

MY LIFE IS MY TIME –

EXISTENTIAL CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT THE CONCEPT OF “TIMING”

**Lecture at 40th North European Conference for Pastoral Psychologists,
Pastors, Physicians, Therapists and Counsellors, 4 – 8 January 2012**

MARIANN HAGBARTH, licensed psychologist and psychotherapist

The theme for this conference is taken from the book of Ecclesiastes, Chapter 3 verse 1:

There is a time for every purpose under heaven.

I continued reading the chapter and found an interesting message further on. In verse 11 we can read: Everything that God has made is beautiful in the right moment. God has also laid down eternity in the hearts of all human beings, but in a way that we cannot fully comprehend it.

This is a wonderful message and I could really stop here. But I will try to add some human reflections to our theme of “time”, being aware that none of us can ever fully embrace it.

Many years ago I had a night-dream where the Swedish film director Ingmar Bergman met a young man. Ingmar Bergman said he should start a film project and asked the young man to help him and then said: Do you have time? The young man answered: My life is my time. This dream had a great influence on me and still has.

Regardless of personal interpretations, the dream says something very important about the concept of “time”, namely that it is and has to be completely intertwined with the concept of “life”. Time is a boundary surrounding the life we live in this material world. A special date tell us when we where born, another exact date will be the day we die. There between is our lifetime. For some it will be short, for others very long.

But I am sure it is not the length that one day will judge what importance our life had or what difference we made. So when talking about time we also must include some other concepts like “quality”, “content”, “meaning” and “responsibility”. This leads inevitably to serious challenges that we meet when making our life-choices.

My life is my time - is a clear answer to the two people in my dream. The young man is offering the older film director his time and in the same moment also part of his life. And this is what we all are doing all the time. We give of our lives in different ways. There is no time

without some kind of content. Even when we are asleep we are busy, even when we meditate our bodies are into something. And during ordinary waking time we are doing a lot of things. And I guess it is here that the concept of “timing” gives us a meaning.

Timing and the first verse in Ecclesiastes suggests that there are some moments in life more suitable for doing some sort of things and other moments better for other business. This can be understood in a chronological manner like going to school at an early age and rest a little more in old age and so on. It also means that during some parts of our lives we are more happy than on other, more sad days, one day receiving a newborn baby, another day the opposite, losing a loved one.

Timing can also be understood as comparable with what is called synchronicity. The most well-known situation is when an old friend after a long time calls you on the telephone at exactly the same time as you were planning to do so. Something is obviously going on somewhere in the atmosphere that we cannot completely understand or control. Two or more events coincide in a way that cannot be explained only by reason or by chance.

The concept of synchronicity makes life much more interesting. When in October I was asked to come here today my first reaction was to say “no” because the timing in my schedule was really one of the worst. Then I thought this was so funny when the focus was to be just timing that I said “yes” anyway. So the reason that I am here today is not because of chronos but of kairos. As soon as I had accepted the invitation a flow of thoughts started running through my mind. It gave me an opportunity for new reflections, so thank you for that.

So the question of timing is embedded in a more profound context. What do I do with my life? How do I use my life? How do my life and time connect with others I meet on this road?

I who am standing here talking now and you out there listening to me are sharing a similar existential destiny. Not in the sense of having exactly the same kind of experiences of course, but in the meaning of being men or women on this earth at this particular time of history. We are already timed together like we are timed together with our families, children and all other people we meet, including our patients.

I use the word “patient” for those coming to me for seeking help. The word means the one who is patient and I think that is just what they need to be, patient with me, with themselves and with the process they start when going in psychotherapy. Most of them hopes that the process will go quickly in a couple of hours and I let them believe so, partly because not even I can know what time this particular person needs. Sometimes they stay for almost a lifetime, sometimes one hour is enough. This means that we cannot compare the chronos time with kairos time. In shorter than a second a whole life can change, and some people tend to live to 90 without any major developments shown.

