

THE AGE OF INTERRUPTION

by Michael Ventura

Psychotherapy Networker January/February 1995

Time is the medium in which we live. It is the psychological, mental and emotional air we breathe; and, like air, it is transmuted within us and becomes us. There is inner time -- our personal sense of the rhythms of time, experienced differently by each of us; and there is imposed time - the regimented time by which society organizes itself, the time of schedules and deadlines, time structured largely by work and commerce. These two times, inner and imposed, rarely jibe anymore, and the painful tension between them is one of the core psychological realities of our era.

Today, parents' lives are a frantic maze of chores as they clean, shop, cook, ferry the kids, often while working full- or part-time. Breadwinners wake early, commute in traffic, work at jobs whose rhythms are determined by others, and commute back home, exhausted and distracted, to an equally fatigued and distracted mate. Children rarely see either parent in a relaxed setting, and they find their daily lives run by school schedules and peer pressures. Families try to meld entirely different sets of imposed time into a livable shared life while each member privately feels that his or her inner sense of rhythm is being violated. When, as often happens, they take this sense of violation out on each other and on themselves, then the overwhelming social demands on their time can translate into a private hell. Millions of private hells.

At this point, many seek, or are often driven into, therapy -- and time becomes the therapist's dilemma as well. But we have no psychology of time. Psychotherapy has not analyzed an individual's relationship to time as it has, say, an individual's relationship to a parent. There are no maps. We must begin to make one.

In the beginning was the railroad -- the beginning, that is, of today's experience of time. In the 1880s, railroad interests (in that era, America's most potent business power) pressured the federal government to divide the country into time zones. Before this, 3:00 p.m. in San Francisco did not correspond to any particular time in New York, much less England and China. In fact, 3:00 p.m. in any city was only roughly coordinated even within the city limits. There was no place to call for a central reference point -- there weren't any telephones to call with.

Coordination was largely a matter of bells and whistles. The factory whistle would blow, the town-hall clock would chime, and, if they felt like it, people would set their house clocks and pocket watches accordingly. Absolute precision wasn't expected, nor, for most endeavors, was it needed; 20 minutes either way was, in most instances, no big deal.

The concept of being "late" was still foreign to daily life, except in factories. Shops and crafts were local, self-employed affairs, not dependent on daily deliveries or maintenance services, opening and closing according to the flow of the community. Local travel was by foot and horse -- modes not lending themselves to precise measurement. Going from one place to another afforded people what would seem to us luxurious intervals of personal time. The faces one saw along the way were usually familiar, and people greeted one another and often stopped for conversation. In fact, not to engage in a bit of conversation in passing was considered rude. Most people didn't need to make

“appointments,” as we know them now. Schedules were for railroads, not individuals.

The railroads, on the other hand, had the telegraph. Telegraph lines followed the rails the way telephone lines later followed highways. In most towns, the telegraph station and the railroad station were one and the same, and the two together (combined with river traffic and ports) constituted the basic infrastructure of America. The telegraph followed the tracks, train stations were in constant communication, so trains ran on time. As the railroads became more and more crucial to all forms of commerce, first factories and, by degrees, everyone else, had to conform to railroad schedules. Time began to be standardized.

The railroad and telegraph were continental operations, and conceived the concept of time zones to coordinate those operations from coast to coast. They imposed the concept on the entire country. America was still a nation of farmers. Roughly 80% of the population was rural -- large families confined (and not too pleasantly confined, if their photographs are any indication) in isolated houses, often miles from one another and miles from town. Family farming was the country’s biggest industry, but it was a decentralized way of life, a way of life still counting time in the ancient manner: by sunrises, sunsets, and the seasons.

But even as the largest industry, decentralized family farmers couldn’t compete for influence with the concentrated power of the railroads, or with comparatively new industries, like steel. As the rails became more and more crucial to agricultural commerce, farmers had to coordinate their sense of time with the railroads; their produce had to be ready at a certain time in order to get to a certain market. Knowing exactly what time it was became a commercial necessity. So rural America became subject to what, until then, only factory workers had to contend with: commercialized time.

The commercialization of time completed its domination of American life in the 1920s, with the advent of radio. Suddenly, there was a radio in most homes. Families, whose rhythms had revolved around mealtimes and work, now lived their evenings around their favorite broadcasts. Even bedtimes (which, when you consider are it, are intimate moments, and used to happen when people were tired) were altered to accommodate broadcast times.

