Time as a Commodity: Reflections and Implications

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American society's conceptualization of time as a commodity has supported occupational therapy practice since its inception. This article discusses numerous contemporary media messages about time both because they are pervasive and because their meaning often escapes us. Popular magazines, greeting cards, and cartoons weave themes about time concepts into the fabric of other messages. There is remarkable coherence in the themes that cut across these three sources of time messages. Commercial images reveal the ideas that we are asked to accept about time; satirical images ask us to reflect about the ideas that we have accepted. A preponderance of images suggest that we control time and live in style. These suggestions constitute a cultural force that shapes personal values toward an end that we rarely consider. Occupational therapists need to recognize the presence and power of media images that radically challenge the meaning of living a satisfying life.

The American Society for the Promotion of Occupational Therapy was incorporated at a time when efficiency engineering was a burgeoning practice in industry. Our founders appointed Frank Gilbreth, a motion-study expert, as an honorary member of the early Society; his photographs of prosthetic and adaptive devices enhanced Dunton's (1919) text on reconstruction therapy (Licht, 1967). In Cheaper by the Dozen, Gilbreth’s son, Frank Jr. (1948), described his father's commitment to using time effectively. Fully clothed and sitting on the carpet, Frank Sr. taught his 12 children the most efficient way to lather their bodies in the bath. He had developed a strategy that minimized repetitive motions while prolonging the life of the soap. On another occasion, Gilbreth painted the Morse code alphabet on a wall in the family bathroom, so that time spent there might yield new learning. Gilbreth’s valuation of efficiency was not exceptional; the country’s commitment to industrialization was strong. It is not surprising, then, that the Society’s early promotion of occupation also involved a valuation of productivity and the effective use of time.

Early spokespersons made the connection clear. Meyer (1922) characterized the planned use of time, our “biggest wonder and asset” (p. 9), as an essentially human occupation. Slagle (1921) supported the balanced use of time to support habit training. Reed (1984) affirmed occupational therapy’s sustained focus on time: “Time and work, temporal adaptation, habit training, and time management all have as a central concept the organization of occupation into a unit or units of time” (p. 172). Therapists in diverse arenas of practice acknowledge time’s significant bearing on a person’s engagement in occupation. Mosey (1986) identified the time-related problems of many of those who seek our help:

- The student entering a demanding graduate program must rearrange routines to make more time for study. The new mother must adapt to the internal rhythm of her infant. . . .
- The retired individual no longer has the structure of work to organize time. The loss of a role partner, particularly a spouse, can lead to a sense of an intolerable future. Temporal dysfunction may arise from physically disabling conditions. The person with severe motor impairment may require considerably more time to perform activities of daily living than unimpaired individuals. . . . People with chronic illnesses may have complex, time-consuming regimens to carry out to prevent physical deterioration. . . . Deficits in temporal adaptation are also associated with psychosocial dysfunction. Individuals who are mentally retarded may have difficulty ordering events in time. . . . Individuals with affective disorders may disregard time or be unable to conceptualize and plan for future time. Anxiety disorders are sometimes characterized by rigidity in daily routines, severe procrastination, or difficulty in setting reasonable priorities relative to social roles. (p. 94)

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(1979) made the radical link: Time-management is an aspect of managing (and occupying) one's self. To help a patient who has temporal problems with occupation, we use a number of techniques. Watanabe developed the activity configuration interview to provide a glimpse of the world to which the patient is responding (Willard & Spackman, 1971). The configuration evaluates the person's perception of the quality of his or her performance of those daily activities that constitute a typical week. Cynkin (1979) suggested that therapists tabulate representative activity configurations for groups, such as white-collar workers in a city, to better identify an individual group member's problems or idiosyncrasies. Cynkin used an activities clock, which visually represents bands of time allocated to specific activities over a designated period. Her clock resembles the segmented "pie of life" that Neville (1980, p. 330) recommended to record a day's activities. Takata (1969) and Moorhead (1969) developed inventories for play and work to investigate the quantitative aspects of performance (i.e., frequency and time permitted or devoted to these functions). Therapists use these diagrams and inventories to explore the underlying organization of activities to help the patient better understand the meaning of personal life choices.