We have a choice, and not only one, to say yes or no to our destiny and now I might sound like an old-fashioned preacher. But I am convinced that each and every one of us has some special purpose for being here endowed with exactly the kind of talents needed for this work to be done. We can call it finding our true selves, but just finding is not enough. Then comes the more exciting part, namely to let this light shine out into the world surrounding us. And this I think is a continuing process where we influence each other in two directions, both giving and receiving. For better or for worse. We do not always give each other good things but we can struggle in that direction.

When meeting patients the same kind of reciprocal influence occurs. Here I will mention the inequality relationship that can occur between the person seeking help and the one supposedly giving this help. As therapists it can be tempting to misuse this situation of power that the people coming often want to give us. I think it is important that as soon as possible make clear that we are on this journey together as existentially equal human beings, sharing some parts of our respective lifetimes with each other. I have some knowledge in psychology or theology and capacity for empathy and listening that the other person needs. But the true knowledge about the other person’s life lies entirely inside the heart and mind of the one we meet.

So when speaking about timing in therapy we should not fall into the trap of believing that we have some almighty form of insight that we can deliver at a time that we decide the patient is mature enough to receive it. This could be disastrous to both parties. Maybe what I say interferes with things you learnt in your psychotherapeutic training. I will try to explain myself a little better. Of course we can have some ideas about what the patient’s problems

are and how he or she got them and so on. And of course we should keep these to ourselves in the beginning, especially since they can very well prove to be wrong later on.

We need to be curious, open-minded and humble when judging what we hear. To have like a meditative blank mind and just receive what the other person gives us. This does not mean being silent, we can be very talkative, but being empty in mind. When having this kind of attitude we also show the patients more trust in their own capacity of finding themselves and their own solutions.

What happens then to the concept of “timing” in therapy? I here want to introduce another necessary concept and that is “presence”. When you are following your patient in a total presence by really being there with your true self the timing will come by itself as a natural consequence. And you will not even think about it. But if your mind is occupied by thinking about making the right timing the opposite will occur. You will lose it. The time will disappear while you are busy preparing your perfect timing of an excellent insight-offering to your patient. Why will this not work? Because you are making it your own job and not allowing it to be what it should be – something that happens in the meeting between the two of you.

It requires not a special gift nor a long experience or training – but your total presence – the gift of your time at that special moment - and this in itself creates an atmosphere where the other person dares to share their innermost secrets with you and healing can take place. Forget about yourself and you will be there. The only thing you need to think about regarding time is when to end the session because you have probably someone else waiting there for you.

Regarding ending I will also say something about the length of a therapy. In training we are usually told that it is very important to make the start and the end clear already when beginning the process. After 35 years of working with human beings I am more and more convinced that this is not a good idea. Neither I nor the patient can, when we first meet, know where our work will take us. I prefer an open-end model and book a couple of hours or six months at a time. Then we will see.

I will give you some examples from my practice. The shortest therapy I ever had lasted one hour. I was very young at that moment. The patient was a middle-aged man. He was sent to me from a physician. His problem was that his eyes were constantly wet and nobody could explain why. Many doctors had for many years tried to help him, thinking it was something wrong with his tear-channels.

Immediately I got into very good contact with the man. Soon he started telling me his life story and I just sat there listening. He was an orphan who had been brought up in different foster families and institutions. He had been shuffled around more like a package than a human being. He couldn't remember much love and caring. It had been more a matter of hard work and different kind of abuses. He talked almost without interruption and during the whole time his eyes were overwhelmed by tears. They were constantly falling down his cheeks but he didn't mind but just went on telling me his terrible story.

In my head I thought this man really needs a long therapy. When the hour was finished I said we should look for a new time. What for? He asked looking very surprised. I have told you everything and I feel so relieved. Nobody ever asked me before. I am so glad you listened to me. He was smiling all over his face and the tears had stopped falling. He shook my hand with both of his big hands for a long time. Then he left the room and never came back. I have still not forgotten him and probably he still remembers me if he is alive. He should be around 85 now. I should really want to know what happened later but I can guess he finally found happiness in life. And that he didn't need to consult any more physicians regarding his wet eyes.

Being there one hour for someone can make that kind of a difference.