Thus, from 1880 to 1930 (a brief moment in the history of cultural evolution), there was a fundamental shift. With local enterprise increasingly dependent on the rails, with first the telegraph and then radio unifying the continent through instantaneous communication (as well as the advent of the telephone, a major appliance found everywhere), the flexible time of the past became the more rigid time sense we know now, a time sense originating in the demands of continental commerce. Personal time had succumbed to a sense of time measured with money.

By 1950, when even more wide-spread television viewing and what we now call the “media” became such an overwhelming force, the standardization of work laws combined with the Social Security Act to utterly change how Americans viewed their lifetimes -- literally, the *time* of their lives. It was assumed, with a depth of conviction that cannot be exaggerated, that a person (in 1950, usually a man) would enter the work force between the ages of 18 and 22; would work eight-hour days, five days a week, for approximately 45 years, and would retire at 65 to live out his days on a government stipend. All aspects of family life -- marriage, child rearing and education, for instance -- were now seen within this framework. Aspirations and activities that couldn’t fit within

the limits of this schedule -- this sense of time -- came to be deemed impossible, if not unnatural.

Every year, there would be approximately 100 “days off” for weekends and holidays, and another 14 days off for “vacation time,” leaving 251 days for work. Weekends were seen as essential rest in order to make work possible, and could therefore be viewed as part of work-time, since work wasn’t conceivable without rest. Vacations were the only truly discretionary periods. In 26 years, then, one amassed one year of one’s own, dispensed in 26 pieces. In the 45 years of expected worktime, a worker was allotted roughly one year and eight months of truly personal time. Those numbers are the measure of how little personal time was valued. What was taken for granted by 1950 was the concept that has come to define America: *Time is money*.

For us, time is a commodity, bought, sold, packaged, and rationed. Vacation time, sick time, time off for good behavior, time valued at a market rate (minimum wage), time over which one has no control, nor even any input. Thus, the fundamental assumption most Americans now share about time is that forces completely out of our reach both define and determine our time.

It is very difficult for people to claim the power to alter their lives when such a crucial element as time -- their time -- is perceived as being beyond their control.

When you step back a moment and view this in the light of how human beings lived for eons, it seems extraordinary -- an incredible relinquishing of power and choice. One’s life is now neatly compartmentalized into work and leisure, youth and age, public and private -- and all viewed as seemingly predetermined. Actually, it’s completely arbitrary.

It’s been well-documented, for instance, that before the Industrial Age, most people had much more time “to themselves,” as we now say. In town and village life, for instance, it was common for several people in a family to play musical instruments together. In small communities, both in aboriginal and developed societies, good storytellers were highly prized. In tribal societies, individuals spent a great deal of time fashioning personal art, both for their clothing and their rituals. In fact, scholars agree that many tribal peoples needed to work only 15 to 20 hours a week to sustain themselves. Time was experienced as enormously flexible, within the inevitable passing of days and seasons.

It is crucial for therapists to understand this history because that’s the only way to realize that the common American perception of time is a systemic and intended alternation of the personal time sense as it was experienced everywhere for eons; and that this alteration was accomplished with only one rationale -- money. It is equally important to realize that the concept of time-measured-by-money is unique (and therefore arbitrary) to our industrial techno culture, and came about in a collective way to accommodate commerce on a scale that had never before been engaged. Only when we realize this can we understand the almost universal, usually nonverbal, feeling of injustice, of victimization, of being deprived of something intimate and crucial -- one’s own time.

In America, the average working couple (with children) spends only *20 minutes a day* sharing time together. Is it surprising that this couple has difficulty communicating? Or that they feel less and less intimate as the years go on? Or that one half of these marriages end in divorce? When you consider the demands on their time, it’s obvious that

a major source of disorientation and anger experienced within families is quite literally a matter of how they spend their time, and thus is not *personal* or *familial* at its root. So it is not something that the analysis of family patterns can reveal or heal. On the contrary, assuming a family source for something that is not, at its root, familial, can only lead, in the long run, to confusion and bad or ineffective therapy.

Hours are artificial constructs; moments are not. The measurement of what we can an “hour” has taken on enormous importance since we began to measure our work, and our value, by the hour -- a practice barely a century old. People who are paid \$4 an hour are not valued, and do not value themselves, as highly as people who are paid \$20 an hour; people paid \$20 an hour are treated differently, and often treat themselves differently, than people paid \$100 an hour. So the issues of class and self-worth are intimately linked to the issue of time and to the uniquely American idea that “Time is money.” Self-worth, then, is a crucial element in the life of families.

