

My Life Flashed before My Eyes: Hermeneutic Reflections on Time

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Abstract

The everyday experience of time can be disrupted by the events in our lives, and disquiet notions of predictability about the passage of time. In this work, I describe an alternate experience of time passing that occurred in the context of a car accident. The phrase "I saw my life flash before my eyes" situates the varietal experience of time in human existence, and invites the use of chosen hermeneutic tenets to explore the phenomena. I describe the mysterious personal experience of time associated with the accident, as well as varietal experiences of time that occur for people during hospitalization, relating to experiences of nursing practice. The tension associated with the temptation to apply scientific explanations to metaphysical questions, and the inevitability of accepting ongoing wonder about the mysteries of time, are featured throughout.

Keywords

Time, hermeneutics, nursing, philosophy, human science, metaphysics

Several years ago, when crossing the street as a pedestrian, a car struck me. I learned later that the driver was 18-years-old, and was distracted by conversation with her boyfriend, who was sitting in the passenger seat. As a result, she did not see me crossing the street, and because she was travelling so quickly, I did not see her in time to get out of the way, either. The important caveat to this account is that I am fine. I often wonder about the young girl who accidentally hit me. I imagine that she was a new driver, much like my own children, who were also new drivers at the time of the accident. I suspect she was distressed by the accident, just as I readily acknowledge my own distress. However, the most significant source of contemplation for me involves a peculiar experience of time that permeates my memory of the moment of impact,

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when I had the experience of having my life flash before my eyes.

The influence of the trauma to which I refer has appeared and subsided over the years. The meaning of the accident to the fullness of my life experience reveals and conceals itself in interesting and unexpected ways. I think, in retrospect, that I was somewhat oblivious to the physical trauma of being hit by a car in the weeks and months that followed. Instead, I remember somewhat eagerly re-telling anyone who was interested, that in the process of the collision – the time between the impact and the time I landed on the pavement, “my life flashed before my eyes.” Months after the accident, a hermeneutic mentor encouraged me to write about that experience, but it is only now, after several years have passed, that I attempt to ascribe meaning to that strange phenomena. I ask myself why it has taken so long. I suspect that it had to do with waiting until I had a sense of how to approach the experience. It has taken time to feel ready, but I am now prepared to employ selected tenets of hermeneutic thought to guide the possibility for deepened understanding. Elements of time, awareness of time, and personal readiness associated with the healing character of time, emerge in the exploration.

I am aware, as I use the phrase “I saw my life flashing before my eyes,” that many others have experienced what I did, since that phrase is not one that I constructed. I borrow the phrase, because it is a way that others have described the “reality-defying” event of having life and time manifest in another realm. It was almost as if a form of time travel occurred during the experience I am about to describe. Certainly, the depth of thought that occurred, and the images that appeared for me in those few seconds that made up the event, defy notions of linear time, “real time,” and the workings of the clock.

Some context of the incident is important. My husband and I were visiting the city of my childhood home on the rather somber occasion of having a final family reunion with my elderly mother, who had been diagnosed with a terminal illness. My three children were all students at distant universities and we had arranged for them to fly to see their grandmother for the last time. As I crossed the street on that auspicious day, I had just visited my mother in hospital, and was about to greet my daughter who was arriving from the airport. She was to meet me at the hotel that was just across the street from the hospital.

The Accident

I remember waiting for the light to turn green. There were a number of people waiting with me on this busy downtown street, replete with six lanes of traffic to traverse. When the light turned, I stepped onto the pavement, walking briskly in anticipation of seeing my daughter, and glancing to the right towards the hotel, attempting to catch sight of her arrival. Behind me, at that moment, I heard the forever-anonymous male voice yell, “Hey!” Interestingly, the memory of his warning did not arise in my recollection until weeks later. That detail, which was not initially accessible, wormed its way back into my recollection after some time had passed. But warn me, he did, although it was clearly too late, for immediately, the impact of the car, coming from the left, assaulted my being with a totality, and an intensity that remains difficult to articulate. The experience of a car crashing into my body was an overwhelming sense of defenselessness and resignation that permeated my being. I experienced an embodied understanding of the body’s fragility – of *my* body’s fragility in a moment in the history of the universe –and I felt an

