



Time Out Of Mind

□ by Peter Wahlstrom

There it sits, strapped to the wrist, taking up so little space, adding so little weight, ever-ready to provide accurate information at a glance. The wrist watch is such a marvel of convenience, such a perfect blend of ease, use, comfort and reliability, it feels like it belongs to the body, that without it the body somehow feels naked. How could such an unobtrusive work of elegant simplicity be denied in any setting? How could it possibly be seen as a hindrance when it remains silent, at the beck and

call of its wearer, causing no unwanted distraction while promoting organization and efficiency, which can arguably improve the wilderness experience?

A watch, or other portable timepieces, may serve a useful function in the wilderness at little expense to the user, but it is not as benign as it seems. It is technology that gives aid and even comfort but not without taking something away at the same time, thereby denying its user the maximum wilderness experience. This denial would

be an acceptable trade off if a watch was necessary in the wilderness, but in most cases it is not. Whatever need there may be to know the time can be satisfied for all intents and purposes by what is naturally present—the sun. Looking at the sun will tell you as much about time as looking at your watch, albeit without the precision, the necessity of which is questionable.

Admittedly, there are exceptions to this view. Depending on the type of wilderness, it may be necessary to keep a



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A wilderness stream splashing down over a rocky ledge is the perfect place to sit and appreciate the timelessness of canoe country. (Shade Lake)

more precise measure of time than what the sun can give.

Extreme conditions and potential threats do not characterize the Boundary Waters wilderness. The closest comparison would be the need to be on time for a pick up by a towing service. In this situation a watch, if brought along, can be consulted at the appropriate time and in the meantime left in the pack.

That the Boundary Waters does not require measurement of time says something about different types of wilderness and their respective demands. In the Boundary Waters, not having to rely on measured time is a luxury we can afford and will appreciate. Leave the watch behind and there will follow a deep experience of slow life that will take you beyond the sense of being in a different country to being in a different world—from different customs to different consciousness. It is a way of transformation that occurs by means of less not more, by reducing to a pristine state of being “time out of mind.”

With the advent of devices as basic as the sundial, designed simply to parse the course of the sun into commensurate segments, efficiency ascended the throne and a new mode of existence came into being for the ancient world. Consciousness shifted from simply being to becoming, as society began to beat with a different, more accelerated heart. Under the rule of measured time, which fostered greater awareness of the passing of time and provided a means to budget it, people got busier. An immediate result was greater productivity, which has been the fly wheel of human civilization ever since. That it has also improved civilization is undeniable. A quick survey of the innumerable benefits at our fingertips will confirm this. Undoubtedly, humanity has

advanced with the introduction of measured time, but not without sacrificing something in return.

Something fundamental to our nature is crippled by measuring time, and may be the source of much discontent in the civilized world, although we may not realize it until we discover a place to live without it. In fact, the first indication of something lost is a certain satisfaction that comes from living without measured time. This satisfaction may be what draws millions of people every year out of civilized life and into wild places like the Boundary Waters. It comes from the recovery of that which artificial time has taken away: our ability to enjoy fully the present moment.

Every summer I bring a group of college students through Anoka Ramsey Community College on a one-week excursion into the Boundary Waters. They receive some college credit and, more importantly, an indelible learning experience. Most of the students are brand new to the Boundary Waters, so shaping their approach to wilderness camping is one of the major objectives of the course. To this end, the other instructor, Brett Larson, and I agreed without hesitation to forbid watches or other time pieces so students would be able to feel what it's like to live time out of mind. As a result of this approach, students thrive on the experience, cleaving both to nature and each other.

The one exception to this came on a particular trip that, although by no means a disaster, was marred by tension which eventually erupted into open conflict. The dissension was due to several factors that fed off each other to form a potent brew of trouble waiting for a place to happen. Chief among them were some strong personalities and the existence of a single wrist watch.

The potential for personality conflict is constant whenever a group of people unacquainted with one another are thrown together for a week of intimately-shared living space. But when that space consists of Boundary Waters wilderness, the persistent requirement of laboring every day and cherishing every night usually has a bonding effect. When people see what they can accomplish by pulling together and sharing the load, differences of personality don't rear their ugly heads. Instead, a harmonious dynamic sets and carries the day, but it is not invincible. As I have come to learn, it can be unraveled.