Every man and woman in America wakes each day with a price on his or her head -- the precise price at which their time is valued. Many perceive this as *the* dominant, determining factor of their lives. Once there was pride in being a good, lifelong waiter, bricklayer, mechanic, steel worker, cook, etc. The fact that these tasks paid less than others was compensated by a general, culture-wide respect for work well done. That respect and self-worth have been eroded as the concept that “Time is money” has become more overbearing and as the prospect of a lifelong job becomes more rare. As all therapists know, it is difficult to tend someone’s problems, or to help them tend themselves, when there is no firm reference point for self-worth. That is what it’s like to wake with a price on one’s head.

In European-American families, the price on the father’s head is almost always more than the price on the mother’s; in African-American families, it’s often the reverse. Thus, forces beyond their reach have determined that one’s time is more valuable than the other’s, that one’s hours are measured differently than the other’s. This practice is so integral to our society that we take for granted how deeply this measurement reaches into us, and that what is really being measured is what other eras have called “the soul,” an individual’s intrinsic sense of self. We also tend to take for granted the sense of violation engendered by this measurement and the anger that results -- an anger that inevitably is expressed in the home.

A high-school student, for instance, who knows very well that he or she is bound for a dead-end or insecure job (if, indeed, a job can be found at all) *must* be frightened and angry. It would be unnatural to feel anything else. That anger translates into hostile children beyond their parents’ influence. In extreme situations, it translates into drugs, crime and violence. These children know very well that they have a price on their heads, that they will be measured by “Time is money.” They know that their unskilled time is considered virtually valueless, and they feel the violation of this measurement intimately, and express it intimately.

It’s rare to find anyone today who thinks they have “enough time” for what confronts them in a day -- though our lives are filled with devices invented to “save time.” These devices don’t really save time; they merely shorten tasks. A task that took hours now may take only minutes, or even seconds, but those hours aren’t “saved”; instead, they are used for other tasks that take only minutes. So, where once one had time

to get into the rhythm of a task and find in that rhythm the satisfaction of making, of accomplishment, and the wandering of one's mind, now the task, done by a device, leaves no satisfaction and goes by too quickly to allow one's mind the restfulness of musing and wandering. What we have is a staccato rhythm of doing one thing after another after another, filling up the "saved" time with new chores, and what we experience is not satisfaction but a frustrated sense of continual interruption.

Transportation is the most pervasive example. The car, invented to speed transportation, has instead spread daily life over many miles and made transportation an ordeal. Life used to be lived in a fairly small radius. Only decades ago, most people could easily walk to work, schools and stores. Today many parents spend most of their child-rearing moments in a car, in traffic, in high-stress situations where they are trying not to be late and not to crash. The children -- the smaller ones strapped tightly into confining chairs -- are required to be quiet and still. Quiet-and-still is not a natural state for most children, especially in a situation of infectious stress where both child and parent are reacting to each other's anxieties. *No one* likes the family taxi service, but it's perceived as an onerous necessity that all parties need to make the best of.

What can a child learn about time from this, much less about a sense of control over one's own life or respect for the way one's parents live? The child learns, strapped in the seat, that the quality of time is absolutely foreign, an imposition, something coming from the outside that has nothing to do with the inside, and to which inner life must be subjugated.

It isn't surprising, then, that children will drug themselves first on TV and video games, and later with drugs, in order to numb their inner lives. They have, after all, seen their parents do the same thing with television at night, coming home from work and slipping into a kind of daze ("the gelatinous nirvana of television," James Agee called it) in which their inner voices cannot be heard because it is too painful to allow one's inner voices to speak when one's time is so circumscribed, so measured, so without choice. People live in fear that those voices will scream, "ALL THIS IS WRONG! YOU MUST CHANGE YOUR LIFE! RIGHT NOW!" What would they do with such inner messages? The question of how to change is too terrifying. So inner life itself is seen as something one has no time for -- yet many yearn in secret for more "time of my own."

A person who feels so little freedom, so little leeway, so little ability to "make time" for her- or himself, cannot help but resent this. It's practically inevitable that this resentment will be acted out on the people we live with. Treating the mechanics of acting out alleviates some symptoms, but can it give someone's life back?

Today, our moments are lost in hours. And, since our moments are everything, unless they can be retrieved, all is lost.