association with some kind of existential “mocking.” It was as if a voice was reminding me of my hubris, and the inevitability of the end of existence. There was an urgent moment of reckoning with...my creator? The universe? The fates? So formidable was the impact that I succumbed immediately to the inevitability of the event. I do not remember the pain of the collision as much as I remember the acknowledgement that this would be the occasion of the end of my life. I saw, in that instant, the experience of my life, almost as if it were displayed on a multi-dimensional collage before me.

The near-death experience I had as a young child in a drowning accident scripts my earliest memory. In the moment of impact, I mused about the “stolen” nature of my life, since that childhood tragedy shaped a worldview that I later associated with “survivor guilt.” In the moment of impact, my thoughts went to that occasion, the marker of my beginnings. The next thoughts were for my children, gathered on the occasion of a family farewell to a beloved grandparent. But I saw them as the children that I had raised, not only the vision of young adults that permeated the occasion of our reunion. Their childhood essences were part of my projection, and their lives, too, presented themselves as beings that I knew as infants, children, and now adults. I grieved for them, for they would be incredulous at my death, and I lamented that the unexpected nature of the accident would traumatize them for the rest of their adult lives. I thought of my husband, ever cautious and careful, who would be frustrated that I did not see the car coming, and look to reasons as to why this accident occurred and why it should not have. I pictured my dear mother, lying in her hospital bed such a short distance away, in the hospital where I was born. I could have seen, had I been able to focus, the room of my birth, the site of the old case room. I had always known where to spot the room at the hospital where I was born, and in this suspended instant, I visualized the ironic cycle that comprised of both the beginning and the end of my life in perfect circuitous proximity. I pictured my mother’s bewilderment, and her thoughts for my entire family, robbed of their mother/spouse/sister. Mom would be sad to have a child’s death precede her own. I knew, too, that she would reconcile the event as God’s will and prepare to greet me in the afterlife. There was a flash of personal disappointment, too, for my untimely demise would mean a lost opportunity to begin my doctoral work, since I had just learned that my application to begin a PhD had been accepted. I remember the irritation of contemplating a project left unfinished.

While all of these thoughts whirled through my head I was only dispassionately aware of what was happening to my body in the physical world. Bursts of visual images accompanied the assault, including a peek at the driver— a terrified looking girl at the wheel, her face displaying the shock and horror of what had transpired because of her distraction. I sensed the feeling of flying through the air, seeing my life, and my body, from a distanced perspective, and I marveled at the random nature of my departure. Then, there was communion with the ground. I glimpsed the undercarriage of the car, and the knowledge that I would now be run over. It was at that moment that I mourned the loss of my life, and the absurdity that it would be this way that my life should end.

From start to finish, this event could not have lasted more than three or four seconds, and yet, I know with curious assurance that the thoughts I described occurred with the acuity that I recount. It was as if my life flashed before my eyes in those few seconds, uncovering more than would

ever be possible in real time, but parading before me, nonetheless, with surprising depth and complexity.

