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The Mysteries of 'Pandemic Time'

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If one thing has changed for everyone everywhere during the pandemic it's our perception of time. We know that besides the objective measures of time marked in seconds, minutes and hours on our watches and in days, months and years on our calendars—in reality, time is lived and felt subjectively and differently, depending on the moment and our experiences.

When these are 'good,' when we're enjoying ourselves, when we like what we're doing, we say time is flying. And when the experiences are bad, or we're feeling despondent, living through loss or anxiously awaiting news, then seconds can seem an eternity.

However, what is novel about the reality we've been living with COVID-19 is that people refer differently to changes in their perception of the passage of time—a 'pandemic time' full of paradoxes and contradictions. The coronavirus, with its peculiar capacity to disrupt all points of reference, makes time appear to go by swiftly and slowly at once. We live through a distorted sort of time that seems slow if taken day-by-day...paused, stalled. But if we look back, then we see time has vanished as if in an instant.

Thus, people remember 2020 as the year we crossed off with a single pen stroke, the one we're still owed, that shouldn't even count for birthdays. But the pre-pandemic past is perceived as a far-away time that doesn't belong to us anymore, as if we went to sleep in one world and woke up in another.

There's a sensation of 'airplane mode' with an empty cache, without many new experiences accumulated or many new memories stored. Everything indicates that with the shrinking spaces in which we live and work, with so little social contact, time seems to psychologically disappear. As motivations dwindle and the days become more monotonous, for many people time seems to move slower still. Time and space have stepped outside logic and lost their bearings.

As we live through a time where one day resembles the next, the mind works to build memories, but conjures up few details. Carrying out multiple activities in the same place reduces the creation of these memories, since it is harder to attach them to different places or different people. Who hasn't experienced a lapse of memory in the last few months?

Trying to understand the mysteries involved in this new perception of time, I discover that people are living a contradiction: the pandemic gifted us more time for many things that we didn't do in the past, but this 'extra' isn't manifest in daily life. In fact, since there are more things to do than usual in the same amount of time, we perceive greater monotony borne of routines more

poorly structured, which then feels like a scarcity of time, as our overloaded schedules run into one another. The day goes by in a perpetual present tense, accompanied by a sensation of strangeness and even at times, surreality.


At the risk of appearing redundant, the truth is that there is no other time than the one we are living in, and we have to learn to accept it as part of reality. It would be a grave error to ruin the present by remembering a past that now has no future. It's real: for us, there is a before and an after. But as Charlie Chaplin said: "Time is the best author. It always writes the perfect ending."

We still have to manage a high degree of uncertainty, especially when it comes to our free time and our social relationships. Time seems to go by waiting for a vaccine, a PCR or for isolation to end. As noted by Juan Carlos Volnovich, an Argentine colleague I admire: "We live in a present that is stuck, refusing to become a past."

So what to do with this disruptive time so that it doesn't disturb us so much?

It won't be enough to just get used to it, resigned, going along darning and mending as time slips by. Nor can we ignore the pandemic, reducing our risk perception: if up to now I haven't gotten sick, then I won't be getting sick, whatever will be will be. But manic euphoria won't help either, the kind that leads us to triumphalism, that the vaccine will solve it and we'll return to life as it was.

The appropriate phrase would be hopeful realism. Keep ourselves occupied, do things that motivate, since there is always time for what matters. Give in to the wisdom of uncertainty, knowing each day's pursuits are enough. Time will go by faster if we pay it less attention, if we dive into what we're doing and do things worth diving into. If we stop keeping score.

If we keep taking care of ourselves, taking care of everyone, then life will begin anew every day—the kind of days we live in now, in 'pandemic time'—monotonous, passing swiftly yet slowly. But this time can still be full of love, the sense that life is worth living. Days when, without realizing it, moments of pleasure can also be found in whatever way we engage: with our work, family, partners, learning, reading, music, or a commitment to the possibility of a better world. Only thus will the future surprise us with new promise. 

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