Therapists then use a similar variety of time lines, logs, and recording strategies to help persons explore new schedules of time use. The goal is often articulated as one of balance among self-care, work, and play functions. But the ultimate goal is twofold. The patient's temporal perspectives and practices will provide personal satisfaction and meaning, and these same perspectives and practices will also satisfy societal requirements (Barris, Kielhofner, & Watts, 1988). The person should fit comfortably enough into whatever society he or she wants to join; an adequate fit is a mark of personal adaptation and health.

A person's sense of time and plans for time develop within some societal context. Kielhofner (1977) discussed temporal adaptation within American culture, reminding us that our society values time as a commodity that can be bought and sold as well as saved or wasted. This view of time, he said, will define potentials and boundaries for occupational mastery (Kielhofner & Burke, 1985). What we choose to do in time reflects our 20th-century understanding that time is money.

We need to explore more deeply the messages about time that currently appear in the popular media, in order to consider the adverse consequences of perceiving time as a commodity. As professionals who acknowledge the importance of cultural adaptation, we need to understand our societal values as they are communicated in media images.

The Power of Images

Freeberg (1989), an art historian from Columbia University, argued that the power of images is pervasive. He discussed the nature of the power:

People are sexually aroused by pictures and sculptures; they mutilate them, kiss them, cry before them, and go on journeys to them; they are calmed by them, stirred by them, and incited to revolt. They give thanks by means of them, expect to be elevated by them, and are moved to the highest levels of empathy and fear. They have always responded in these ways; they still do. (p. 1)

Freeberg explained that this power inheres in images because such images mobilize our senses: "Once our eyes are arrested by an image, so the argument more or less runs from Plato onward, we can no longer resist the engagement of emotion and feeling" (p. 358).

Technological advances have enabled both the production and the accessibility of vast quantities and varieties of images. In a recent Newsweek article, Plagens (1989) described an exhibit at the Whitney Museum of New York entitled "Image World: Art and Media Culture":

The show's message is that media saturation is the new and unavoidable muse. One room-size installation declares in its wall text that Americans are bombarded every day with more than 1,600 commercial messages from 23,000 newspapers and magazines, 260,000 billboards and 162 million TV sets (left buzzing for seven hours a day. (p. 88)

Benjamin (1968) argued that technological advances were producing "inordinate quantities of seeing-matter" (p. 248). Bayley (as cited in Wind, 1985) regretted that tolerance is the outcome of this technological superabundance.

Because of the glut of images that clamor for attention, we respond to them with cursory glances. We do not permit our thoughts to be fully mobilized. We then believe ourselves immune to their influence. Nonetheless, we are highly vulnerable to the images that bombard us daily; their power deepens because we dismiss them. Images fill our world, arresting our eyes and shaping our feelings in subtle but real ways. Because we glance at the surface of things instead of at their deeper meaning, we disregard their latent empathy and fear. They have always responded in these ways; they still do (p. 1).

Media Messages: Who Tells About Time?

Numerous contemporary images in advertisements, greeting cards, and cartoons powerfully combine pictures and words to weave ideas about time into a matrix of messages about particular products. Gilmour (1986) used the term perceptual invariants to describe those unchanging features that play a role in human perception. Using gravity as an example, he explained that persons are nested in the earth and...
therefore depict the world as they experience it in gravity. Any picture of an earthly subject is also a picture of the effect of gravity. Similarly, pictures about the human experience are also messages about time, within which human experience occurs.

Magazines contain numerous advertisements that communicate messages about time. For this inquiry, I reviewed specific magazines that were accessible to me and to a representative number of the persons whom we treat. These magazines were Audubon, Cosmopolitan, Discover, Glamour, Ladies Home Journal, Mademoiselle, McCall's, Modern Maturity, Ms., Newsweek, Psychology Today, Self, Southern Living, Time, and Vogue. Although half of these are considered women's magazines, identical advertisements appeared in men's magazines such as Car and Craft, Entrepreneur, Hot Rod, Motor Trend, Omni, Sporting News, and Sports Illustrated. Greeting cards by Ambassador, Sunrise, and American Greetings also contained messages that tell persons what to think about time. Cartoons, particularly those drawn by Kliban, Larson, and Unger, often target our perceptions satirically. A remarkable coherence of themes exists across these three sources of time messages. Commercial images reveal the ideas that we are asked to accept about time; satirical images ask us to reflect about the ideas that we have accepted. Together, these images disclose societal values about time that we often treat lightly.