The watch made its appearance due to the insistence of one student who claimed a need to take a certain medication at an exact time every evening. I was reluctant to cave in but felt I had no choice given the medical nature of the request. The concession was granted, but in return I insisted that any indication of time be kept private; I didn't want to ever hear what time it was. She agreed, and it seemed at the time like a good compromise, but I underestimated the insidious nature of measured time.

The noticeable difference had to do with pace. The canoe that had the watch was always out in front: the first on the water, the first in paddling and the first to reach a destination, whether portage or campsite. Meanwhile, the three other canoes, which were time out of mind, assumed a much slower pace and stayed together. On this particular trip, with relatively short distances to cover, there was no need to hurry. Winds permitting, we could ease into a smooth and languid stroke, soaking up the scenery—except for the canoe that was moving to the beat of artificial time. The lack of cohesion seemed harmless at first, but as is the case with any

kind of disharmony, it set in motion a contrary ripple effect.

Tension was evident whenever the two in the first canoe had to wait for the rest of us to arrive at a portage. Often the wait was productive. By the time the other three canoes pulled in, the first canoe and its contents would already be ferried to the other end. But there were times when the slower group would indulge in a meaningful distraction, like random exploration, leaving the occupants of the first canoe—which was usually well out of range of sound and sometimes sight—to sit at a portage with nothing to do except look at the watch and wonder what was taking us so long.

One morning we were heading to a portage at the end of a long channel connecting two small lakes. The first canoe was already a fair distance up the channel and out of sight by the time the rest of us reached the opening where the channel broached the lake with its rocky gates. On one side we noticed four empty canoes from another party pulled up on shore and could hear gleeful cries coming from somewhere inland.

We *had* to investigate. One of our canoes pulled into shore and an intrepid scout went out. We watched him pick his way up a tree-flecked slope toward the sound of the voices until he disappeared into the forest. In a short time he came back into view, high atop a stone ledge that overlooked the channel and signaled us with a wave. His face was one big smile as he cupped his hands around his mouth and made his clarion call, “Cliff jumping!”

We shot to shore, slipped life vests on and clambered up the slope, leveraging hands and feet on the slender trees exploiting cracks of life in the rock. Once on top we discovered a playground occupied by

a group of boy scouts and a couple of troop leaders, leaping from a 30-foot perch into the channel. We asked if we could play. From an academic standpoint, it was an exercise in fear and exhilaration; from a human standpoint, it was pure fun.

By the time our lesson in frolic ended, the sun was drifting into the western sky as we proceeded to the portage. When we got there the first canoe was placidly resting in the water on the other side, loaded and ready to depart, while its occupants sat pensively nearby on some rocks. We boasted to them about our cliff jumping episode. They boasted to us about their relaxing wait, but their faces told a different story.

Open conflict seemed just a matter of time. It came on the last day of the trip as we were heading for the vans parked on Round Lake. The first portage of the day was formidable—from Tuscarora to Missing Link—and had everyone intimidated by its 363-rod length. As we paddled into the bay harboring the portage, the message went out from me to take it easy. Put the load down and rest whenever the need arose because we had the whole day to reach the vans.

Everyone welcomed this advice except for the one student in the fast boat who repeatedly made mention of his hope for an 8 p.m. appointment with his wife. His attachment to schedule had the scent of trouble.

When we landed at the portage, he was in hot pursuit of the end, his sights trained on the future. Unfortunately for him, the others didn’t see it the same way. Their focus was on the here and now of making it across this monster portage. The different points of view were like hot wind and dry wood; all that was needed was a single spark for tempers to blaze.

It came in the form of an untimely word of “encouragement” from the student in a hurry to another student who had stopped to rest on the trail. Emotions escalated as fast as it took fingers to point at each other and epithets flew as an ugly scene slashed across the beauty of the forest. Although not surprised by what happened, I was, nevertheless, embarrassed by the lapse in decorum. When the dust settled I ordered the two students to work it out themselves, and I pledged to myself that from now on the “no watch” rule would be absolute.

The turbulence brought on by the watch reveals how mere perception of time affects our conception not only of the space we occupy, but also the identity we assume. By measuring time we become preoccupied with the future and lose appreciation of the present, which is seen more in terms of its utility as a tool to be used to shape and direct the future. Far less is the present used for sheer enjoyment or getting lost in like one does when engrossed in meaningful labor, deep play or contemplation.

