



Thoughts from Linda:

*Saving Time*  
*Discovering a Life Beyond the Clock*

by Jenny Odell  
2023

*Time* magazine's March 27<sup>th</sup> edition included an article entitled *Clock Wise* by Lily Rothman, Managing Editor, who focused on how the three years of pandemic living and afterthought have influenced and are revealing the ways we think about and relate to the concept of time itself. This article made numerous references to the work of Jenny Odell and her new book, *Saving Time*, published this year.

Jenny Odell is a new author who achieved acclaim in 2019 for her previous *New York Times* bestseller, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*, which found a readership among numerous people wanting to find ways to live better lives in our productivity-focused Western world. She is an American multidisciplinary artist, writer, and educator who lives and writes in Oakland, California. She taught at Stanford University from 2013 to 2021, focusing on topics that included creativity on the internet, art, and digital/physical design.

In her latest book, she focuses on how individuals in Western society relate to a conventional concept of time, as it is the "water in which we swim." She offers a vast history of the concept and numerous alternative ways to think about time itself in this very well-researched book.

She noted in the interview for the article in *Time* that the COVID-19 experience did not initially drive her motivations. Still, she revealed that her interest was sparked and accelerated by it. She observed that after the pandemic experience, many have discovered/re-discovered more thoughtful and human ways to think about and experience time. Before 2020, she says she noticed just how many people mentioned to her that they wanted to "just do nothing" but "couldn't find the time for that." This paradoxical comment seems to be a corollary to the same sentiment that finds so many

“rushing to practice yoga” and is in itself quite a commentary on the inherited Protestant work ethic as well as our modern world and the time crunch we often feel.

The book is divided into seven chapters: *Whose Time, Whose Money, Self-Timer, Can There Be Leisure, Putting Time Back in Its Place, A Change of Subject, Uncommon Times*, and *Life Extension*. Her *Conclusion* is entitled *Halving Time*. A reader herself, she references many other writers, and the book is educational for their contributions as well as for her own. You’ll learn about Robin Wall Kimmerer and her classic book, *Gathering Moss*, and how moss is a tool for measuring time by “laying down a record” thanks to the way the leaves take in chemicals from their surroundings. She explains the concept of leisure and work-life balance outlined by the German-Catholic philosopher Josef Pieper in his 1948 book, *Leisure, the Basis of Culture*. He posits that time is horizontal, a pattern of forward-leaning labor time punctuated by brief moments of rest so that we will be rested and capable of more work.

Odell takes us through the history of time management and the ‘time is money’ paradigm of the industrial age. She tells a full story in the chapter, *Whose Time, Whose Money?* about the early concept of ‘clocking into and out of work’ as displayed in the 1936 movie *Modern Times*. She tackles the idea of ‘wage work’ and explains the concept’s origins and early reactions to it.

The movie is an excellent representation of assembly-line work and, I suspect, served as an example for the famous Lucy and Ethel chocolate assembly line story in *I Love Lucy*. As Odell notes about *Modern Times*, “The very first image in the film is that of a clock—severe, rectangular, and filling the entire screen behind the title credits. Then a shot of sheep being herded fades into a view of workers exiting the subway and heading to work at ‘Electro Steel Corp.’” This early movie stars Charlie Chaplin as The Tramp, where he plays a worker caught in the automation nightmare as ‘bosses’ drive the workers to do more and more in a punishing and ever-intensifying process. He works on an assembly line there, frantically trying to screw nuts into pieces of machinery, falling behind when he must scratch an itch or is distracted by a bee flying around his face.

In a comically tragic set of scenes, he cannot break the habit or motions of his job, even as he goes to the restroom. He tries to smoke a cigarette only to hear a boss call, “Hey, quit stalling! Get back to work!” To increase productivity (a topic she examines thoroughly), the company experiments with the inventor’s device, The Billows Feeding Machine. A promotional brochure says it is the “timesaving, practical device which automatically feeds your men while at work. Don’t stop for lunch! Be ahead of your competitor. The Billows Feeding Machine will eliminate the lunch hour.” In the movie, a

corn cob feeder goes berserk, and the rotator slams the spinning cob into the Tramp's face repeatedly in one of the most comical scenes of the early film. This clip is available today on YouTube in a four-minute video. And, of course, it makes a key point in the early thinking of 'time as money.'

This book covers a lot of territory and is a most interesting read, with terrific examples and stories, both old and new. She takes us through concepts of time in ancient Greece, including explaining the two Greek words for time: *chronos* and *kairos*. You'll learn about Sandford Fleming, an engineer who, in 1879, proposed international time zones for the first time. He suggested that everyone on Earth observe a "cosmic day," as he called it, within one of twenty-four time zones starting at Greenwich, England, where the prime meridian had been established a few years earlier. You'll read about Frederick Winslow Taylor and his 1911 book *Principles of Scientific Management* and better understand the early impact of this treatise. She tackles the philosophers and physicists and introduces the reader to the French philosopher Henri Bergson's 1907 book, *Creative Evolution*. Bergson contended time was duration—something creating, developing, and somewhat mysterious, as opposed to abstract and measurable. According to him, all problems conceiving the true nature of time stemmed from wanting to imagine discrete moments sitting side by side in space. He further noted that this was not a concrete environmental space but something purely conceptual. She takes us on a long journey of understanding rocks, and the impact of timefulness in environmental space, through the works of Marcia Bjornerud.

As Odell writes, "This book is not a practical means for making more time in the immediate sense—not because I don't think that's a worthwhile topic, but because my background is in art, language, and ways of seeing. What you will find here are conceptual tools for thinking about what 'your time' has to do with the time you live in. Rather than despairing at the increasing dissonance among clocks, between the personal and the seemingly abstract, between the everyday and the apocalyptic, I want to dwell in that dissonance for a moment. I started thinking about this book before the pandemic, only to watch those years render time strange for so many people by upending its usual social and economic contours. If anything good can come out of that experience, perhaps it is an expansion upon doubt. Simply as a gap in the known, doubt can be the emergency exit that leads somewhere else."

She focuses much of the book on systemic issues and power in relationship to the concept of and use of time. She also connects time to more significant questions and her interest in macro topics such as human justice and the climate crisis. Indeed, as the article in *Time* noted, she is not alone in her interest in the world of time. Ruth Ogden,

an experimental psychologist at Liverpool John Moores University who has been studying the perception of time for many years, noted that she had only been asked for one interview over the past few decades. And now, in the wake of the global pandemic, she has recently received over 100 requests for interviews. The EU sponsored the first International Conference on Timing and Time Perception was held in Corfu, Greece, in 2014. Today, there are 32 contributors to the “Blursday database” which compiles survey results from over 3,000 people in nine countries who are asked about their experience of time, specifically during the COVID pandemic.

We know from this research that isolation makes time drag. And Odell also realized the impact of the relationship to time in her research. She came out of the project of writing this book focusing on a kind of mindfulness marked by “a loving, curious, fascinated feeling of interest in time,” as she puts it. She said she wants to be “living in the now without thinking about it so much that it can’t be enjoyed; seeing time as a series of moments, each as rich as the meaning we put into it.” She found that balance of nature, in collective actions and friendship—is key to defining time as both the context for and the output of relationships.

This book examines common assumptions and educates in evocative, exciting, and energizing ways. You should ‘take the time’ to read this one. It is well worth it!