Among commercial advertisers concerned with time are watchmakers who sell timepieces. Not surprisingly, these manufacturers also comment on that which timepieces mark or measure. Marketers of a wide range of products and services also say much about time. Insurance firms, cosmetic manufacturers, travel agencies, department stores, drug companies, airlines, fashion agencies, food producers, car makers, and banking firms sell us ideas about time. These ideas constitute a subtle background that requires that we shift our perspective to become sensitive first to their presence and then to their power.

Beliefs About Time: A First Glance

It seems apt to look first at advertisements about timepieces, in which beliefs about time are more explicit. When we look at a watch, what are we asked to see? Contemporary images ask us to simultaneously see two distinct objects: a machine and a bracelet. The advertisements sell, along with the watch, ideas about time that are associated with either its machine or its bracelet aspect. Because the watch is a wearable clock, we need to first consider the nature of clocks. Merrell-Lynch shows us a disassembled watch. The picture shows clearly that a watch is a machine that consists of movable and interconnecting parts, and it frames the ad’s question, “What would time be without the clock?” The ad then answers: “Unmanageable. A clock gives time structure.” Time is an unstructured, unmanageable entity that clock machines, affixed to walls or to our bodies, can control.

An article about Calibre '89 appeared in the New York Times Magazine on January 15 and affirmed the technological potential of the clock (Weber, 1989). Calibre '89 is a timepiece that will soon be on the market. Its complexity is astounding—It has 1,728 parts, including 24 hands. A four-man design team, aided by computers, took nearly 10 years to make and assemble the parts of the “world’s most complicated portable timepiece.” The machine should auction at about $3 million. Its high price evokes another high price, that is, the price of the clock’s looming presence among us. Cartoonist Unger illustrated this presence in his depiction of two women chatting on a couch. They are seated beneath an enormous key that extends several feet above them and that serves as the windup mechanism for a clock in an adjoining room. The theme recurs. We seem ambivalent about the enormity of the clockwork because clock watching intrudes into our lives.

Our ambivalence is well founded. One powerful message from Timex about the bracelet aspect of the watch suggests why. Five watches free float side by side, their bands unclasped as if supporting them in flight. We read, “For while we may use quintessential things for commonplace purposes, they serve as talismans and guideposts, touching our souls with souls of their own.” These watches are quintessential, that is, they possess the fifth essence, the highest element that composes heavenly bodies. Time, we conclude, is an awesome presence that we must charm; we dare not approach it unguided. Have our watches replaced the celestial bodies that were once of our personal guideposts through time? Have they become our primary defense, our charm against the chaos of time? Have timepieces, either as machines or as charms, intruded into our very souls? The ad frames a question that we can begin to address only by looking at more ways in which watches are presented.

The Form of Time in American Society: A Closer Look

Kliban’s cartoon “Dawn of Time” reminds us that the wearable time machine differs from timepieces used in the past. In the cartoon, a primitive man hunkers in tattered hides at a shore’s edge, looking steadfastly at his watch. Time dawns, we understand, with the ticking of this man’s watch and not with the sun that rises behind him. Many contemporary watches display the position of the sun or the phases of the moon. We see these natural events by looking down at our wrists.

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rather than up at the sky. The watch prevents us, Kliban suggests, from noticing the passage of time elsewhere: in the sunrise, the movements of planets, the tides, the seasons, and our bodily rhythms.

Watching a clock affixed to one's body has not always been the way in which persons have measured time. Timepieces from the past differ markedly from current timepieces. There have been sundials, hour-glasses, and water clocks, but we choose to wear small clocks. Von-Franz (1978) asked us to seriously reflect on the meaning of these differences:

The forms of time give shape to human experience. Traditional thought, from China to ancient Greece, embodies time not only in gods and goddesses but also in the various devices that measure and grasp it. Time as flux is apparent in the flow of grains in an hourglass; time as eternal return, in the circling aeons of the Indian and Mayan calendars or the tail-eating serpent Ouroboros; time as a universal pattern of synchronous events in the I Ching or the astrologer's intricate figure-work.