A technology invented and marketed to increase convenience has made privacy, or even the state of non-interruption, virtually impossible for millions. The cellular phone and the beeper, becoming more and more common among the urban and suburban middle class, mean that one can be contacted anywhere, at anytime.

Call-waiting has become a standard feature that most people subscribe to. At peak telephone hours in the larger urban centers, it's rare to have a telephone conversation that call-waiting doesn't interrupt. Calling someone, then putting them on hold for an incoming call, is considered normal rather than rude. Interruption is increasingly taken

for granted -- both the right to interrupt others and the expectation that one will be interrupted in turn. The individual's time, already experienced as a cross between a labyrinth, a cage and a treadmill, is now vulnerable to fragmentation without warning from any direction.

Animals subjected to this frequency of interruption become nervous, frightened and eventually break down. Homes being assaulted by this technology cease being homes and become merely stations for sending and receiving, transmission and reception. Added to the television, the radio and the home computer, the new telephone technology makes the transformation from home to a kind of residential station complete. Home is now a place for data collection, with the family as a whole, and each member individually, being reduced to a medium for the transmission and reception of data. Most of the data bombarding the home comes from an instantaneously networked world, and the various spheres of work, school and social life that surround the family.

A crucial aspect of this data is that most of it isn't shared within the family. On the one hand, there's usually too much to be shared; on the other, it's meant for individuals and is processed individually. One family member is on the Internet, another plays video games, another watches the soaps and sitcoms, another sports, another mainly movies, another mainly news, and each may scan their own computer bulletin boards. With more and more emphasis on "the information superhighway," in addition to the perfection of "virtual reality" technology, these trends can only increase.

Thus, people occupying the same quarters aren't necessarily sharing their lives. They may be dependent on one another economically; they may have feelings toward one another (or the fragmented state they live in may have reduced those feelings to mere longings); they may feel responsible for each other; but they have precious little *shared experience*. The young children are in day care because the parents have to (or choose to) work; the older children are in school (or wherever); the parents are at their (usually very different) jobs; each individual is involved for most of the day in separate activities, miles from one another, that make each receptive to particular sources of data. When activities aren't shared, shared receptivity doesn't develop, and data important to one is inconsequential to the other.

Add to this the complexities that computers pose. In many middle-class households, each family member above a certain age has his or her own personal computer. As computers become more integrated with commerce and education, and easier to afford, it is expected that virtually all middle-class families will be, as they say, "wired." Subscribing to services like the Internet, which contain, in human terms, an infinity of information, and through which people all around the world can communicate instantly on computer bulletin boards about an infinity of interests, each family member will have the world at their fingertips and will be able to pursue any interests anywhere with anyone electronically. Combined with fax machines already in many households, this will complete the transformation from home to residential station.

In the residential station, boundaries of time and distance disappear. One can be faxed or emailed any time of the day or night, from anyone, anywhere (even from Outer Space!). By the time this magazine is published, the first "virtual reality" headsets will be on the market. Virtual reality headsets are interactive "games," worn as helmets and operated by electronic gloves, in which the individual is totally encased in an electronic world that can encompass any reality or surreality that can be programmed. The

malleability of virtual reality, when compared to the intractability of external or imposed time, will become a substitute for both inner life and human interaction – much more seductive and transformative than television. By the end of the decade, such equipment is expected to become as common as computer video games. This will complete the family's orientation outward, away from one another, toward unconnected, even disparate and conflicting worlds and interests.

“Family time,” which even now often is perceived as a distraction from other pursuits, will be even harder to manage, and will have to bridge even wider gaps, as those still interested in such time try to bring family members together. Eating schedules, already difficult to coordinate, will become even more so. Almost the only thing that the family will do, not together but more or less at the same time, will be sleep. The complexities this poses for human interaction, and for addressing our wounds and tensions, can barely be imagined. Most people already spend far more time watching television than talking; it is likely that children, especially, will spend more time with virtual reality than conversing with parents. How will children (or adults, for that matter) make the shift from virtual reality, in which they control the interaction, to human reality, which cannot be controlled?

As we depend more and more upon computers and computer-oriented technology, we will experience a deepening tension between computer time and human time. The tension this creates will manifest itself among the people we live with. Already, according to author Jeremy Rifkin, therapists report that “people used to working with computers become impatient with the slower durations of everyday life.” Computer technology is based on the nanosecond, which is one billionth of a second. The time it takes for the average keyboard operator to hit one key is roughly 500 million nanoseconds. As Rifkin writes, “This marks a radical turning point in the way human beings relate to time. Never before has time been organized at speeds beyond the realm of consciousness... Events processed in the computer world will exist in a realm that we will never be able to experience.”

