

## All the Time in the World

a talk delivered in March 2016  
at the annual Composition Program Awards Event  
at the University of Pittsburgh

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I want to talk to you today, all of you young people especially, finishing up degrees, at the onset of new careers, such an exciting moment, I want to talk to you today, about time, what you will be doing with it, what you will make of it, the next 20 minutes, the next 20 years, no matter, it's all the same. I've been mesmerized by the mysterious experience of time in my own life, in life itself, since I was a kid. I don't know why, or at least don't remember how I got started thinking about this almost infinitely malleable matrix that formats the paths we have to navigate a way along while we're here. But I've returned to that conundrum quite regularly over the years, to read about it, write about it, again and again. I'll be talking briefly about some of my work along these lines, but I chose this theme today for a much more practical reason.

As you may have noticed, in our culture, the academic culture, everyone always seems short on time, acts and feels as if there is just never enough of it, any of it all sometimes, hectic, harried, stressed. We rush by each other with perfunctory salutations, or none at all, leaning forward, almost jogging, books clutched to our sides, we complain about how can I possibly do all of this and this, you can't be serious about adding that to my this, and, sit with you for a cup of coffee, well, maybe next month, oh, wait, I forgot, I'm busy then, how about next term, or next year, I am so busy, busy, busy. Even answering an email sometimes seems more than many people can spare the time for, or, if they do, the

recipient may wish they hadn't. For example, on the very day I got the request from Annette to give this talk, I got an email, out of the blue, the kind we often get. It was in my queue just above Annette's, so I read it in its sequence, as I generally do. This young person was asking for some advice and help in the application process for our Hot Metal Bridge program. I responded normally, appropriately, took maybe 5 minutes, tops. I got a long reply, which opened this way:

*Dear Paul,*

*Thank you for your prompt response and for offering your time as a resource. I'm also grateful for the sensitivity and kindness with which you communicate in the previous email; post-bacc and grad apps have been stressful and I'm constantly finding myself frustrated at condescending and/or robotic responses from a variety of well-established academics [a long elision here where they told me about their work, life, etc. . .] Thank you again for offering your services and for being so down-to-earth!*

How to feel about this? Yes, I'm so great, I took 5 minutes of my precious time to offer a bit of help? No, I felt shame, on behalf of a profession, my profession, that has gone so awry. Why? Because at least some people actually took the time to respond, the overtone of their message being: I will use this time grudgingly to make it clear to you that I am too busy to spend any of it with you.

You may hear your mentors talking that way, other faculty you encounter, here, elsewhere, colleagues at conferences, your own peers even, and you think, I guess I must be too busy, too, yes, yes, yes, I am, of course I am, just like them, no, no, no I can't talk now, maybe, well, someday, not now, can't you see how I'm

rushing to get, Ok, where was I heading, I don't remember, you distracted me . . .

I'm going to open with my conclusion, as baldly stated as possible, the one I hope to get to through what I say today, just so you know exactly where I'm headed with all of this: That way of talking, that way of acting is, I believe in every fiber of my being, so stupid, a self-induced delusion rooted in hubris that syphons off any joy we might rightfully take from our work before we even get to feel it, and it is absolutely not true. Me, you, anyone, everyone in this business, we have all the time in the world, or should, because, in the general scheme of human labor, I'd be hard pressed to name another profession, now or ever, in which its practitioners have more direct control over their time than ours. That kind of control is an extraordinary luxury in relation to work-for-pay both in historical terms and in our current culture. Yes, we have a lot to do: reading, thinking, writing, talking, the very things that our love of which drew us here to do, the things we would be trying mightily to find time for if we were compelled to make our living in another line of work. So why not enjoy them. OK, that's my conclusion. And, if you're still with me, the tonal low point of this talk, I promise. Now I can take the rest of my time up here having some fun.

And what better way to do that, for me, than to talk about Coleridge, who is, as those of you who know me know, really, not just one of my favorite authors but one of my all-time favorite people. I wish I could have known him, hung around with him, I bet he was a blast. I'm going to focus on one of my favorite Coleridgean enterprises, those multiple "Essays on the Principles of Method," scattered through the little journal he founded and published in 1809 and 1810 called *The Friend*. What a sweet title!