Contemporary timepieces embody time in the watch, a ticking machine that is also a bracelet. The wristwatch is more meaningful than any other personal adornment because it is our form of time. This wearable clock suggests that we want both control and style to shape our human experience. The watch embodies time; we then embody the watch.

Many ads present the watch as a personal accessory along with purses, belts, shoes, and eyeglasses. We are asked to believe that the watch will enhance us and make us more functional and attractive. Casio watchmakers emphasize their power to extend our functional capacities. They present a shocking color image of a young man's face unhinged at the side and pulled open like a door to reveal the numerical contents of his mind. They promise that their databank watch will extend our memories, thereby making us perfect. Swatch touts the watch's potential to extend us in other ways. In one of their ads, a woman faces the camera, arms folded across her chest, wearing only three watches, to tell us: "I feel naked without one." The accompanying text promises that the watch will give us more than the time of day—"It will enhance our sexual attractiveness. A watch strapped to our bodies, we see, will perfect us.

Kliban's cartoon illustrates the extent to which we accept the watch as an integral part of ourselves, whether as a mechanized piece that ticks or as a stylish piece that charms. Rising from sleep, a tousled, unshaven man stares blearily at a circular hole stamped out of his wrist. Without his watch, he experiences a missing piece, a hole in himself. The image startles us into a recognition of how incomplete we sometimes feel when without a watch. An even more startling image appeared with an article about personal belongings. In this piece, a naked woman reclines on her side with her back to the camera. Arrayed on soft fabric just behind her, in the foreground, lies a cluster of the woman's belongings, including her watch. The caption reads, "We are in a very real way, extensions of the things we have." What an Orwellian reversal of the concept of accessory! Instead of being extended by objects, have we become their extensions? Have watches, by virtue of our having embodied them, become such a quintessential part of us that they approximate our soul? Images such as these are provocative and disturbing.

Ads repeatedly argue that time is an entity that needs to be structured or charted and that our timepieces allow us to do so. Timepiece ads work because their originators recognize our need for control and style. When we look beyond timepiece ads to consider ads in which time is presented more subtly as a context for personal experience, we find an overwhelming number of messages that elaborate our need.

Time's Connection With Ambiguous Standards

Many subtle images remind us that American society uses time as a measure of quality. The standard is paradoxical, but its polarities are consistent with our dual image of the timepiece as both machine and bracelet. Advertisers use conflicting messages to reflect the ways in which we defend against the passing of time. Such paradoxical messages are everywhere.

Our standard is rapidity, or how quickly things get done. Express Mail gets the letter there faster. Medipren provides fast relief. Clinique skin products make a man look "terrific in 2 minutes." Toshiba fax machines fire off text and graphics in 20 seconds or less. Human beings must also be fast. Tag Heuer presents Olympian Carl Lewis running past a blurred crowd. The "superb athlete" runs fast; his life, the ad says, is "dominated by infintesimally precise records of time." He is a winner and a champion because he is fast.

Rapidity, however, is not our sole standard for quality. An equal number of images tell us to value durability, that is, how slowly an object deteriorates. An advertisement for the television game show "Wheel of Fortune" depicts a golden metallic robot turning letters on the game board, above which reads the caption "Longest-running game show. 2012 A.D." The program is good because it will last. We also understand that the robot Vanna is superior to the person for whom it is named, because the person will not endure. Yamaha pianos have an unequaled reputation for durability. Dewar's whiskey presents a ruddy-cheeked herdsman in a colorful countryside, in which we see an ancient stone dwelling. He touts the Scottish rule, "It takes hardy stock to survive." But
many persons are not hardy, and most are not fast. The human condition limits one's endurance. Ads imply that if we use the product advertised, we will become hardy and fast by association, thereby improving our condition.

