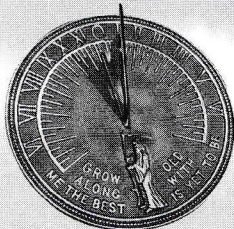


FATHER TIME'S BIRTHDAY P



Time Is a Tragic Jester, 2005, © Crystal Charquill.



ONCE UPON A TIME on a summer solstice, the longest day of the year, Father Time went on strike. Step by shaky step he descended the mountain where his time-worn workshop sat and headed toward the valley below. He was tired and cranky. He had been around longer than anyone could remember, keeping track of time.

He slumped down on a boulder in the middle of a lush meadow. "Nobody cares about me anymore," he whined to Mother Earth as she lovingly tended the wild flowers of cinnamon red, mellow yellow, and cornflower blue blooming at her feet.

"I've been here so long people take me for granted. In fact, all they do is complain about me. You know, how there's never enough time."

"Oh, you're just feeling old," said Mother Earth. "You know, like time is passing you by. Come sit near one of my rivers and watch it flow. Notice how it drifts on and on forever and a day. It will help you relax."

"Or maybe you simply have too much time on your hands," added Brother Sun as he rose over the peaceful clearing. "How about helping me to grow this summer's crops?"

"You could kill some time with me," chimed in Sister Moon, barely visible in the morning sky. "Why we could spend all night traveling the time zones. Guaranteed to make time fly!"

Father Time was not listening. What did they know about being disregarded? People were always gazing at the moon, basking in the sun, and admiring the beauty of nature. He stood up, straightened his tattered gray coat, dusted off his torn top hat, and picked up his cane carved millennia ago from the branches of the first tree. "There is no time like the present to deal with a problem. World, get ready for a wakeup call. I am about to drop my first time bomb!" Moving at double time, he charged off in the direction of his workshop.

Overhead flew the BlueSky Jester, wearing his cloud suit. Accompanying himself on an antique lute he sang to no one in particular:

Time for me, time for you
Time for everything we do
Hurry and rush are such a waste
The magician is one who has never known haste.

Surrounded by his huge library, clocks of every kind, shape, and size, and tons of time-related gizmos and gadgets that he had invented over time, Father Time smiled to himself. He carefully selected one of the big black volumes and flipped through the yellowing pages. When he found what he was looking for, he got up and danced a jagged little jig.

"Time is on my side!" he giggled as he shuffled around the room crowded with timepieces galore. "Now all I have to do is find it." And he began to search through all his assembled paraphernalia. Sundials, shadow sticks, candle clocks, alarm clocks, grandfather clocks, wall clocks, time capsules, egg timers, and wheelbarrows full of watches. No luck until he closed his eyes, spun clockwise three times, and pointed.

There, hidden behind the ancient water clock called the clepsydra, was what he needed: the World's Hourglass.

The glass had been blown from the shards of a rainbow, and its dainty holder was pure gold. He had built it himself back before time began and hoped it would not take an eternity to remember how to open it. Hours felt like seconds as, happily busy, he tinkered with the mechanism. With infinite care, he pried off the top. From his very fingertips, glowing now as bright as the gold, a substance began to fall into the hourglass.

He gave his hands a final shake. "Pressed for time, are they? I'll teach them to be ungrateful. This will put a wrinkle in their time: twenty-five hours instead of twenty-four!" Then he laughed a lonely laugh until tears ran down his lined face, making him seem even older than he was. The BlueSky Jester heard the sad sound and began to sing:

Yesterday is real as tomorrow
And they're both the same as today
Calendars change the numbers and names
Yet time is neither lost nor saved.



Arlene Gay Levine, author of *Thirty-Nine Ways to Open Your Heart: An Illuminated Meditation* (Conari Press), has had prose and poetry appear in many venues, including *The New York Times*, an off-Broadway show, and on CD. Her poetry is frequently anthologized, most recently in *Serenity Prayers* (Andrews McMeel, 2009). She tends her garden of roses, herbs, and words in Forest Hills, New York, where she is currently at work on a collection of her poems and a novel for middle graders.