By way of completing my story, I was, in the end, not run over. I had landed on the pavement, on my side, in time for the driver to stop. At that point, there was a deadening and confusing silence for what seemed, again, to defy notions of time. I lay on the pavement waiting for someone to say: “Call an ambulance.” Instead, after what seemed to be an interminable period of inaction, I heard a fragile voice from afar repeating over and over “Are you OK? Are you OK?” I imagine, in retrospect, that it was the voice of the young driver. The trauma in her voice, in my recollection, was palpable. I was unable to respond since the pain associated with the accident had now announced itself with unquestionable authority. Still I waited for someone to say, “Call an ambulance.” And still, there was no move to do so. From the distance, I heard a voice say, “Turn her over.” The de-humanizing reference to “her” was not lost on me, since I longed for someone to approach me, the person on the pavement in that place and time, hold my hand, and offer connection. Instead, I croaked “No, leave me be. I shouldn’t be moved.” I had processing to do, lying on the pavement. For one thing, I had to find a way to cope with the worst pain I have ever experienced. More importantly, though, I can also honestly confess, that in addition to dealing with the searing pain, I indulged in the need to savor the incredible gift I had been given. Part of me was positively giddy at the realization that for the second time since the drowning accident that signified the beginning of my memories, I had narrowly escaped, on this day, the end of all memories. I knew that whatever injuries I had sustained would pale against the alternative possibility of the death that I had accepted as my fate, only seconds ago.

Had it all occurred in a far-off realm, in a parallel universe, where time takes on an alien dimension? The simultaneous experience of overwhelming pain and glorious giddiness are an interesting pairing to contemplate, but it was my reality as I lay on the pavement, musing about the fleeting nature of existence, and the reprieve from the inevitable that had blessed me on that day. After what seemed to be a ten-minute lapse, but which was likely under a minute, I heard someone finally say, “We’d better call an ambulance.” After what seemed to be a thirty-minute wait, but which was likely only five minutes, the ambulance arrived.

Hermeneutics and Time

“How did it get so late so soon?”

— [Dr. Seuss](#)

Why is it important to explore my alien experience of time, which appeared at a critical juncture of my life, and presented as an unrecognizable and unsettling perception? Grondin (2003) asked “Can the interpretative-the hermeneutic-really be overcome?” (p. 12). His question is thought provoking, for it implies that interpretation occupies a very basic aspect of our human approach to understanding, and in my case, the desire to understand meanings associated with my strange experience of time. Heideggerian language suggests that in the fullness of *Dasein* – our existence - we are unable to avoid interpreting the facticity into which we are “thrown” in the world-that-is-already-there. In other words, the everyday realities of our circumstances will always provide the backdrop for our inevitable interpretations.

The alternate experience of time has the potential to disrupt the security of our everydayness, and beckons an attempt to rationalize, or “scientificize” the disquiet. What scientific explanation might there be for such an uncommon experience of time? Did I hit my head and not know it? Did I dream it? Have I embellished the memory over time? Heidegger decries the yearning to ascribe universal truths to metaphysical questions. In fact, Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (originally published in 1927) had, as its central impetus, a desire to “alert us to the radical temporality of all being and destroy all illusions about supratemporal permanence” (Grondin, 2003, p. 2). The centrality of Heidegger’s message stemmed from a desire to launch philosophical thought away from the attempt to create universal solutions for unsolved metaphysical problems (Grondin, 2003; Sherratt, 2006). The unlikeliness of finding a scientific “explanation” for the mysteries associated with time passing, therefore, are remote, and perhaps address Grondin’s query as to whether the interpretative can be “overcome.” Would it be possible for me to overcome the temptation to interpret, in scientific or other contexts, what it meant to glimpse a foreign dimension of time? Would it be possible for me to dismiss the event without ongoing contemplation about its peculiarity? The influence of the event on my life, and my attempt to interpret meaning in this writing, suggests that I cannot.

I am drawn to Heideggerian and Gadamerian explications of time, wherein there is a suggestion that time does not exist in a linear or chronological way, but rather in an “altogether” way, where dimensions of time present as one. Heidegger (1927/2010) stated: “In the everyday ‘just passing through life’ that takes care, *Dasein* never understands itself as running along in a continuously enduring succession of sheer ‘nows’” (p. 390). In that statement, Heidegger emphasized that *Dasein* accepts all temporal interpretations, but embraces them in the fullness of existence. It seems, then, there is more to understand than the “succession of nows” such as the listing of events or the cataloguing of statistics. Instead, the promise for hermeneutic interpretation is to rest and pause, allowing the meaning to come into view. It is possible to understand *Being*, then, as comprising, in each moment, our past, present, and future. Heidegger (1927/2010) extended that conceptualization by asking, “Does *time* itself reveal itself as the horizon of *being*?” (p. 415, Author’s italics). Heidegger’s question draws attention to the intractable relationship between being and time, and reveals with succinct luminescence, the vision of our existence as experienced by time. Heidegger also hinted at the impossibility of conceptualizing time as a linear framework, by suggesting:

