

A Personal Lesson About Time

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I have always believed that God continually presents us with clues and lessons about the nature of the universe, the purpose of life, and the answers to our questions. The only thing lacking in realizing the lessons quickly and completely is our own inability to pay close attention. It seems to me that each person is naturally drawn to sources of their lessons that are fitting to their tastes and interests. Like a mystery story, if we follow the clues we can find the culprit. Who has caused this state of affairs, who is behind all these goings on, who has written this play? If we are distracted, by attachments or ambitions, we may miss the thread of clues that runs continually through our lives, trying to bring us our lessons. What follows is an unfoldment of the way I found answers to a question that I had from my early childhood; what happens after death?

In 1962, when I was fourteen, I was preparing to enter into high school by taking a summer school course to improve my reading skills. The reading assignment listed a dozen or so books that could be reported on. One of the books, *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley, was on a separate list, requiring parental approval to be selected. Some parents had objected to students being allowed to read the book, as it was considered by some to be too controversial. That was the book for me! Anything that was being kept from me was exactly what I wanted. I devoured the book and was intellectually stimulated for the first time. I had not realized that books could communicate philosophies. Before that, books were only stories, like watching a play with no intended message or moral, just entertainment. I felt that Huxley had communicated something of himself, his thoughts and beliefs, through the story and I wanted to know more. I went to the library and checked out all the Huxley books they had. I was somewhat disappointed to find that none of the other books were written in a science fiction framework. I found the essays dry and, for the most part, the other novels mysteriously lacking what I had gotten from *Brave New World* (frankly they were way over my head). Out of all the books, however, one thing stuck out and absolutely lodged itself deeply in my mind; in the front of *Time Must Have A Stop*, there was the following passage:

But thought's the slave of life, and life's time's fool
And time, that takes survey of all the world
Must have a stop.

It stood on a page by itself and did not have an authors credit, I assumed it was written by Huxley. Something about it, though, made me feel that this was a significant clue. I contemplated it and felt that there was an elusive meaning that would become clear if I kept my mind on it. I carried a copy of the quote with me all through school and even into the Army. A couple of times I lost it or forgot exactly how it went and would find the book at a library and make a new copy. Whenever I had the time and inclination, I would repeat it in my mind and try to understand its full meaning.

What does it mean? The first part seemed clear enough:

Thought is the slave of life. Right, what people think is largely the result of their experiences. What lessons life dishes out will be reflected in people's opinions and prejudices.

Life is time's fool. This also seemed clear; individuals, families, cities, civilizations, all of life is eventually brought down by time. So far so good.

Time that takes survey of all the world must have a stop. This is the part that puzzled me. It was too simple and too tragic, there had to be more than just things come to a stop. Taken at face value it was like saying it gets dark when the sun goes down. Something more must have been meant by the whole statement. A way of living, a way of looking at life; something more.

I had been looking for something more most of my life. In 1966, when I was nineteen and living with my future wife in Berkeley, she brought home a copy of the *Bhagavad Gita* (a text book of a comparative religions class she was taking) translated by Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood, with an introduction by Aldous Huxley. Huxley again! This was another clue. We both found something reaching deep inside ourselves from the book. This was something to live by, something that rang so true and so deep that it felt like coming home, spiritually speaking. It never occurred to us that the Swami who had done the translation was ever in this country or even still alive. We spent a couple of years trying to live according to the Gita as best we could, without formal teaching. Then in 1970, after we had moved to Los Angeles, friends told us about Swami Prabhavananda and the Vedanta temple in Hollywood. We went to see him, and in a few years we were initiated. We felt that much of our life experience had been pointing us in the direction of Vedanta, even without our knowing it.

Almost twenty years after my first encounter with the quote, and fifteen years after joining Vedanta, my wife ran across an essay written by Huxley during the early 1940's in *Vedanta For The Western World* called *On a Sentence from Shakespeare*. In that essay Huxley expresses how he found a complete statement of philosophy in those three lines, which are from Hotspur's deathbed speech in *Henry IV Part One*. The meaning of the final clause, which by now I had glimpsed through direct instruction and experience, was clearly expressed for me: "It is only by taking the fact of eternity into account that we can deliver thought from its slavery to life. And it is only by deliberately paying our attention and our primary allegiance to eternity that we can prevent time from turning our lives into a pointless or diabolic foolery". Yes, that was it! This is a message of hope, of deliverance, of liberation. Even if we just stop to consider how our thoughts are formed, and how time changes our thoughts and priorities, we can be freed from life's pit-falls. The statement points to a way to live, not just a description of the mechanics of life and death. I have since heard several swamis include the quote in lectures and I marvel at life's teaching methods. What was it about that quote that so captured my mind back then? Was it just the mystery of it, or was it a response to my primal question that I was given the grace to remember and pursue?

Some thirty years later, I encountered a much older form of that characterization of time's end in the second chapter of the *Srimad Bhagavatam*. Like Hotspur's speech, time is described as death approaches, but what a wonderfully different setting. And what a lofty goal to aspire to:

"A true Yogi realizing the approach of death sits calmly in Yoga posture, with his heart purified and mind under perfect control, becomes absorbed in the consciousness of Brahman. Thus he lives in a state of perfect tranquility.

Time, the great destroyer, which lords it over everything in the universe, is annihilated. The universe itself melts into nothingness. The Yogi is no longer aware of his physical self. The worshipful Lord alone is in his heart. All to him is God. Such is his blissful state".