Before very long it appeared that something was wrong. Time seemed to pass more slowly than ever. Brother Sun could not judge when to rise or set. Sister Moon did not know when to wax and wane. Mating and hibernating became a guessing game for the animals in the fields. Even tides had no idea if they should rise or ebb.

Of course, the people were by far the worst off because they imagined that without time their world would end. They had built their lives out of seconds, minutes, and hours, and now they felt they had nothing to count on. What could they put their faith in if not time? Many of them were so depressed they refused to get out of bed. Others sat and wailed and waited for the end of time as if it were around the corner.

The only soul unaffected by the changes was the BlueSky Jester. Patient and kind, he made his rounds as usual at no specific time. Why worry when everyone was

always in the right place right on time no matter where or when? He felt no pressure to keep up with the times. No time was especially superior, nor was there any one moment he would call bad. Things and times simply were or weren't, as they were meant to be, for the good of all. To cheer the people he sang:

Joyful moments, sacred hours
Days of sorrow, years of growth
Let us live as bloom the flowers
Sunup, sundown; perfect both.

As time passed, the novelty of Father Time's trick wore off, and he became more lonely and bored than ever. He wished someone would come and ask him the correct time. But the few people still brave enough to function now that the hours could not be trusted were busy trying to figure out what to do when.

Father Time was too proud to admit his bad behavior had not gotten him the attention he wanted. "Time waits for no man!" he howled in his solitary pain. Instead of removing the twenty-fifth hour, he began to add more to the hourglass, one for each day he was ignored. His fingertips glowed overtime.

Mother Earth began to worry, which was not like her at all. From time out of mind, the seasons had always come and gone on schedule. Of course she could not be sure now that time was out of whack, but soon it ought to be the autumnal equinox when the hours of night and day must balance. How would the light and dark share their power in the world when Father Time kept adding hours willy-nilly to each day?

She called Brother Sun and Sister Moon to her side. "Time is running out!"

"Don't you mean over?" asked Sister Moon, her silver eyes flashing from lack of sleep. "Why I've never seen so many hours in a day. How many is it now? Thirty-six? Forty-five? A hundred and two?"

"I've lost count," sighed Brother Sun. How weary he had become shining on and on, even when Sister Moon appeared, just in case. "I do know one thing for sure. We need a time saver. Why look at the leaves! They don't even know whether to turn colors or fall off." He shook his head sadly. "And what should I tell the robins when they ask if it's time to fly south?"

So even this powerful trio started to lose hope. Time was marching on, but for the time being it was on a non-stop parade with no time out. The feeling of gloom was overwhelming. Brother Sun, exhausted from all his overtime, began to fade, and without him Mother Earth and all her creatures were doomed. Sister Moon, however, refused to give up and instead imagined this headline in *The New York Times*: "Planet Saved in the Nick of Time."

As she visualized a solution, the BlueSky Jester arrived, unnoticed as usual, humming this little tune:

Time is a line
With no beginning or end
Some call it enemy; I call it friend.
Summer to fall, winter to spring
We all dance in the eternal ring.

Brother Sun, enlivened by the harmony of music and wisdom of words, became energized, his rays once more gently caressing the land.

"I suddenly have this feeling," said Mother Earth, who was always good with hunches, "the only way to get our timekeeper punching a time clock again is to make him feel wanted."

"We have to let him know he is loved," agreed Brother Sun. "But how, if he doesn't already feel my warmth and understand? Or see the sparkling splendor of the night sky or the glory of growing things in this garden we call home?"

"You could throw him a party," said a tiny voice.

"Who is that?" the three called out in unison.

An infant neatly dressed in fluffy white diapers and a blue satin sash crawled toward them. "It's me, Baby New Year, and I can't be born if we don't get some order back around here. Things need to occur when it is time for them to happen. Don't you think it's high time we took some action?"