Initially, time presents itself as an uninterrupted succession of nows. Every now is already either a just now or a right-away. If the characterization of time keeps primarily and exclusively *to this succession*, then, in principle, no beginning and end can be found in it as such. Every last now, *as a now*, is always *already* a right-away that is no longer, thus it is time in the sense of the no-longer-now, of the past. Every first now is always a just-now-not –yet, thus it is time in the sense of the not-yet-now, the ‘future.’ Time is thus endless ‘in both directions.’ (p. 403, Author’s italics, Author’s quotation marks)

The notion of one’s life, as part of the “history of the universe,” might therefore be understood in a way that defies grandiose connotations associated with such a statement, but rather, alludes to the infinite characterization of time, made manifest in the context of our existence, and our *Being*.

The notion of life “flashing” before our eyes, summons a certain alignment with the “flash” of hermeneutic understanding to which Caputo (1987) referred, when he described the lightening-like occasion of understanding. Blattner (2006), too, referenced the “altogether” gasp of recognition-the fusion of horizons- that accompanies understanding and meaning. There is familiarity with those notions, and it is possible to reflect on what happens when we interpret a flash of insight into the course of everyday navigations. The prospect is also elusive, since an altogether gasp of understanding can be hard won.

It seems that, in the use of the word “flash,” there are implications of immediacy. Furthermore, in all hermeneutic conceptualizations of existence (*Dasein*) there are existential implications regarding Heidegger’s suggestions of human finitude. Understandings of finitude underscore the meaning of the “flash,” which is always experienced in the context of our finite existence. The flash can be understood, too, by uncovering dimensions that transcend the limitations of linear assumptions of starts and finishes, timelines, and other familiar conceptions of time passing. A multidimensional “mind map” thus replaces the vision of a “roadmap” in my conceptualizations.

Deliberation

The meaning of my reflection about the accident then, is not at all clear, but this insight fits well with the general incentive of hermeneutic reflection. In other words, my exploration need not be an impulse to reconcile, or to experience closure about this mysterious occurrence of time, nor is it an impulse to solve metaphysical queries that I distil into the question: How can time be experienced, in the everyday, with such variation, given the finite and static ticking of a clock that marks its passage?

Caputo (1987) reminds us, “The point is to make life difficult, not impossible – to face up to the difference and difficulty which enter into what we think and do and hope for not to grind them to a halt” (p. 7). It seems, then, that there is purpose in dwelling in the difficult questions that encompass our human passage through life, including the invitation to remain open to the mysteries that elude place and time. Notably, the process of hermeneutic interpretation, and the skill embedded in that process, must not amount to abstract theorizing (Crotty, 2010; Laverty, 2003). As Gadamer (1976/2004) stated: “For the interpreter to let himself be guided by the things themselves is obviously not a matter of a single, ‘conscientious’ decision, but is ‘the first, last, and constant task’” (p. 269). Husserl’s plea to remain focused on “the things themselves” (the lived experience as opposed to theoretical abstraction) supports Heidegger’s proposition that our lives are intelligible only through the interpretation of the everyday (Dreyfus, 1992).

To repeat, the notion of *Dasein* invites a view of existence that is finite, but non-linear. The possibilities for understanding such an idea include seeing the “now” as a composite of experience. Understanding time by invoking Heidegger’s attention to finitude, historical situatedness, and a sense of “running toward death” (Caputo, 1989; Grondin, 2003), as well as Heidegger’s tragic conception of *Dasein*, serve as a “penetrating glimpse into the radical temporality and angst of human existence” (Grondin, 2003, p. 145). These are ideas that capture a perspective of time that resonates with the experience of seeing one’s life flash before one’s eyes, for in those moments, the race towards death appears comprehensible. As such, inexplicable presentations of time serve as lived examples of the perception of time that

Heidegger explored. They are but a glimpse, however, and punctuate *Dasein* infrequently, creating, perhaps the temptation to explain, interpret, and understand them when they arise.