Our simultaneous valuation of the modern and the traditional constitutes another paradox. Our world would be less valuable if it were without modern conveniences. A Larson cartoon entitled "Before Television" illustrates this conviction. Two children are lying on a living-room rug, elbows propped to hold their chins, staring at a blank wall. Before television, we understand, there was nothing for them to see. Virginia Slims ads contrast the old-fashioned woman with the modern woman. Modern is decidedly better, whether the changes occur over time or in a revolutionary manner. But we also value tradition, or rootedness in the past. White's antique furniture is unexcelled. Traditional scents like Fendi's la passiona di Roma return us to an unsurpassed way of living. Passionate arguments alternately name modernity and tradition as an absolute good, and we are ambivalent. We fail to recognize our arbitrary attributions and our dual valuations based on time.

Numerous images are prescriptive. Suggestions about what we should do with time are often associated with our ambiguous standards for quality, but the basic functions prescribed follow the dual form of the watch. Some ads tell us to mechanize time, whereas others urge us to follow the guideposts of style.

**Measuring Time: A Matter of Control**

Advertisers tell us that the timepiece as machine helps us to measure time, manage it, and ultimately save it. Cartoons and greeting cards explain why we should do so. On the cover of a Sunrise card, a startled girl clings tenaciously to the webbed foot of Mother Goose, who has just barely taken flight. The message inside cautions, "Time flies... make the most of it." Images like these show the horror of time's passing. Birthday cards count years along with all manner of bodily inefficiencies. An image accompanies a brief article on the effects of aging. In the image, a clock dial replaces the elderly person's features, and the hands show that it is a few minutes after 5. An oval cutaway reveals not a brain, but an open sky. We understand: Productive times are over, so the older mind holds air. Aging compromises the body and empties the mind.

Media messages encourage us to resist the effects of time, to override our natural rhythm. A lovely woman is casually dressed and somewhat windblown in a full-spread ad by Oil of Olay. She raises her arm to show her watch more clearly. She says, "They say men get character lines and women get wrinkles. Well, I don't intend to get either." In a most direct attack on aging, the ad scorns even its positive aspect. Upjohn urges a balding man who watches a setting sun not to lose hope, because baldness is treatable. Combatting the ravages of an aging body seems the only intelligent and scientific thing to do. Laszlo skin product manufacturers call it "the application of brain cells." By using their products, we are "using our heads." We are led to believe that, by using these skin-care products, we can defend ourselves against nature and restructure time so that we are young again.

We learn what to do from images that tell us how to make the most of time—Manage it. One fashion image inadvertently illustrates the result of all of this controlling: a person controlled. A woman depicted in a smartly coordinated outfit rushes through the city streets with her eye on her watch. On closer observation, we note that the watch leads her. Most ads, however, present a person in charge. Dillard's shows us an alert, bespectacled young woman in a business suit, phone in one hand, monthly calendar in the other, taking charge of her time. Advertisers sell us a variety of organizers so that we can effectively structure our time while visibly compartmentalizing it. Calendars box time into visible units that represent hours, days, and months. Boxes obliterate the sense of time as a flow or even as a rhythm; they are as much an artifact as is the ticking of time. Time neither ticks nor happens in boxes.

We manage time because we want to fill it properly, but also because it is a commodity in which to invest. Nightingale-Conant Corporation asks us to spend time listening to a cassette tape because the investment will change our lives. The Guatemala Tourist Commission assures us that if we give Guatemala a week, they will give us 2,000 years—a great return. Advertisers pander to our regard of time as currency. They ask us to spend money and time wisely on them.

The watch as machine gives us one form of defense against the passage of time: It allows us to contain, compartmentalize, and manage it. An equal number of ads promise that we can charm time, a different defense that takes the form of enhancing, preserving, and conforming to what is timely.

**Charming Time: A Matter of Style**

As bracelets, watches are often portrayed as valuables made of gold. Ads about gold tell us why we believe that it is valuable. In an ad for Krementz jewelry, a beautiful, ethereal woman clasps her hands near her face to display a gold ring and earrings. She says, "Permanent things, that's what it is. I think you just reach a
point where permanent things start becoming the most important. ... As long as there's a sun, this is going to shine.” Gold, like the sun, endures. If we wear gold, the Krementz ad suggests, we will “turn into stars.” Watches are quintessential and make us so, especially when they are made of gold.