You might be thinking right now, Coleridge, Samuel Taylor Coleridge? He's not such not a great vehicle to try to ride to your

conclusion on the wise use of time. He hardly ever finished anything, all that laudanum-induced laxity and frantic, failed thinking, which is what everyone keeps saying about him. I saw an example of exactly that attitude toward him while I was preparing for this talk. So this guy is describing how Coleridge handled *The Friend* and says, kind of dismissively, that, well, like so much else in his work, he just couldn't keep up with the production schedule; that in the two years he published *The Friend*, it came out only "intermittently," 28 issues in all. But think about this: Coleridge didn't just edit and publish and distribute the journal, he produced its content! So, let's say you decide to start a journal, get it out there, and, of course, write the articles in it. And you can only do that 28 times in two years. I'm sure everyone here, and the man writing that sentence, could do way better than that.

Actually, I never heard of the man who was writing that sentence, but I can say with what I believe is some confidence, that with this one little "incomplete" on Coleridge's transcript, one of many, many others, he achieved more than that writer has or will in his entire lifetime. So what else didn't he finish: "Kubla Khan," what a slacker, "Christabel", slouch, the *Biographia's* second volume, loser. And here's the thing, when Coleridge describes himself in one of his letters he says "I am indolence, capable of energies." In other words, Coleridge did all of this stuff, tons more than I ever was able to do, and he had all the time in the world, enough to feel he was actually lazy. That's my kind of guy: "Hey, Sam, got time for a cup of coffee some day?" "Sure, Paul. Let's go right now." And it wouldn't be some 10-minute stand-up, chug it, and run job. No, two hours, a *tour de force*, a ramble around Xanadu, an afternoon to remember. That's the guy I want to work with. He has all the time in the world. And so do I.

I encountered these essays on method for the first time when I was an undergraduate, in a book I bought called *The Portable Coleridge*, a pretty good group of excerpts from the series,

enough to get the drift of his overall argument. I was a physics major at the time, reading a lot about method, Bacon, Descartes, Sartre, anyone I could find who wrote about it specifically. I thought that among them—no weaklings there, to be sure—Coleridge was the staunchest, the most interesting. About 15 years later, in the early 1980s, I came back to those pieces for another look and ended up writing a long essay of my own, an essay on time, on the way rhetorical structures pre-orchestrated temporality, inverting its stereotypically forward-oriented vector, when we spoke, wrote, the very future we forethought, but hadn't yet materialized in any words, all of its multiple possibilities, like an array of alternate universes waiting to see which will be enacted, flashing back toward us, as we took our time down one of the possible paths we had opened. I had such a good time writing that essay. One of my all-time personal favorites. By which I mean, I couldn't get it published anywhere back then. Too long, too strange, too something. So I put it away, in my private stash. About 20 years later, Byron Hawk asked me if I had any essays he hadn't seen, so I sent it to him. About five years later, via a related set of connections, that he initiated, it ended up online in *Enculturation*, 25 years after I wrote it. I love that essay for many reasons, above all its patience. It had all the time in the world to wait for the world to have time for it. And I love Coleridge's essays for helping me to think about time in this way, not as inimical, a never-enoughness, always flogging us forward, but as a friend, wending gently back to walk with us toward whatever it is we came here to do.

They are pertinent to my theme today, these essays, because Coleridge says this straight out at the conclusion of the final essay:

*From the indemonstrable flows the sap, that circulates through every branch and spray of demonstration. To this principle we referred the choice of the final object, the control over time.*

I remember getting to that sentence and thinking “what the hell are you talking about?” You mention time offhandedly here and there, sure, I noticed that, but the whole series, the final object, about time, control over time? No way. So I went back and re-read the essays through this lens and, *voilà*, yes, Coleridge was right and I was wrong (big surprise): That was the theme, but it was entirely subterranean, everywhere in it, down below, though, like Alph the sacred river running through Kubla Kahn’s measureless caverns down to a sunless sea. The cool thing is, you would never know that if you just read them through once. But you can’t miss it if you read them twice. And that is precisely the nature of the sort of circuit that Coleridge believed got opened up when a thoughtful speaker uttered the first word. The end was forecast in a way, but even the speaker couldn’t know it yet. And then, there it is, revealing itself just as the circuit closes, and the whole thing preceding it gets recomputed under its aegis.