The Precipice of Understanding

I believe the experience, and the recollection of it, uncovered a space for me to consider other time-related understandings of *Dasein*, relating to my everyday nursing practice. Hermeneutic scholar and philosopher, Dr. Walter Brogan, suggested that living on the threshold – being always open to possibility - is a position that reflects the need for careful contemplation, in order to savor the dialogical space that defines the threshold. This liminal space, in turn, creates a precipice for infinite contemplation about meaning (Dr. Walter Brogan, personal communication, June 9, 2017).

For example, while practicing nursing in the clinical setting, I can recall countless episodes where the issue of time, in people's experiences, created dimensions of disquiet. Persons waking from a general anesthetic will "lose" awareness of the several hours that passed during the surgery, and may worriedly perceive that they are waking before the surgery has begun, or that they are awakening during the surgery. In another recovery-room experience, I recall the poignancy of a woman waking from her anesthetic with tears streaming down her face. In the course of her short anesthetized procedure, she had "seen" and visited extensively with her deceased son. The assurance that she held about the reality of the encounter left us both altered.

It seems that many new mothers, when clutching their newborns for the first time, are engaging in a trajectory of that infants' existence, as though their child's life is unfolding before them in those first instants, rife with imaginings and projections of what the child's existence will entail. These, and so many other varietal perceptions of time, whether time accelerates, grinds, or is altogether "missing," are part of the human health and healing experience, so much so, that the mysteries may appear as commonplace to health care providers, who become familiar with the phenomenon as everyday observations. However, individuals who have experienced the wonder of life flashing before their eyes, or lose time, or find themselves relegated to another place where time takes on a different meaning, may be disquieted, and struggle to reconcile an inexplicable experience. The tendency for caregivers may be to theorize about patients' agonizing experience of the slow passage of time, and search for scientific explanations about such metaphysical wonderings. In the moments that I awaited the ambulance, for example, the torment of *enduring* time reflected an experience of time that alternated, again, from the cornucopia of images that were compressed into the preceding moment. I continue to muse about the contrasting projections of time that accompanied the entire experience.

Nurse scholars have considered the meaning of time in the context of the human health experience. For example, nursing theorist Rosemary Parse's *Theory of Human Becoming* served as a framework to explore the phenomena of time passing (Thoun, 2002). Thoun pointed to the advantage of seeing time as a "unitary" phenomenon, in contrast with "Newtonian" visions of time, around which time is viewed as objective, linear, and continuous. Thoun suggested:

The Newtonian notion of time subverts the phenomenology of lived experience and quality of life. Nurses who strive for understanding of lived experiences and loving

participation with others in practice are uniquely positioned to provide an opportunity for release from the restrictions of linear time. While each person defines and lives time passing in her or his own way, the awe and wonder of rhythmic, unitary time offers the possibility of experience that is rich with process and possibility, mystery and surprise. (p. 318)

With these words, Thoun (2002) locates possibilities for nursing practice within a “unitary” vision of time, aligning with Heideggerian notions, wherein time transcends the series of “nows” and assumes understandings of time as contingent on a particular conception of human existence, wherein existential meaning is possible in each moment of interaction. There are, therefore, fascinating possibilities for each participant, in each moment, in the context of the health-caring experience. The attempt to articulate phenomena of time, using the conventional descriptions of past, present, and future, are limiting, and summon a frontier wherein alternative expectations of time can present as a way to enrich human health encounters. Thoun emphasized that nurses enjoy considerable opportunity to release the restrictions of linear time, in the context of the health and healing experience.