Watches are valuable, and advertisers often claim that they are works of art. Movado advertises their Museum watch as a “pure expression of time as art.” This watch dial is part of the permanent collection of New York’s Museum of Modern Art; the watch-art piece connection cannot be made much clearer. Fendi watchmakers, a bit more subtle, superimpose a watch sculpted from raw gold onto the image of a classical sculpture. They hope that we will understand that they are works of art, Movado advertises their watches as “the latest Roman masterpiece” is the watch. But style, not beauty, is what advertisers really sell.

A watch exists for every life-style. Watches of all kinds promise to enrich our lives. A Piaget watch helps one couple enjoy a romantic evening. For another couple, the Citizen Elegance watch proves that “What’s on your arm should be as beautiful as who’s on it.” And then there is the Swatch watch, it caters to those who “are really into metal.” The ad shows a woman in a metal-studded halter top. Ads endorse conformity to the latest fad—they sell living in style.

Images that tell us to enhance time and preserve it resemble those that sell the stylish dimension of the timepiece. An ad for Grand Marnier liqueur takes us to a sunny beach where two glasses of liqueur await us. We are told that with this liqueur, we will have a “grand time.” Palm-Aire resort owners show a middle-aged woman reclining on a netlike fabric and luxuriating in her special moment. They claim that “for two glorious weeks a year, [they’ll] make [us] forget the other fifty existed.” How tragic that we can enhance some moments only by forgetting others. Such is the way of fashion.

We want to remember certain occasions, however, and so we preserve them in various ways. Greeting cards depict our way of celebrating and preserving such times with music, candles, and confetti. In an ad for the Panasonic S-VHS camcorder, we see a photograph of a young boy holding a spectacular shell that he has just found on the beach. A yellow rectangle frames this image, and we are told that the product will capture this moment “sharper ... with more detail than the actual experience.” We understand that the technological recording will not only preserve, but surpass, our personal recollection. Camera manufacturers teach us to create something lasting so that we might also endure. Sontag (1977) described the hope: “The photographer stays behind his or her camera, creating a tiny element of another world: the image-world that bids to outlast us all!” (p. 11).

**Time as a Commodity: The Risks**

Control and style are strongly promoted values that shape our cultural experience. The watch's dual form of machine and bracelet follows the functions that we exercise on time. We control time, hoping to defend against its unmitigated power. We charm time, with one finger on the pulse of style, as if it were our own. The watch suggests our societal preoccupation with vigilance and superficial regard.

Most of the images that we encounter in advertisements differ markedly from those found in the story of The Velveteen Rabbit (Williams, 1978). The Rabbit, new to a young boy’s nursery, asks the Skin Horse, an older and wiser toy who has been kind to him, a question that most of us ponder:

> “What is REAL?” asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. “Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?”

> “Real isn’t how you are made,” said the Skin Horse. “It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.”

> “Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit.

> “Sometimes,” said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. “When you are Real you don’t mind being hurt.”

> “Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,” he asked, “or bit by bit?”

> “It doesn’t happen all at once,” said the Skin Horse. “You become. It takes a long time. That’s why it doesn’t often happen so people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose joints and are very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all, because once you are Real you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t understand.” (pp. 16-17)

We fail to understand the irony that the watch, designed to mark the passing of time, has been strapped to the body to become the pacemaker par excellence. We also fail to understand that stylish trappings do not guarantee beauty: Advertisers sell us ideas that we are too willing to buy, ideas that cartoonists claim we have bought at great price.

Commercial images say that we have welcomed the machine into our souls. We buzz within. We have sharp edges. We are wound up and less in touch with our natural rhythms. We believe that we may break easily, and so we keep ourselves carefully. We have internalized style and timeliness as guideposts. We fear having our hair “loved off”; we defend against getting shabby even though shabbiness sometimes accompanies wisdom. It is important to us that we not be ugly or out of synchrony with the latest fad. We seem not to understand what it means to be real.

We are so convinced that we must make something of time that we rarely allow ourselves moments in which to become. With paradoxical standards for excellence, we spend our lives arbitrarily valuing the
fast and the enduring, the modern and the traditional, unsure of our own or another’s true worth. We have incorporated a ticking and a glitter deep within ourselves. We use the power of the machine and the charm of the bracelet to defend against our being in time. We are not comfortable with the thought of becoming, of getting worn or ugly, or of stepping out of some arbitrarily established synchrony on our way to becoming real.