Again, the root of this tension will not be familial, and the observation and treatment of family patterns will address only symptoms. How does one treat the relationship between the family and its technology – especially when having family members together in one room for observation or therapy will become an increasingly artificial situation when, in daily time, the family is rarely in one room for one purpose?

Contemporary families are worlds away from rural families who worked either together or close by, with people everyone in the family knew. They are even worlds away from urban neighborhood-life as it was lived as little as 30 or 40 years ago, when relatives tended to live in the same neighborhoods, within walking distance from one another, and everyone in the family knew everyone else's acquaintances and even knew the families of those acquaintances. In those lost worlds, time was experienced as cohesive, as a piece – everyone in the family was part of the same general experience. Now, especially among the middle class and the affluent, everyone in the family tends to live a very different experience, and their times no longer mesh. Without a shared flow of time, what *is* family life? Can it be said to exist at all?

Underneath all that passes for “daily life,” there is another life, another time. It is the life of people who are either excluded from or have escaped from the demands most

Americans share and feel they must conform to. It is the life of many artists, musicians, criminals and those who have dropped out. It's been called "the night life." These are people who reject (or can't cope with) "daylight savings time" for what's been called "night time losing time." They function mainly at night, don't take "day jobs" seriously, don't pursue careers in the commonly accepted sense, and neither plan their futures nor weigh today's actions against a secure old age.

Without romanticizing this way of life – for it is often seedy, greedy, drug-infested and violent – it is important for a discussion of time and therapy because *fantasies* about it constitute much of the television, movies and music – that is "entertainment" – for those who accept, or at least accede to, society's time limits. Any evening's channel-surfing is enough to prove that our society has taken these fantasies to extraordinary extremes. People who, depending on what numbers you believe, have roughly 40 hours a week of "leisure time" (a phrase unknown until this century because it was unnecessary), spend roughly *40 percent* of those hours in front of the television. If they go out for the evening, it's usually to a movie. In short, demographically average Americans spend a great deal of "discretionary time" (another phrase previous eras never needed) *watching people who don't have to live as they live, nor obey the rules they obey.*

This is an incredible fact, and therapists take it for granted at their peril. Such entertainment is not merely an escape; it is also a passive, and, if you like, pathetic form of rebellion, and speaks of anger, frustration and dissatisfaction on a massive scale. (The favorite video rentals among American adolescent and pre-adolescent boys are "gore movies" in which many people, usually women, are graphically chopped to bits.) Thus, most Americans spend their leisure time not for leisure, nor for creative pursuits that give individual or family satisfaction like gardening or crafts, but to indulge their anger at the way they spend time the rest of the day. No other fact of contemporary life demonstrates so clearly that Americans feel caged by time.

In preceding centuries, there was a pretty obvious separation between what's called the "subconscious" and the "conscious." Individual life was more or less ordered, however unjust or distasteful. Except for the occasional plague, fairy-tale, Bible story or cathedral gargoyle, lurid phantasms were usually left to the real of dreams. But now we live in a technologically hallucinogenic culture that behaves with the sudden dynamics of a dream, an environment that duplicates the conditions of dreaming.

Our everyday world of computers, television, billboards, magazines and radio, is one of dreamlike instantaneous changes, unpredictable metamorphoses, random violence, archetypal sex, and a threatening sense of multiple meaning. For a quarter of a million years we experienced this only in sleep, or in art, or in carefully structured religious rituals. Now, in our electronic environment, the dreamworld of sudden transformation and unpredictable imagery greets us when we open our eyes. And our response to it is, against all our better judgments, to want more – more VCRs, PCs, car phones, virtual-reality headsets and faxes that create this new surreality.

What distinguishes the 20th Century is that each individual life is a daily progression through a concrete but fluctuating landscape of the psyche's projections. Technology projects the subconscious into countless *things*, and thus technology duplicates the processes of the subconscious's greatest artifact, the dream. The surreality, simultaneity, sexuality and instantaneous change that once occurred only in our dreams now also occur all around us. So the condition of our subconscious is now also the

condition of this physical environment we've built for ourselves. Now, we reel between dream and dream, between the dreams of our sleep that speak to us alone, and the dreamscape of the waking world in which we make our way through millions of dream pieces colliding around us in a collective slam-dance.

