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What Time is It?





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The Two-Part Concept of Time in Japan: A Personal Reflection

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Careful observers of Japanese culture are surely aware that the concept of time is very important. Let's look first at one of life's daily staples: the train system. Trains arrive and depart on time, period. Even without the ability to read a single kanji character on a station's schedule, newcomers in Japan can have a warm fuzzy feeling that they are embarking the correct train by catching the one that departs exactly at the time predicted by Google Maps. Recently, a major train company issued a formal apology for a train that departed the station 20 seconds early (!), as some commuters must have missed it, and were then forced to wait seven minutes for the next one, subsequently arriving seven minutes late to work. The punctuality of Japanese trains.

Taxis arrive on time. Actually, it's better to count on taxis arriving well before the requested time. Meetings also start on time. People invited to my house arrive on time and if they are late, even for totally legitimate reasons way beyond their control, even if they had advised me in advance they'd be late, offer profuse, humble apology. Because it is very Japanese to be on time or early. If I'm hosting an event that starts at 5, I'd be smart to have my house set by 4:45, otherwise I'll face the dilemma of deciding whether to be gracious and welcoming of early arrivals (clearly the right decision) or scurry around and finish vacuuming.

All this attention to punctuality actually suits me very well: the sense of control I get by being my own keeper of time is a security blanket for me. My anxiety skyrockets if I run late. In the classic *The Sound of Music*, when the Captain signals with a ship's pipe and his children materialize and march down the stairs in ordered formation...that's my secret ideal life. Julie Andrews/Fraulein Maria rolling in and capsizing the whole ordered scheme upsets me tremendously. I'm an on-time person, and I really dig living in Japan, a totally on-time country.

There's a flip side to all this timeliness, though. There's a time and a place for it, so to speak. When not on the clock, Japanese people can take a loooooooooong time doing things. I once went for dinner with a colleague, a Japanese English teacher I highly respect. We met at the train station, and then walked to the restaurant, a quarter mile away. To my astonishment, this was the longest walk of my life. This fellow, who at work literally ran-walked between classes (Japanese people have a startling run-walk they use on urgent business, which is all business) strolled at the pace of a drowsy snail. My internal voice was screaming, Can we

walk a little faster please? What is going on? But my friend had simply switched it off! He was on his free time, and was going to enjoy every single second of it. Likewise, if you're lucky enough to be in Japan when the nationally treasured pinky white cherry blossoms – sakura – are out, you will definitely see people spending hours (hours!) photographing them. The sakura trees are blooming, and nothing else matters. One more example: Zen Buddhist temples have seas of meticulously raked white pebbles. An extravagant outlay of time is required to arrange the stones into mesmerizing concentric circles, which is the whole point. At certain times, Japanese people 'turn off' their hurry and conscientious punctuality.

My daughter, my only child and my most precious treasure on this earth, lives and breathes with complete unconsciousness of time. She is permanently in the mode of cherry blossom photography and Zen pebble raking. In the mornings, I plan on an hour for her to get ready for school. A series of simple processes I think should take fifteen minutes max takes her a full leisurely hour. Like my friend wandering down the street to the restaurant, my beloved daughter wanders around the house and gets herself together for school in the longest possible amount of time. Time doesn't exist for her, and my nagging does absolutely nothing to speed her up. I remember in an airport once, we were running late for a flight (hi, anxiety!) and I asked her to hurry up a little. With genuine childlike sincerity she exclaimed, 'OK mom!' and immediately began breathing loudly, huffing and puffing as if becoming winded in a sprint. But her little legs went no faster at all!

I'm the total opposite: I have a really hard time switching it off. I'm in a rush, worried about the starting time of whatever is next, all the time. I can't turn it off! I can never seem to give the sakura blossoms more than a quick glance. I walk the same speed at work and on the weekends. I'm only ever aware of where she and I need to be next and how long it will take to get there. This near constant redlining of my internal RPM makes it very hard to 'Be still and know that I am God.' I'm missing the part of life that happens in the slow times.

The wisest of the ancient kings had something to say about my situation: Ecclesiastes 2:21-23

"For a person may labor with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then they must leave all they own to another who has not toiled for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune. What do people get for all the toil and anxious striving with which they labor under the sun? All their days their work is grief and pain; even at night their minds do not rest. This too is meaningless." Yep, nailed it. King Solomon reached forward thousands of years to personally tap my shoulder. So what do I do? How do I give up this need for control? Well, the very next chapter has the solution: Ecclesiastes 3:11-14 "He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end. I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God. I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that people will fear him." Bam! There it is. He has made everything beautiful in its time. As an English teacher, I notice the particular grammar 'has made.'" The present perfect tense says it all: it is all already made beautiful. None of my toiling and striving and timeliness can make God's work any more beautiful or perfect.

Next bombshell: He has also set eternity in the human heart. Amen! Lord! I am here to serve the human hearts of Japanese people, period. Not my own plans, not my own nitty-gritty timetable. Their achingly unreached hearts live and beat in eternity, as You designed, and my only purpose here is to represent You before them. I truly repent of my anxiousness about

time and my misguided attempts to maintain control of it. Slow me down, I ask You. Help me join my daughter and my Japanese friends in trading the anxious awareness of the ticking of the clock for the capacity to soak up both the grand scheme and intimate tiny details of Your will. Like the fleeting sakura, we are only in this life for a moment, and my daughter and I will spend only a precious brief moment of our lives among Japanese people. Please grow my awareness that You own it all – from the timely precision of the train schedule to the timeless contemplatively raked pebbles so I can be fully present in their lives. It's all Yours and I don't want to be in the way of the things You have already made beautiful in Your holy, perfect time.

.... Now, what time does that next meeting start?... Just kidding. I've just made plans to go to the park with my daughter and our new Japanese friends to see the cherry blossoms.

Nita is on a short-term mission teaching English at Kanto Gakuin University. Thank you for your servant's heart.