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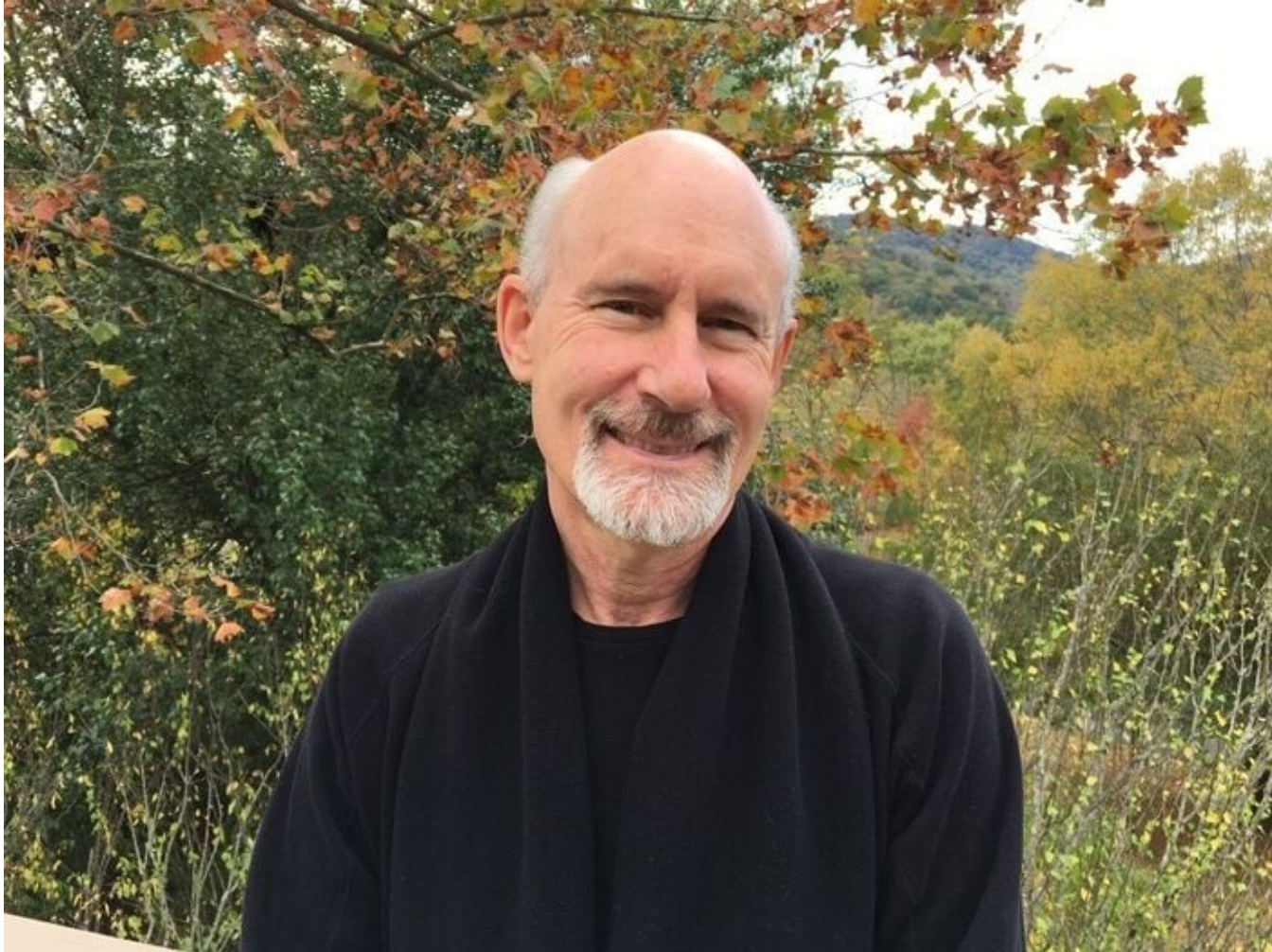
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Passages of Time: Years, Days, Moments

By Chris Highland
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While attending college in Seattle, a good friend and I went to see Al Stewart in concert. Some may recall the popular song "Year of the Cat" or the epic "Roads to Moscow." Years later, while browsing through a bookstore near my home in California, I heard a guitar playing from the tiny stage in the back. Wandering over, I saw a small crowd gathering to hear the guest musician: Al Stewart. A delightful surprise to hear him again, and see him up close. It was good to hear him sing one of my favorite tunes, "Time Passages." As usual, Al used vivid imagery of a December snow and the train (of thought?) he caught to take him home. The lyrics were very familiar, since I often played the song on my car cassette deck: "Well I'm not the kind to live in the past; The years run too short and the days too fast; The things you lean on are the things that don't last; Well it's just now and then my line gets cast into these Time passages." This called to mind his earlier album, "Past, Present, Future."

We can all relate to passing through doorways, stages, periods of life, when something is left behind and something else is gained or discovered. We hope it's progress, that something better presents itself, even that we may become a better person, or more enlightened or understanding. The question is, does time really exist? As Buddhists are keen to remind, life is only a limited link of moments. Seconds, minutes, hours, days become months and years, but life is really only this moment, this moment, now, here. Take a deep breath. There is only now, another moment, then ... it's gone. The fleeting nature of what we call life, our lifespan, ticks away the seconds to invite deeper awareness, or distract attention that imagines we have "all the time in the world."

We don't of course. We don't "have" time and time does not have us. There is nothing to hold onto, no handle to hold. So we keep reaching, though time is "forever" out of reach. We are free to choose, until—our time runs out. Since we never know when that will be, when "our time" is "up," we're left with the fantasy that there is such a thing as "our time."

Henry Thoreau wrote: "As if you could kill time without injuring eternity" (Walden). As with time itself, eternity is in our imagination, because we can't plumb those depths; yet we can take Henry's point. We speak of "killing time," but in the long run there are consequences to our choices. Thoreau marks the "nick of time" on his walkingstick, "to stand on the meeting of two eternities, the past and future, which is precisely the present moment."

Al Stewart's "Time Passages" is both a confession and a realization. He can't live in the past, because things don't last. The passage of time—actually many passages, countless (timeless) passages—opens endless opportunities to "cast a line" in the flow, into the shallow or deep river (to catch those elusive moments?). The ancients told us we can't step in the same river twice. We're no more than bubbles swirling on the surface, caught in the currents, the movement of endless stillness. Does that sound mystical? I suppose so, and who are the mystics but fellow humans who tried to see beyond Time, appearing to sense beyond senses that the river has no beginning or end. If Time is somehow an ocean, like the vastness of space, our brief existence has meaning only here, now, moment by moment.



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Religion, faith, freethought, reason. Do these help us? Do they give us "the time of day"? Do they magnify the moments, to see life up close, to be aware of the fleeting bubbles of foam, or do they trick our eyes to think we can seize and squeeze a handful of the river, to claim it, to own it, to call it ours? Maybe Time is God, or the River is God, or right now, this Moment, is God—cascading creation. A flood of time, or a drop. A puddle, or a sea. Time raining down on us, filling us, saturating us, absorbing us, as we are unfathomable drops of water.

Is this the language of mysticism, or physics? I see nothing supernatural in this line of thought, but I do sense my senses, and my reason, reach the edge of knowing. I can never see the whole picture, perhaps because there is no way to frame "wholeness." We have no way to measure "never" or "forever," or the eternity Thoreau wishes not to injure, or the stream of moments Stewart casts his line into.