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## **A BRIEF ESSAY ON TIME**

By Angela Blanchard

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*Time passes differently for the privileged than for the neglected.*

For the poor, time is measured in packages of effort devoted to survival, the time it takes to earn your rent, the hourly wage, overtime (if you are lucky) the time it takes to prepare your meal. The wait at the grocery store, the wait at the clinic, the wait in the emergency room, the wait for a raise, the wait for the bus, the wait for change. The wait for an apartment you can afford, for the prison term to end, for the class to open up ....of all the struggles of the poor, boredom is the least understood. *Poverty is monotonous.* It dictates that time will move in a slow herky jerky circular path, wrapping around and around each day, choking the life out of living.

The wealthy buy time for activities they want to do.... To pursue interests, to explore pleasures of the mind, body and spirit. Of all they have, what is most enviable is their ability to purchase learning, intellectual time, time that moves in waves of excitement, a life with an evolving plot that twists and turns on the imagination of the main character. Of course, wealth will not compensate for lack of imagination, and money cannot buy vision. But lack of opportunity can strangle the life right out of one.

*Every discipline has its own ruler for time,* archeologists measure in thousands of years, historians and politicians in decades, physicians in hours and days. Each profession creates definitions for time in the segments that produce change... how long between ice ages, how many years of a presidency, how many days to live... Social work measures time in life stages, in family time, in developmental time. In contrast, resources are allocated to our work in political cycles, years of public awareness, policy development, legislative action, service delivery.

We work in an environment that demands that we remain sensitive to the suffering and struggles of neighbors who measure time in hours, the time between one meal and the next, the time between one phone call and the next, the time between one hug and the next. This is physiological time, emotional time, the fragments of life filled with pain or joy, loneliness or affection, acceptance or rejection, satisfaction or hunger. These bits and pieces are the small tiles, cemented together that make up a lifetime of hope or despair. We are supposed to hear them, see them, help them.

Our schools are filled with adolescents who suffer acutely from isolation, fear, self-consciousness, anxiety and loneliness. They fill their hours feverishly seeking acceptance,

attention, and visibility. They are hungry and their emotional clock says this unbearable moment of rejection will go on forever. The bullies will always win. I will always be left out. Their sense of time is collapsed. Lunchtime lasts forever.

While our adolescents tough it out in school hallways, our elderly neighbors exist in monotonous neglect, invisible to everyone. Seniors who know the value of a life, know that middle school is a moment, know what is worth fighting for and what is not, sit alone with decades of experience and no one to share it with. We need a wrinkle in time that will bring these generations together.

In the morning we talk to the policy makers about the integration of early childhood services. We talk in terms of building community awareness, forming partnerships, improving quality. We talk in terms of years and are excited because we can see it happening. And then we remember that the babies who needed this when we started are in middle school now. That is painful. How old will these babies be when we get it worked out? How many years of missed opportunities will pass? How many empty days will go by as we work toward the “long term” solution?

What makes our jobs so excruciating is that solutions are products of political and societal changes, measured in years, while pain continues to erupt daily. We must continue to hear our neighbors and care for them, even when we can't help them, even when we know the real solution is years away.

As we reach out with our hearts and hands to connect with our less fortunate neighbors, we must work on the political, societal solutions. *We must have the faith to commit to processes that take years, and stay present to the pain that fills days.*