of my dining room sits a little digital picture frame. The removable memory stick drives a recurrent slide show of hundreds of photos from the past 30 years. Over and over it displays images of people looking out from across variable spans of time and space. These images both mimic and inform my consciousness. The frame is a digital scrapbook, a relentless mnemonic device and, as it turns out, a catalyst for poetry. It is an expression of the human imagination's capacity for time travel, an advocate for nonlinearity, and an ambassador from the frontier where biology meets the imagination. The Magic Picture Frame is a set of notes from that frontier. **SDP**

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