

Time is a strange beast. I never really understood the saying, ‘The days are long but the years are short’ until I had kids. Some days, I feel like I’m wallowing in time. It stretches out into never-ending afternoons filled with grubby hands and half-eaten Vegemite crackers while I’m wading through the Sisyphean task of housework. But then my two-year-old son lays his head on my chest for a full-body cuddle, and time stops. Half an hour might pass, but here we are, a glimmer of eternity wrapped in a cocoon of pure love.

Katherine May describes this in her recent book, *Enchantment: Awakening Wonder in an Anxious Age*, “(Time) is behaving strangely ... every night when I wash my face, I feel as though I have been standing at my sink in one continuous moment across several months ... at other points in the day, it moves so slowly that I can scarcely believe the world is still turning.”

In a world of productivity ‘hacks’, time is a resource: we usually don’t have enough of it and need to find ways to maximise it. There are all kinds of productivity ‘experts’ telling us the best ways to get the most done with what little time we have. The best morning routine, how to optimise your workflow, or how to start a bullet journal. But the word ‘hacks’, as Oliver Burkeman writes in his book on time, *Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals*, implies “that your life is best thought of as some kind of faulty contraption in need of modification so as to stop it from performing suboptimally. We are not machines, and yet we so often act like we are”.

But it’s not all our fault. Tech companies hire the sharpest minds to ‘hack’ our eyeballs to keep us on that app or website so we’ll look at the next video, picture, or notification. Tristan Harris, a former Google employee turned digital ethicist, describes how tech companies use the same strategies as casinos, offering intermittent and variable rewards. In this way, our attention is being hijacked, stealing our precious resource of time.

HOW ‘TIME’ HAS EVOLVED

We haven’t always lived like this. Think of our ancestors working in farming communities, rising with the sun and resting when it went down. Money was made from produce, or ‘a day’s wage’, with no specified hours. This model gradually changed through the Industrial Revolution as people moved into factory work, which required large-scale coordination to keep machines running. Suddenly, people were ‘working by the clock’ with fixed hours and wages. And now, the barriers between work and life have broken down even more in an era where you carry your work around on the computer in your pocket, always on call.



During the lockdowns brought about by COVID-19, time warped once more. “COVID restrictions, particularly lockdowns, removed these markers that ‘anchor’ us in the timescape, and the absence of these markers distorted our perception of time,” wrote Arash Sahraie, Head of the School of Psychology at the University of Aberdeen in a recent piece for *The Conversation*. These anchors are birthday celebrations, family holidays – even just going into the office. For Oliver Burkeman, “The fragility of our existence, the fact that you can’t predict what’s going to happen in the next minute, let alone the next month, and the fact that we need each other to make meaningful lives was made much more vivid for me during COVID,” he said.

Four Thousand Weeks is the result of Burkeman’s weekly column in *The Guardian*, where he wrote, “I would continue until I had discovered the secret of human happiness”. The columns mused over a number of moral and ethical perplexities, but he got hung up on the concept of time management and, upon realising that the average human life is “absurdly, terrifyingly, insultingly short”, set out to write his treatise on what’s important about the way we treat our time on earth.

Artist and author Jenny Odell has written a similar meditative philosophy on time in her recent book, *Saving Time: Discovering a life*

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beyond the clock. She distinguishes between the two kinds of time, known in ancient Greek as ‘chronos’ and ‘kairos’. ‘Chronos’ (relating to the word ‘chronological’) refers to measurable time: seconds, minutes, and hours. Whereas ‘kairos’ refers to a more qualitative moment in time that cannot be measured. It can be defined as ‘the right, critical, or opportune moment’.