He was such an adorable baby that Mother Earth forgot her troubles for a moment and lifted him up on her lap. His innocent face beamed with the sheer joy of being alive. "I may not know much yet," he said, "but it seems like nothing makes people feel more special than a party in their honor. After all, I get one real doozy every year, so I am sort of an authority on the subject."

"Time is of the essence," said Mother Earth, almost to herself. "A party it will be." Then she smiled at Baby New Year. "Have you ever noticed, from time to time, it's the young ones who have the best answers?" Without wasting a moment, they set to gathering for the celebration all the things made more beautiful by time. First came the people of the planet and every fond memory they owned, followed by the harvest of mature fruit, vegetables, and wine. Sister Moon took a stitch in time and sewed a lovely new robe as a gift. She studded it with seven stars whose sparkle was known to grow brighter eon after eon. Then they sent Brother Sun to Father Time's workshop to shine his Light that was Love as an invitation.

In his musty ancient workshop, dark with the ravages of time, the old man felt like a prisoner doing time with no visitors allowed. Time and time again, he was tempted to empty the sands of time from the hourglass.

Why go on if nobody would give him the time of day? Pacing back and forth, he decided that the perfect time was at hand. He picked up the World's Hourglass, ready to smash it into oblivion. Suddenly a ray of sunlight pierced through the shadows warming his gnarled hands.

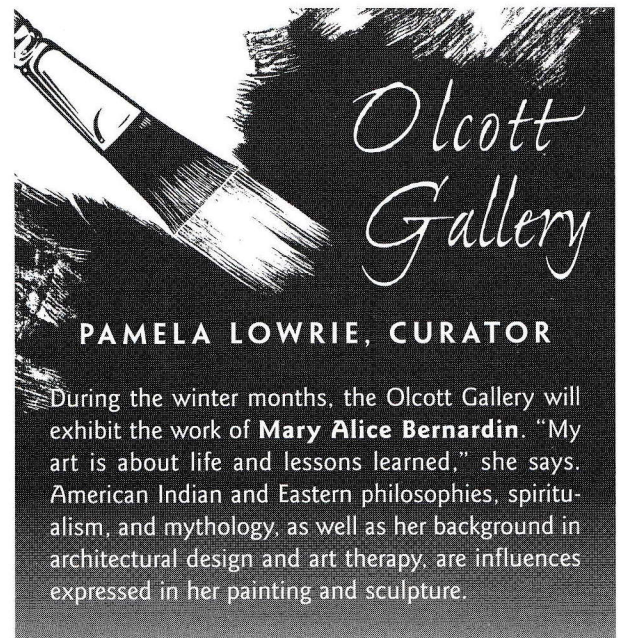
"Come along with me, Father," said Brother Sun, "and bring that hourglass with you. We must be somewhere special exactly on time." Father Time scowled, but he was secretly overjoyed to see that someone at least had not forgotten him.

"I promise you'll have the time of your life." And so saying, Brother Sun lighted the way for the lonely old man.

"Surprise!" everyone yelled as the two arrived. Baby New Year sat atop a colossal cake. Nobody knew how many candles to put on it, so they chose him instead. Overwhelmed with emotions, Father Time dropped the World's Hourglass. At that precise instant, it was scooped up by the BlueSky Jester, who composed this ditty for the occasion:

Any time at all is the best one for you
What once was old becomes brand new
When the journey seems finished there's your start
Live not by the minutes but from your heart.

The crowd applauded wildly, and Father Time, touched by the whole world waiting to honor him, willingly emptied the hourglass of all but the original twenty-four hours. Now time, for the time being, runs like a clock again. Still, there are a few of us, like the ageless BlueSky Jester, who will always remember our story is a timeless one. ■



Olcott
Gallery

PAMELA LOWRIE, CURATOR

During the winter months, the Olcott Gallery will exhibit the work of **Mary Alice Bernardin**. "My art is about life and lessons learned," she says. American Indian and Eastern philosophies, spiritualism, and mythology, as well as her background in architectural design and art therapy, are influences expressed in her painting and sculpture.