I will tell you about a young man who has been seeing me for seven years. He came as a teenager and I have had the privilege of seeing him grow up into a handsome and self-confident man. He still pops in to make a visit now and then. My practice could also have a sign outside saying "drop in" like the hairdressers have.

A couple of years ago he became very worried about how long he could go on seeing me. I told him he could come as long as he wanted and needed. This answer didn't satisfy him and he asked when I was going to retire. I went on telling him I will always have time for my old patients as long as I live since I see them as my very good friends.

Standing at the doorstep to leave my room he still looked troubled. At that moment I suddenly heard myself saying: And even when I die I will come and watch over you. His face burst out into one of the greatest laughs I have ever heard. He came back, gave me a big hug and said: OK, I feel safe. Since that moment his worries of being abandoned have never come back. He has a girlfriend now and can look forward to a good life even without his old therapist.

What did I do with that comment coming suddenly and spontaneously from within? I broke the time-limit that threatens us all so much in this life and introduced eternity. I think I gave him the message that love is eternal, it has no ending. My love for him will always follow him and give him inner strength regardless of me being there physically or not.

And as I am a very religious person I am convinced that the light that suddenly flashed through my room that moment came from the existence outside of time, from the one who is and always will be, whether we call him God or not. As we read in Ecclesiastes 3, verse 11: God has laid down eternity in the hearts of all human beings. Even if we cannot fully comprehend it we can experience it and feel it like lightning in darkness. It is when we allow our inner well of love and compassion to come out and meet the true well of the other person that miracles can happen. Let it flow out! Don't put a lot of garbage inside, or even worse, put a cover on top.

As I said earlier some of my patients have kept coming now and then during most of their lives. I will tell you something about a woman who died last year. She was then around 60. She came to me for the first time 30 years ago because she and her husband couldn't have a baby. After some time they adopted two nice children. She came and showed them to me one at a time as they arrived; they are now between 20 and 25.

Two years ago she told me she had been diagnosed with cancer and was very sad and worried. She started coming more frequently again and I supported her as much as I could in her struggle. At one period during her life she was also participating in one of my dream groups so she was well acquainted with working with her dreams. This became a good help for her these difficult years.

I will tell you something about her last dream. It was a nightmare and a man was running after her and she was very scared. I also use a method called symbol drama where you can

continue a dream in your fantasy and this we did. I asked her to stop and turn around and look at the man. It was a giant but when she focused on his eyes he become smaller and more normal in size. He said to her: Your time is measured. She answered: But I need more time. How much? Like this she said, showing with her arms in the room, like a balloon. Oh, said the man. Then she sat down by a tree and the man sat by another tree, waiting. Afterwards she said to me: he can sit and wait there. Both of us knew she had been talking with death. This became our last session. Two weeks later she died during an operation.

I went to the funeral and at the memory ceremony I told her family and friends about her dream. I ended by saying that finally she got just what she wanted, endless time as she was flying away in her balloon into heaven. I met her family after the funeral and showed them all her paintings and dreams and this helped them a lot in their mourning.

At some moments we face situations where we have to make a choice regarding to whom we shall give our time. I will tell you about one such experience. At the bottom floor of my house there is a restaurant. The owner is a nice lady called Flora. One day when I was rushing to meet a supervision group in the city I found her standing crying in the door. What has happened, Flora? I asked. My brother was murdered yesterday, she answered.

It took me less than a second to decide where I needed to be the next minutes. We went inside and she told all about what had happened, how the beloved brother had come in the way of some fighting groups of young men and got killed. I tried as best I could to listen and give some comfort. After some time she became a little more calm and I went, much delayed, to see my supervision group. They understood my reason for coming late and agreed that I had made the right choice regarding my time at this moment.

To end my lecture I will tell you a short dream that a woman whom I have in supervision sent me as a New Year's greeting this year. She was dreaming of a woman walking in a desert. The woman is carrying herself in her arms. It is a baby-boy coming from universe. The woman is surrounded by light and the protection from God on her way home. Like the woman in this wonderful dream I wish that we all will protect our children that come from the universe and carry them out in the world.

The most valuable gift we can give to each other is our time. So thank you for sharing this moment of your lives with me.