I know I’m nearing the end of my allotted time here today, so I’m going to tease out only one of Coleridge’s sentences—after such a long build-up, just one sentence, maybe a letdown to you. But it is such a great sentence. And, atypically for Coleridge, it’s a very short one. I recall vividly my first reading of it. It’s maybe halfway through the series, and he starts: “In wonder (Greek word), says Aristotle, does philosophy begin; “ So I get that far in the sentence and being an eager and speculative reader, and seizing on the freedom Coleridge promotes by construing the character of his rhetorical space as “forethoughtful,” I’m zipping ahead, imagining how it will go, where he will say philosophy ends, and in my head I hear: “in wisdom, no, no, in knowledge, no, no, in serenity, no, no, in truth,” all the bromides I could generate, I suppose. But that’s not how it ends. It ends this way: “and in astoundment (Greek word), says Plato, does all true philosophy finish.” So, in wonder does philosophy begin and in astoundment does it finish.

What a downer, I thought. I know that astoundment is not identical with wonder, but maybe it’s wonder times two, wonder

with a couple of smiley-face emojis after it, and I'm going through the whole of philosophy to get there. Huh? Almost immediately, though, I began to recalculate, to see what he meant. In that very sentence, for example, I, me reading it, started with wonder and ended in astoundment. And that shift opened a circuit for me to think in a new way about "philosophy," the subject of his sentence. For example: Let's say I read Parmenides, which, if you have read *Rereading Poets* you know I did in college for the first time, with very minimal wonderment. Then, let's say, I read Heraclitus, a little before him; Plato, a little after, then Descartes, Kant, whatever. Then I read Parmenides again. Whoa! I didn't notice that the first time around, which is actually what happened with me. That's already wonder times way more than two.

Then, say, I read Heidegger and Derrida and come back again. Wow, I see it, astounding, but it's only ground floor astounding. So, say, I read Graham Harman and Timothy Morton and come back again. Now that is astoundment, full blown. Parmenides, those horses taking the young man to the "ends of his mind" out there into the ether where he meets the goddess who tells him the cryptic secrets of Being, capital B. Yes, that's astoundment. Maybe it took me 50 years to take the whole path, my path, not Coleridge's, just mine, to migrate across the universe from wonderment to astoundment, which is not wonder times two but wonder times a million. And that's just with philosophy, as I said, the grammatical subject of his sentence. What I love most about that sentence is you can substitute almost anything you want in that subject position, and it's all still true: Everything of value in life begins in wonder, finishes in astoundment.

All the great paths I have traversed, simultaneously, over those same 50 years, because that's how parallel universes operate in the temporal spaces we inhabit here, they have been just like that, opening a way, calling me in, not to hurry, not to get there, but to be here, to do this, to live now. Everything I cherished, I have encountered on those paths, my multifaceted way, through this beautiful, beautiful world, the sentences, the poems, the classes,

the courses, everything I took my time to read, write, my family, my morning walks, even you, if you have taken the time to be with me, has made itself present, manifestly, first through my wonderment, and, then after a second, a day, a year, a decade, or, now, these 3 score+ years into my life, it has rendered me astounded. Some of those circuits in my life are now closed, and I am on the verge of closing others. I am so happy, relieved, grateful that I had all the time in the world for them.

You have all the time in the world, too, believe me, that is true. Care for yourself and for those around you. Be kindly whenever and as much you can, and when you can't, be polite. Listen whenever and as much as you can, and when the need to speak arises, as it will, speak up with passion and care on behalf of what matters most to you. The work will get done much more quickly, more quietly, so much less drama, if you do, I guarantee it. And you will be much the happier in the doing, your time here so much sweeter, and the time others spend in your company sweeter as well.

Our field is ensconced pretty much at the center of that academic galaxy we call "the humanities." We are closing out its dedicated year here almost as I speak. We all, every one of us, every day, need to remember that at the root of that word is a human, and it's not just some inscrutable concept; it's a me and a you and that passerby over there, struggling maybe, glancing our way, hoping we might walk over, that guy behind the email, trying, those dozens, then hundreds, then thousands of good young people who pay to spend their time with us, whose lives we are changing, even if only slightly, every day, for better or for worse. Humans. So be one. Be as great as you want to be along the way. Yes, be as great as you want to be along the way. But if you don't take the time, all the time in the world, which I am telling you is what you have, to also be good, to do some good with and for those fellow travelers who cross your path here, which is what we humans are made for and called toward, don't ever say you learned anything of consequence from me.