People who feel caged by time, yet who live bombarded by disorienting imagery, are people whose loyalty to their fantasy may be at least as great as their loyalty to their family members. Among the young, in fact, friends are usually chosen for their shared loyalty to a fantasy life. A case could be made that this is how most people, young or old, choose their friends – and that the whole idea of “profession,” or any particular profession, is largely dependent on a shared fantasy.

The paramount fact is: we no longer have family in the traditional sense; we have *family-plus-media*. Media, with its core appeal being both an escape and a rebellion against time, has moved in with the family and has become one of its core components. Thus, when therapists encounter what seems like a complete family, they, the therapists, are operating under an illusion. The entire family is not present. That family lives with an array of imaginary people that do not enter one's office, do not speak, do not interact (yet!); but those imaginary people command loyalty and have influence. The young dress and talk like them, and measure their behavior more against these fantasy figures than against the behavior of their parents. A homemaker who schedules her chores around her favorite daytime soaps is giving her fantasy life at least as much consideration and attention, and often more of her precious time, than to her mate. A husband who follows sports with more erudition than he follows the machinations of the local school board (a group that has more impact on his life than his favorite team), and who schedules weekends and holidays around sports broadcasts, is indulging fantasies of prowess, victory and defeat, to the exclusion of the *experience* of his world and his family. The core function of the media and computer is to allow people to (mentally) leave their time-cage.

Feeling that time is a force imposed from without to which they must conform, people use much of their energy to avoid that force, usually passively, and without interacting with one another, populating their inner lives with images again imposed, or at least supplied, from without. The soul or self or whatever you choose to call it – that intrinsic quality that makes each person unique and that is what (under whatever label) a healer must connect with and appeal to – is confined in a time-cage and obscured by a cloud of habitual, if not outright addictive, fantasy figures.

The family was once the central determining fact of life, but now, even where something corresponding to a traditional family exists, family members have far less in common, spend little time together, and much of that time is given up to television, where each family member indulges a private yet seething need both for oblivion and rebellion. (These two seemingly contradictory needs occur together often. Drug and alcohol addictions are the prime examples, and are often a response to life in the time-cage.) Our economy is so geared to this confining yet uncentered way of living that no therapist and no genre of therapy can hope to alter it. What, then, can therapists do?

Therapists heal by making unconscious behavior conscious, and by replacing compulsion with choice. As we have seen, in this age of interruption, in this age of “day-runners” and lists, in which nearly every interaction is an appointment, and people rush to

be “on time”; in this age when society’s time-demands are experienced as a cage, relieved primarily by electronic images that seem to flash at one between the image’s bars – in such an age few things are as unconscious and/or compulsive as one’s relationship with time. Therapist James Hillman says that in all his years of practice, his hardest task was “treating people’s schedules.” In other words: treating their time.

Hillman’s clients are far more willing to address issues about parents, spouses and children than they are to address their schedules. Most have enormous resistance to changing their relationship with time. Issues of parent, spouse and child seem on the surface more intimate than issues of time. Yet, in fact, there is nothing more intimate – for one’s time, in the final reckoning, is one’s life.

At this stage in our history, to ask how to balance an individual and/or family’s relationship with time is to ask how to balance their relationship with the world. In fact, speaking of the world in terms of time is more serviceable because time is experienced by most people as a tangible force that must be struggled with and interacted with every day.

But balancing or healing clients’ time may be especially difficult for therapists, because, while they may not share many of their clients’ problems, their fundamental relationship to time is, in most cases, probably very similar. Most therapists have schedules at least as compulsive as their clients’, and feel at least as caged by their schedules. What they do inside those cages may be different, but their relationship to the cage, and the tensions created by that relationship, may not be. This can make for an unconscious and compulsive resistance on the part of the therapist to treating time directly.

But once the issue of time has been raised, it’s hard to avoid. (Consciousness is like that.) Strategies for keeping the issue in view, and for the gradual transformation of compulsion into choice, while not easy, are at least clear.