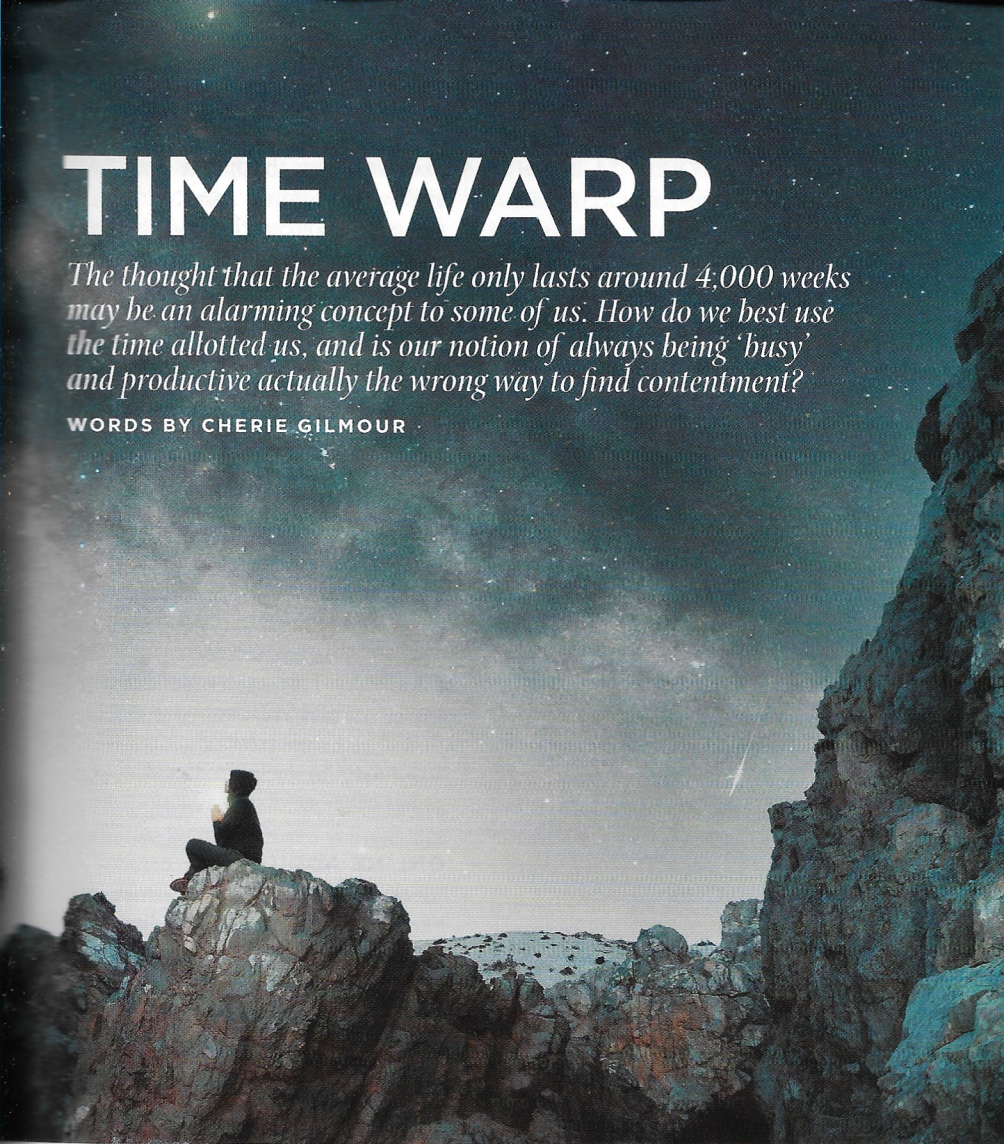
CHRONOS & KAIROS

Odell writes, “What I find in chronos is not comfort but dread and nihilism, a form of time that bears down on me, on others, relentlessly.” Chronos, the simple measurement of time, is how most of us in modern society relate to it. We are driven by clocks: appointments, catch-ups and deadlines. My days are powered by my to-do list, which I strive to achieve in the available hours while

TIME WARP

The thought that the average life only lasts around 4,000 weeks may be an alarming concept to some of us. How do we best use the time allotted us, and is our notion of always being 'busy' and productive actually the wrong way to find contentment?

WORDS BY CHERIE GILMOUR



structuring my children's time around meals, baths, and bedtime. I mentally rate my success at the end of the day, depending on how much I was able to achieve – a kind of gamification of time. "We chase the ultimate fantasy of time mastery – the desire, by the time we die, to have truly mattered in the cosmic scheme of things, as opposed to being instantly trampled underfoot by the advancing eons," Burkeman writes. Our relentless need to be productive goes far deeper than simply staying on top of things; as Burkeman suggests, it's a desire for immortality – to do extraordinary things in our limited life span.

If *kairos* is qualitative time, why am I not measuring how well I paid attention to my kids rather than if they got to bed on time? Or reflect on how deeply I was engaged with the natural world around me? How do we step off the productivity treadmill and disengage from the relentlessness of *chronos* time?

One way is to change our perception of time. Odell is inspired by the writings of French philosopher Henri Bergson, who wrote *Creative Evolution* in 1907. He visualises time as something dynamic and mysterious, rather than something akin to a grid with measured intervals. Odell thinks of it like lava. When lava creeps forward in space, you can see the path it took, but there is no indication that it will continue on the same path. "The live edge

of the lava is moving into the future, which is imminent in every present moment but also contains the history of everything that happened before," Odell writes. Bergson describes time as something potent, containing "the life force". More like a kaleidoscope than a ruler, always shifting into new constellations rather than just simply marching forward.

THE TRADITION OF REST

Rest as a form of ritual has always been a cornerstone of the Judeo-Christian tradition. This religious vision of rest goes beyond a simple practice and is taken as a command. "There is a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord. Life goes wrong when the control of space, the acquisition of things of space, becomes our sole concern," Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote in *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (1951). He describes the Sabbath as a "cathedral in time". The tradition of the Christian Sabbath, or Jewish Shabbat, shows us that we have always needed *kairos* time, and the belief is deeply entrenched.

Burkeman pursues a similar inquiry into how our core beliefs and values about time are formed. He prompts us with questions


like: "How would you spend your days differently if you didn't care so much about seeing your actions reach fruition?" He talks about "cosmic insignificance therapy" by considering the sheer scope of time and the tiny percentage we're assigned. "A minuscule little flicker of near-nothingness in the scheme of things: the merest pinpoint." Far from being a depressing reality, Burkeman views this as a relief – that only when we let go of our unrealistic expectations can we enjoy the present moment.

He also suggests keeping a detailed record of the things we're worried about so that we can look back a few weeks or even months later and see how insignificant they have become.

FLOW STATE

Another way of resisting the *chronos* of time can be achieved through 'flow state', a psychological concept coined by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. One of the key qualities of being in 'flow state' is that time feels like it's melting away. Whether it's exercising, doing yoga, a sport you enjoy, painting or cooking, these activities are essential for our wellbeing. The activity must be done for its own intrinsic value.

Time may be a beast, but it's certainly within our power to tame it: resisting the *chronos* of time by implementing practices that alter our relationship to it, such as taking a Sabbath, a distinct marker of time that can be entered into with family and friends that is distinct from the rest of the week. Try engaging in 'cosmic insignificance therapy' by meditating on the sheer vastness of time and our tiny interval within it and enjoying the freedom that comes with knowing our limitations. Or entering into new activities and hobbies that get us into the 'flow state'.

As American author Annie Dillard pointed out in her book *The Writing Life*, "How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives". Let's embrace the philosophy of time that best serves our humanity and doesn't leave us feeling like we're on a treadmill. Life's too short for that, and that's okay. 



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