Although measured time may answer deep human needs for security and pay a handsome reward with respect to prosperity, it does so by putting us into debt. When the full bloom of the here and now is ignored, we starve another part of our human nature just as vital to our well-being as security and prosperity. It is the part we share with a former humanity and dare not lose; one that traces back to the origins of human consciousness, both in our ancestors and ourselves, connecting us to the worlds of pre-civilization and our own childhood. It is the ability to live in the moment, which nourishes our sense of wonder.

We can live without wonder, in fact most of us learn to do so as we become adults, but we

live in a state of depletion. With our gaze fixed on the future, we live to plan and strive for what we wish to become; this contributes greatly to our material well-being, but not our entire well-being. We need also simply to BE: to take stock of who we are and what we have, to practice insight more than oversight, to recognize the interdependence of all things, to be aware of our footsteps, to follow the whim of the moment and to break through the veil of familiarity of things so life's simple gifts can regain their poetic and moral significance.

The act of simply being is an act of replenishment. It is coming again into possession of those childhood faculties that flourished in a simpler time when, without the imposition of measured time, we were prone to exist in each wonder-filled and curiosity-stirred moment. But the more we become informed by measured time and our schedules take over, the less we exercise wonderment and curiosity.

Simply being in the moment may still be possible, but it is inhibited and even discouraged as we grow under the regulation of measured time whose ticking clock beckons us, ever aware of time passing, to become something more or someone else. We need both being and becoming, but only the latter gets emphasized in the civilized world. Unless we can find a place where measured time takes a holiday, we risk estrangement from being—without which we can still flourish but not without discontent.

In order to keep ourselves whole, in touch with wonder and curiosity, we need to take the occasion to be time out of mind—to be liberated from always becoming and SIMPLY BE. For this we need wild places like the Boundary Waters.

Spending time there is like going back in time, in many ways living literally as our ancestors did thousands of years ago. But going into the Boundary Waters without measured time brings us back as far as we can go, to the very origins of humanity, when reality was perceived through a different lens. When, as Sigurd Olson proclaimed, we lived according to a “philosophy of earth-oneness” a sense of “being engulfed by something greater...a hush embedded in our consciousness.”

With this primitive existence comes simplification, which brings relief from not having so much to do, so many requisites tugging at you. It means spending more time on fewer tasks and performing them with more engagement, with the ability to get lost in them due to the absence of haste and constraint that come from measured time.

By living time out of mind we become more attached, not only to what we do, but where we are. We instill quality, both in the task and life in general. That is what simplification brings in its wake, quality. Indigenous peoples understand this well. Too much construction—intellectual, material and otherwise—detaches us from the sources of our well-being: the earth, air, water and fire that nurture us. Not long after that, we forget to care.

With no apparatus to measure time, we are deprived of the ability to slip a net over time—to mark it, to tell it or to make it. Time also loses its ability to do the same to us. Pace slackens and awareness deepens, allowing the natural surroundings to shape our minds and infiltrate our bodies. When time is put out of mind, the last walls of regulation fade and natural rhythm is all that remains. The cyclic and ever-balancing cadence of the elements—sun, moon, wind

and water—seeps into the void left by the vacancy of artificial time and pulls everything within reach into its bosom. True time is realized and eventually internalized. Union with natural splendor begins to resonate. Contentment reigns supreme.

The custom of carrying all your belongings wherever you travel in the Boundary Waters makes it a fool's paradise if you go in with too much weight. But it is well to remember there is practical weight and there is also psychological weight. Although watches and other timepieces may seem negligible in terms of practical weight, their full weight doesn't come from the material they are made of; it comes from the psychology that little bit of material generates.

The more measure there is of time, the more structure there is to it; the more structure to time, the more it weighs on the mind. Put simply: when we live according to measured time we assume a greater burden, one that expands the present into the future and can put the world on our shoulders if we let it.

Sometimes weight is worth it. It can be fantastically profitable to structure and organize the present in order to shape the future. But there is a need to be unburdened sometimes. There is a need to live more fully in the present moment, with the future discernible only from the position of the sun in the sky. This is life unencumbered and closer to the source, what Walt Whitman recognized as the “secret of the making of the best persons...to grow in the open air and to eat and sleep with the earth.” This is also why country like the Boundary Waters is so important to our well-being. It is one of the few places left where we can be time out of mind and live truly free. □