# Thickening Time

How to Stop Your Life from Disappearing

## The Ideas

by Andrew Mayfield

## Clock Time and Felt Time

The problem with time, as most people describe it, isn't actually about time. It's about experience. When someone says "time flies," they're not making a physics claim. They're making a phenomenological one. They're saying that their experience of being alive has become thin, compressed, unmemorable. The clock ticks at the same rate it always has. But the felt sense of duration, the subjective weight of days and years, has changed.

This distinction points to something fundamental about how consciousness relates to temporality. Your brain doesn't run one clock. It runs two, and they often move in opposite directions.

The first is what researchers call prospective time: how duration feels while you're inside it. This is governed primarily by attention. When you're absorbed in something compelling, hours vanish. When you're bored in a meeting, minutes drag. The more you monitor time, the slower it moves. The less you notice it, the faster it flies.

The second is retrospective time: how long a period feels when you look back on it from memory. This operates through an entirely different mechanism. A week that flew by while you lived it can feel substantial and long when you recall it, if that week contained rich, distinct experiences your brain encoded separately. Conversely, a month that felt slow day-by-day can compress to nothing in memory if it was routine enough that your brain filed it under a single template.

This is the holiday paradox. While you're on vacation, absorbed in new places and experiences, the days seem to race past. But when you return home, that week feels dense, long, full of retrievable moments. Meanwhile, a month of ordinary work life might feel slow while you're living it—you're checking the clock,

aware of time passing—but vanish entirely when you try to reconstruct it from memory.

The two-clock model reveals why most advice about time fails. "Slow down" addresses the prospective clock but ignores the retrospective one. "Be present" might make moments feel longer while you're in them, but if those moments are too routine to encode distinctly, they'll still compress in memory. You can be supremely mindful of a templated day and have nothing to show for it a month later.

## Thick Time, Not Slow Time

What we're really seeking isn't slower time. It's thicker time. Time with density. Time where the ratio of conscious experience to minutes elapsed is high. The minutes might fly—in fact, they often do during the richest experiences—but the memory trace they leave is substantial.

This reframe dissolves a persistent confusion about what makes life feel long or short. Duration isn't about the clock. It's about the architecture of memory and

attention. A decade of high engagement can feel longer in retrospect than two decades of routine, because engagement creates the raw material—distinct, richly encoded memories—that retrospective time is built from.

## The Sleepwalking Problem

Your brain is an efficiency machine, and this efficiency is both blessing and curse. It builds models of recurring experiences and then runs those models on autopilot. The commute you've done a hundred times requires almost no conscious processing. Your brain predicts what's coming, the prediction matches reality, and the experience gets filed as "another commute" rather than as a specific, memorable journey.

This neural compression is what makes expertise possible. The master carpenter doesn't consciously think through each cut. The experienced executive doesn't deliberate over routine decisions. They've developed sophisticated internal models that handle familiar situations automatically. But the same process that enables mastery also enables temporal

compression. The better you get at your life, the less your brain bothers recording it.

This is why many successful people in midlife report that entire years have vanished. Not because they were idle—often they were more productive than ever. But because they were operating within patterns their brains had already templated. They were, in the words of design researchers Dan Szuc and Jo Wong, sleepwalking: performing at a high level while their consciousness had quietly left the building.

## Time Across Cultures

The cultural dimension of this problem runs deeper than individual psychology. Most Western approaches to time are built on what philosophers call linear temporality. Time moves forward. What's spent is gone. The future is a resource that's shrinking. This framework generates its own emotional register: urgency, scarcity, acceleration.

But temporal experience is culturally constructed, and other cultures offer different models. The Aymara

people of South America face the past, gesturing forward when discussing what has already happened and backward when referring to the future. Their reasoning is elegant: the past is known, therefore visible, therefore in front of you. The future is unknown, invisible, behind you where you cannot see.

This isn't merely poetic. Brain imaging shows that speakers of different languages activate different neural pathways when processing temporal concepts. The way you think about time—as linear or cyclical, scarce or abundant, forward-flowing or directionally neutral—shapes the neural architecture through which you experience it.

Ancient Greek offered two words for time that modern English conflates. Chronos is quantitative time, measured and uniform—one hour identical to every other hour. Kairos is qualitative time—the right moment, the moment that carries weight, the instant when something shifts. Chronos is the clock on the wall. Kairos is the recognition that this particular moment matters.

The Roman philosopher Seneca, writing nearly two thousand years ago, made perhaps the sharpest diagnosis of why life feels short. We don't have a short time to live, he argued. We waste a great deal of it. The problem isn't duration. It's allocation. We give time away to ambition that serves others' agendas, to busyness without purpose, to distraction and vice. Most devastatingly, we defer aliveness to a future date—after this project, after this promotion, after the children are older.

Seneca's insight has aged remarkably well. The specific distractions have evolved—screens instead of gladiator games—but the pattern remains identical. We postpone the feeling of being fully alive, always reasoning that we'll start living properly once we've handled the current urgency.

This deferral mechanism is what creates the particular temporal pathology of modern life. We're not just busy. We're busy while believing that real life is somewhere else—in the future we're working toward, in the vacation we're planning, in the retirement we're saving for. The present becomes instrumental, valuable

only for what it produces rather than for what it contains.

The result is a life lived in thin time. Time where very little conscious experience is happening per unit of chronos. Days full of activity but empty of presence. Years that accumulate without thickening. A curriculum vitae rich in accomplishments but a phenomenological record surprisingly sparse.

What would thick time look like? It would be time where your attention was engaged, where novel information was being processed, where your brain was switching between states rather than lingering in familiar patterns. It wouldn't necessarily be slow time—often the richest experiences feel like they pass quickly. But it would be dense time, time that leaves substantial memory traces, time that feels weighty when you look back on it.

This suggests that the real question isn't how to get more time. Time, in the chronos sense, is fixed. You get the same twenty-four hours as everyone else. The question is how to make that time thick rather than

thin, dense rather than compressed, memorable rather than forgettable.

The framework implies that many of our intuitions about time management are backwards. We optimize for efficiency, but efficiency is often the enemy of thickness. We seek routine, but routine is what makes time disappear. We try to minimize friction, but friction—the unexpected, the novel, the demanding—is often what makes experience memorable.

This doesn't mean chaos is better than order, or that you should abandon all structure in pursuit of temporal richness. It means recognizing that the felt experience of time emerges from the interplay between pattern and deviation, between the familiar and the new. A life of pure routine compresses into a blur. A life of pure novelty becomes overwhelming and unsustainable. But a life with enough deviation from prediction to keep the brain's encoding machinery active—that's where temporal thickness becomes possible.

## Constructed, Not Given

The ultimate realization is that your relationship with time is constructed, not given. The acceleration you feel, the compression you experience, the sense that years are flying past—these aren't inevitable features of aging or modern life. They're the products of particular patterns of attention, particular life structures, particular ways of organizing experience. And what's constructed can be reconstructed.

This is both liberating and demanding. Liberating because it means the problem is solvable. Demanding because it means the solution requires more than tips and tricks. It requires a different relationship with experience itself. It requires choosing thickness over efficiency, presence over productivity, encoding over accomplishment.

It requires recognizing that the feeling of time passing is, in the end, the feeling of being alive. And being alive, as Seneca knew, is not something you postpone. It's something you practice, moment by moment, in whatever thickness time allows.

This is the framework. What it can't give you is the feeling — the personal stories, the scientific grounding, and the specific practices that turn ideas into lived experience.

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