However, Caputo (1987) cautioned:

Finally, we come up against the mystery itself, the unencompassable depth in both things and our (non)selves. And then we are brought up short. That, it seems to me, is where hermeneutics leads us: not to a conclusion which gives comfort, but to a thunderstorm, not to a closure, but to a dis-closure, and openness toward what cannot be encompassed, where we lose our breath and are stopped in our tracks, at least momentarily, for it always belongs to our condition to remain on the way. (p. 214)

There are, therefore, few comforting strategies or practicalities associated with the work of contemplating the mysteries of time, but rather a commitment to remain, as Caputo (1987) described, “on the way” to infinite interpretations and possibilities. It bears echoing that the expression of “life flashing before my eyes,” has a tradition of understanding from others in countless other contexts. Recognizing the expression of a life flashing before one’s eyes is therefore familiar in our consciousness as a possibility that *awaits* for meaning to come into view. Indeed, the promise for hermeneutic interpretation is to rest and pause. I remain on the precipice of understanding, knowing that this extraordinary experience is embedded in my historicity, my tradition, and occupies the status of remaining, always, “on the way.”

Connecting with the Everyday

In the following poem, Tolkien (1954/2001, pp. 83-84) touches on the multiplicity of time, and the perspective of “self” in the context of time. Self becomes the mediator of time spent; conjuring memories that relive the deep comfort that can permeate the everyday. In those moments, there is a suggestion that notions of past, present, and future conjoin – that one can contemplate the historic while simultaneously anticipating future contentment. An interesting insight looms. As was the case for me during those few seconds following the impact of the car, the voice of the fireside philosopher in the poem below contemplates the end of his existence with curious acceptance in the midst of concurrent deliberations, capturing with simplistic

elegance, the existential character of our perceptions. The poet celebrates the textures of life by referencing past, present, and future, as well as the inevitability of death, and hints at the possibilities for perceiving the simultaneity of time.

I sit beside the fire and think
Of all that I have seen
Of meadow flowers and butterflies
In summers that have been

Of yellow leaves and gossamer
In autumns that there were
With morning mist and silver sun
And wind upon my hair

I sit beside the fire and think
Of how the world will be
When winter comes without a spring
That I shall ever see

For still there are so many things
That I have never seen
In every wood in every spring
There is a different green

I sit beside the fire and think
Of people long ago
And people that will see a world
That I shall never know

But all the while I sit and think
Of times there were before
I listen for returning feet
And voices at the door

— [J.R.R. Tolkien](#) (*Fellowship of the Ring*)

What mysteries accompany the seasons of our existence, and how easily these exquisite moments of deep existential awareness are subsumed by the machinations of the everyday! Such is the stuff of hermeneutic notions of *aletheia*, wherein emerging meaning surfaces at unexpected junctures, only to recede again, when the everydayness of life assumes its stature. *Aletheia*, or the event of revealing and concealing (Moules, McCaffrey, Field, & Laing, 2014), presents rhythmic companionship to discovery that may surface, disappear, and become replaced by something new. Heidegger (1927/2010) hinted at the elusive nature of discovery by saying:

This nearest and elemental way of Dasein encountering the world goes so far that even one's *own* Dasein *initially* becomes 'discoverable' by looking away from its 'experiences'

and the ‘center of its actions’ or by not yet ‘seeing’ them at all. (p. 116, Author’s italics, Author’s quotation marks)

I return, always, to the gift that accompanied my unusual experience. By looking away from rationality, and linear notions of time and existence during those few seconds when my life flashed before my eyes, I am able to glimpse the unexpected and unplanned profundity of encountering cherished individuals, meaningful life events, hopes, dreams, and disappointments. The experience will undoubtedly alter the way I conceive my existence for the rest of my days. However, I am not served with a conclusive offering. Rather, evolving understanding is contingent on ongoing unrest, as well as enduring openness, about the mystery that accompanies a foray into an unfamiliar dimension, and an enigmatic human experience of time.

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