First, therapists must realize that the history of “time is money,” and the situation vis-à-vis “Time is money” in which a family finds itself, is much broader than the family’s history. Whether or not therapists feel that any given client must be made aware of that history, therapists certainly need to be. On this level, a family’s history is also the history of its country, its economy and the customs of commerce on which it depends. Unless we see that those demands and interruptions are not absolutes, they are too intimidating to attempt to change. It is a process of slow and painful steps from these realizations to a balanced and conscious experience of time – schedules have to be recognized as therapeutically relevant and then examined, resistances have to be breached, new ways of living one’s day have to be experimented with before families can leave compulsion for choice and give themselves more time, more life.

For instance, would kids be better off with fewer activities and calmer parents? Does it take more time, is it more interruptive and unpleasant, to drive kids halfway across town, or to organize similar activities in one’s own neighborhood? Families can discover that there are instances when, to change themselves, they also have to organize concrete changes in the outer world, including their neighborhood, their school, their workplace. Such changes have been thought beyond the scope of therapy, but if therapy refuses to extend itself to such changes then therapy not only remains caught in the cage, it becomes part of the cage.

These are uncomfortable, frightening issues because they involve pathologies that are shared on a scale beyond any individual family. To address them at all is to intimate

that the culture itself is crazy, and to put the authority of therapists, and of psychotherapy in general, behind that argument. But here, as R.D. Laing might have put it, the clients are ahead of the therapists. They *know* the culture is crazy, and it terrifies them. They are looking for solutions. This is part of what they get into therapy for in the first place. Will those solutions be supplied only through simplistic dogmas of talk-show hosts, or will solutions be not only supplied but explored through people (like therapists) with a wider and a more intimate perspective?

The willingness of people to make fundamental changes in how they participate in the culture hasn't, for the most part, been tested by psychotherapy – partly because the theoretical base for such treatment has barely been touched, and partly because insurance companies who profit from the chaos and take “Time is money” as gospel, don't underwrite such pursuits. Thus, with therapists, as with clients, change in the outer, commercial aspects of the profession have to be addressed. A dependence on insurance companies has been accepted by the therapy profession as a whole. Can this go on? How can it be challenged? If these questions aren't tackled by psychotherapy as a profession, it is difficult to see how relevant it can remain as, in part, merely one money-making source for the insurance industry and essentially regulated by that industry in terms of what will and will not be paid for.

Therapists have one great advantage in dealing with the dilemma of time as it manifests in their clients' lives: The therapeutic hour is as intense and focused a period of time as exists in contemporary life. A client or clients enter the room. However reluctant and frightened they might be, there is no question that they enter this particular room and this particular moment in time to deal with issues they have not been able to manage in any other room at any other moment. They enter the therapist's room both to end and begin – to end some patterns of behavior and begin others. In this sense especially, the therapeutic hour is a rare moment in time. What other moment can we name where patterns are so ready to be challenged? The range of that challenge is largely up to the therapist. It is up to the therapist to challenge the debased time-sense of the marketplace with the heightened clarity and now-ness of the therapeutic hour.

Again: Therapists heal by making the unconscious conscious and by replacing compulsion with choice. To make conscious what is, for most, the unconscious cage of imposed time; to replace the compulsive demands of imposed time with an awareness of, and a responsibility toward, one's inner time would be no less than revolutionary, both in the clients' life and the community's. To use one's time differently is to relate to one's community differently, and ripple effects are inevitable.

This doesn't mean “revolutionary” in any grandiose or political sense, but in the day-to-day sense that one client “at a time,” as the saying goes, and one family at a time, would reject the chaos of imposed time for something that corresponds more closely to what is now called, almost condescendingly, “quality time.” In real terms, this means that couples could spend more than 20 minutes a day together. Families could face how they spend 40 percent of their private lives with television, and the pain that causes in missed communication – missed love. People worn by hours of commuting could examine what their job really costs them in stress, in fatigue, in lack of energy to be with loved ones, and what they could do about it. People could be made aware of their allegiances to one another. For these clients, therapists could point toward a world that is not an arbitrary

construct that must be surrendered to, but a place of possibilities to be lived. All of these issues are, practically and mechanically, issues of time.

Psychotherapy began in the realm of dreams; it finds itself now, a century later, in the realm of time. It began by confronting the subconscious; now, it confronts the very nature of freedom. There aren't any pills for this. There's just one person, the therapist, using all he or she knows to reach another. That's the only solution there has ever been, really. In spite of (or because of) our technological and pharmaceutical advances, we have been stripped down to first causes: basic decisions about how to spend our days and nights. And it has become one of therapy's tasks to remind us that time isn't money. Time is life itself.

Copyright by Michael Ventura.