**Reflections and Implications for Practice**

Gilbreth’s (1948) portrayal of an early-20th-century father demonstrating to his children the most efficient way to bathe assumes new meaning in the late 20th century when illuminated by the values embedded in media messages. We cannot dismiss the tremendous implications for practice that inhere in these messages. We must acknowledge that the commodification of time, as presented in the media, lends itself to unsatisfactory distortions.

If a major goal in occupational therapy is to help a person achieve personal meaning and satisfaction, we may have to expend considerable effort determining whether our patients are making personally meaningful choices or are instead choosing in response to the pressures of fad and fashion. In our therapeutic interventions, we may have to more aggressively pursue our patients’ responses to the question about autonomy asked in Watanabe configuration. We may need to add these questions to the more modern configuration interviews that omit them:

1. I want to do this and I think this is good.
2. I want to do this and I think this is not good.
3. Others make me do this and I’m glad they do.
4. Others make me do this and I wish they didn’t. (Willard & Spackman, 1971, p. 80)

But these questions may not uncover our patients’ unconscious assimilation and valuation of media-promoted control and style. We might need to more closely examine and discuss our patients’ value statements for the presence of advertising hype about what to do with time. Patients exposed to a daily bombardment of images may need to engage in more reflective exchanges about the life-style purchases that they want to make and about what they want to become and by what means.

Rather than accepting our societal activity configuration as an unchallenged norm against which our patients should measure themselves, we as therapists may need to communicate to our patients that our societal overvaluation of control and style threatens meaningful doing. Aware of the powerful suggestions in the media, we can help our patients examine not only their own occupations, but also those sold in advertisements. Aware of the constant sensual bombardment from without, we can help each person to detect a personal rhythm within. We can, if we recognize the power of the media, understand our patients’ excessive control or excessive need for conformity as personal problems that reflect their unconsidered acceptance of our societal distortions of time.

Mosey (1986) argued that “the adaptive use of time is characterized by control, the right amount of control” (p. 93). When our organization of time is too controlled, it is no longer adaptive. Our distorted perception of time’s passing as a horror, our image of time as chaos needing structure, scarcely resemble Meyer’s (1922) characterization of time as a wonder and an asset. We have supplanted a more benign early-20th-century view of time with that of an ogre that keeps us either buzzing and changing or over-controlling, unsure of what we really value.

As occupational therapists, we can recognize the merits of a person’s adapting to societal values, but we also commit to personal choice, to individual differences, and to balance. If we encourage our patients to achieve an adequate measure of productivity and efficiency, we also understand that their activities must be satisfying. A therapist who practices in a culture that considers time a commodity will need to assume more of an advocacy role to support a person’s plan to enjoy an activity, like a bath, for its own sake. We have, it seems, bought only part of the early-20th-century vision. Gilbreth (1948) described the missing piece.

Someone once asked Dad: “But what do you want to save time for? What are you going to do with it?”

“For work, if you love that best,” said Dad. “For education, for beauty, for art, for pleasure.” He looked over the top of his pince-nez. “For rumble-so-peeg, if that’s where your heart lies.” (p. 237)

Powerful media messages shape societal attitudes and personal responses, sometimes making it harder for us to understand where our hearts lie. Advertisements constitute part of the world environment that we and our patients must consider. Ads reflect larger trends that we can monitor to ensure that our use of occupation stays relevant and therapeutic. Part of our commitment to helping persons live satisfying lives may mean tempering the distortions associated with identifying time exclusively as a commodity. Increasing societal pressures to manage time efficiently and in style may overwhelm persons struggling with the realities of illness and disability. Our professional tradition supports meaningful engagement in the world, a perspective that is especially vital today.

It implies that there is a reservoir of sensitivity and skill in the hands of man which can be tapped for his health. It implies the rich adaptability and durability of the central nervous system which can be influenced by experiences. And more than this, it implies that man, through the use of his hands, can creatively deploy his thinking, feelings and purposes to make...
himself at home in the world and to make the world his home. (Reilly, 1962, p. 2)

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