

It occurred to me and to Delaney that Time didn't used to be like this, that it is measured in the mind. Was it discovered or invented? Once, Time consisted of light and dark, warm and cold. Then we felt the need for hours. Why did we need them, and how did they change us? We have the Industrial Revolution to thank for minutes. And now we have seconds, milliseconds. What will Time be like in the future?

Questions provoke more questions. The world opens like a flower. Some things I learned while writing that scene: The brain consists of two hundred billion neurons and is the densest object in the universe. Some of those neurons recognize gender, others facial expression, mood, sound, etc. I learned that something can come from nothing, and that this *nothing* has a name—*virtual proton*. When light traverses an electron, it produces a particle of Time—a chronon. So then Time is matter! All because a young man stared at a clock. All because I sat and listened.*

* And I should add that I worked on this scene for weeks—first reading everything I could about Time and then writing a scene in which Delaney decides that he will live in this very minute and so determines to watch the second hand make its sixty-second sweep. And I wrote down everything he thought about in that minute. Some seconds take sentences, while other seconds pass in a phrase. In fact, here it is:

Delaney looked at the clock on the wall above the stove, waited for the sweep hand to reach twelve, and determined to be aware of every second for the next minute. The clock had a white, plastic, art deco-ish case, and a square white dial with rounded corners. The numerals on the face were black and chunky. The 1s wore little visors. The black hands looked like kitchen knives. A cook's knife and a boning knife. The red second hand began with a spade, looked like a drink stirrer. Three seconds had gone by. Four. No time, no verbs. Five. Who came up with this idea of seconds? How obsessive do we need to be, anyway? Wasn't it enough to measure duration by seasons, by moons, by suns? Does the unit of measurement change the nature of time? Doray Defroster. The name on the clock: Doray, like notes on a musical scale; the model name, Defroster, what a modern freezer's built to be. Alliterative and puzzling. Why is there a circle punched out of the face below the word Doray? Not a winding hole, of course, but meant to seem like one? At the bottom of the face: Telechron Movement. Well, there it is, isn't it? Space and time. Do we want the coordinating conjunction? Space-time. There. Simultaneous yet discrete. Like the idea of the three-personed God. Twenty-three seconds had passed, in the kitchen at any rate. Passed into what? Three-personed God, batter my heart, wasn't it? Who said that?

You can't live like this, in the minute as it were, alert to the passage of seconds. That would be like keeping a diary of every minute of your life, which life would amount to keeping a diary of every minute of your life. Maybe. Maybe all that time is is that which—that what which?—what idea which, that function which, that quantity which enables a date to be uniquely associated with any given event. Could time be like light, both a particle and a wave? Yes, what was it Clay Mercer said? A chronon—time becomes a particle when a photon crosses the diameter of an electron. Time possesses mass.

There couldn't be a beginning of time by definition; there could be nothing before time existed. No time before time. No time after time. Like a story, we live it forward, but understand it backward. Except that time has no direction. And eternity then? The awareness that time is fixed, that it's all an eternal present, and that everything and everyone always exists? Maybe this awareness is the heaven, the nirvana they talk about. But if we don't become aware of this while we're alive, what then? We're always alive? But are we always conscious when we're awake? Forty-five seconds. Almost finished. So much can transpire in f . . . ifty seconds. Fifty-one.

"Delaney, what are you doing?"

"Aunt Sudie, you scared a year off my span of life. I'm watching the clock."

The First Commandment of writing fiction is, *Sit Your Ass in the Chair.** And sit it there daily. Strap on a seat belt if you must, but sit. (Velcro slacks?)

Sudie looked at the clock, at her watch. "It's a minute fast."

Delaney turned. "Don't say that."

Delaney looked up and saw the second hand sweep past the black dots at seven seconds, eight seconds, then round the corner of the square and on to the numeral 2. He hadn't been able to keep his vigil after all. Not for the mistaken minute, and not now for the present minute.

I was so proud of my little scene and what I considered my clever insights. I tightened it up eventually and published the story, "This Is the Age of the Beautiful Death."

* And the other Nine Commandments are:

2. Thou Shalt Not Bore the Reader.
3. Remember to Keep Holy Your Writing Time.
4. Honor the Lives of Your Characters.
5. Thou Shalt Not Be Obscure.**
6. Thou Shalt Show and Not Tell.
7. Thou Shalt Steal.***
8. Thou Shalt Rewrite and Rewrite again. And again.
9. Thou Shalt Confront the Human Condition.
10. Be Sure That Every Death in a Story Means Something.

** If you have something to say, why would you make it difficult for someone to understand you? Could it be that you're not so smart? That you think if you muddy the water a bit, it'll seem deeper than it really is?

*** Artists who have weighed in on the Seventh Commandment:

Lionel Trilling: "Immature artists imitate—mature artists steal."

T. S. Eliot: "The immature poet imitates; the mature poet plagiarizes."

Igor Stravinsky: "A good composer does not imitate; he steals."

Stravinsky again: "One must always steal, but never from oneself."

Ralph Waldo Emerson: "Genius borrows nobly."

Wilson Mizner: "If you steal from one other, it's plagiarism; if you steal from many, it's research."

Pablo Picasso: "Bad artists copy; good artists steal."

Picasso again: "Copy anyone, but never copy yourself."

George Moore: "Taking something from one man and making it worse is plagiarism."

Thornton Wilder: "I do borrow from other writers shamelessly! I can only say in my defense, like the woman brought before the judge on a charge of kleptomania, 'I do steal, Your Honor, but only from the very best stores.'"

George Balanchine: "God creates, I do not create. I assemble and I steal from everywhere to do it from what I see, from what the dancers can do, from what others can do."

Josh Billings: "About the most originality that any writer can hope to achieve honestly is to steal with good judgment."

Archibald MacLeish: "A real writer learns from earlier writers the way a boy learns from an apple orchard by stealing what he has a taste for and can carry off."

Alexander Pope: "Most authors steal their works, or buy."

Philip Johnson: "Creativity is selective copying."

John Updike: "My purpose in reading has ever secretly been not to come and judge, but to come and steal."

Michael Caine: "I only steal from the best people."

Lawrence Durrell: "I pinch."