

BORROWED TIME

When I was a kid, let me tell you, I loved my comic books. ðLegion of Super-Heroesö and ðJustice League of Americaö were among my favorites, as I recall, since each of them featured a whole *team* of superheroes ó so I figured I was getting a lot more bang (or rather, *BANG!* ó as well as *KABLAMMM!* and *KABLOOIE!*) for my twelve ó or thirteen ó cents. (That piece of data will tell you how long ago I was a kid!)

Another of my favorite comics didn't have to do with superheroes as such at all. ðChallengers of the Unknownö were just four ordinary mortal guys ó daredevils and adventurers who had each faced death and survived. And so they decided, since they were all living on ðborrowed timeö anyway, to devote whatever time they had left to helping humanity ó which in their case usually meant defeating mad scientists and alien monsters. (Later in their careers, they got costumes featuring an hourglass logo, symbolizing the ðborrowed timeö idea. I thought the new costumes were especially cool.)

Fast forward. Go past the day I came home to find that Mom had cleaned my room and all the comic books and MAD Magazines were gone. Go past the day I found a paperback SF novel in my dad's van, and abandoned the pictures for the words. Go past marches on Washington, a presidential resignation, a war abandoned as hopeless! Go past that decade spent waiting for the sirens to announce that the game of chicken was over and the missiles were on their way. Fast forward, past that brief moment ó oh God,

so brief ó when we thought that the song of history might finally go into a major key, away from all the dissonance and discord of the previous forty-five years of cold war! only to see it take up a new theme, a new world order, that gave precious little improvement over the old one. Go past the first oil war, go past the rejection of its architects, go past those illusionary days when it seemed that world peace might just be a few petty tyrants' disposal away. Go past opportunities squandered, an election that maybe wasn't slow down as things get out of hand, and slam on the brakes in the fall of 2001.

The dust from the September 11 attacks had not yet settled, and the echoes had not quieted, when the anthrax letters started appearing. Everywhere, it seemed, new vulnerabilities were becoming glaringly obvious ó the food supply, the transportation system, the chemical industry. That's when that old phrase from a whizbang comic book came crashing back into my consciousness ó "*borrowed time.*"

And this, I realized with a shock, was what ðnowö was. This was what we were living through, what we were living in: borrowed time. After 9/11, after the anthrax scare, after the DC highway ambushes, it became clear that death, in the form of terrorist attack, could show up unexpectedly anytime, anywhere, for any one ó might have showed up already, except for fortunate circumstance. And each and every day from now on was ó extra. A gift! or a loan.

Borrowed. Time.

And yes, of course that has in fact always been true, and we have always known it was true,

somewhere in the backs of our minds ó but this new clarity would not allow itself to be quietly suppressed in the ways we've always suppressed the knowledge of our mortality. Before, we could try to do things ó exercise, eat right, pray, vote for this party or that ó that we thought would help protect us, or do other things that would at least distract us. But the randomness of terror, and its pervasiveness, meant that this was no longer the case. *That could just as well have been you, it says to us. Your precious defenses, whatever they are, are meaningless. I will come calling, and I will come calling when I want.*

You wake up. You're on a rollercoaster. It's not too bad, you can take the dips, curves, sudden drops, long ascents, sometimes it's actually fun, occasionally you get a wonderful view ó but then you notice something.

There seems to be a brick wall at the end.

It's hard to see; you only catch momentary glimpses as you whip around this sharp corner or that. But there's a brick wall, and all the cars ahead of you go into it, and then you don't see them anymore. The brick wall remains intact, but the cars are gone. You don't know how much track there is between you and the wall, but there's no question, that's where you're going.

Then you see that not everyone notices ó or at least, they don't show whether they're noticing. They talk to their neighbors, they do whatever, they enjoy the moment they're in, they raise their arms and scream with delight, or they hold on, white-knuckled, eyes closed.

So you do have this: you have choices.

Here's what I suddenly realized one day at an amusement park in New Hampshire, halfway through my first real rollercoaster ride: the problem was that *I wasn't driving*. That's the source of the fright, that fact that you aren't in control. If you were driving, the sudden changes of acceleration and direction would be nothing, you do that to yourself all the time, right?

So I decided to play a trick on myself: I pretended that I was driving.

It worked like a charm.

It's not hard: you lean into the turns, you tell yourself, "Okay, now I'm going to make this thing barrel down that hill, now I want to make this sharp left turn, now I want to fly over the top of this next rise." You can tell yourself, "I want to reach that wall. Whatever is on the other side, I want to reach it." And when you reach it, if you have time to see it coming, you lift up your arms and go through without fear.

And meanwhile, in the finite time between here and there, in this borrowed time, what is there to do but make your fellow passengers ride more comfortable? share that granola bar in your pocket? offer a word of encouragement to someone with white knuckles? try to help settle the lovers' spat in the next seat? or call someone on your cell phone, and tell them that you love them, and you're having a great time, and the view is fantastic.

(adapted from an essay originally written in 2006)

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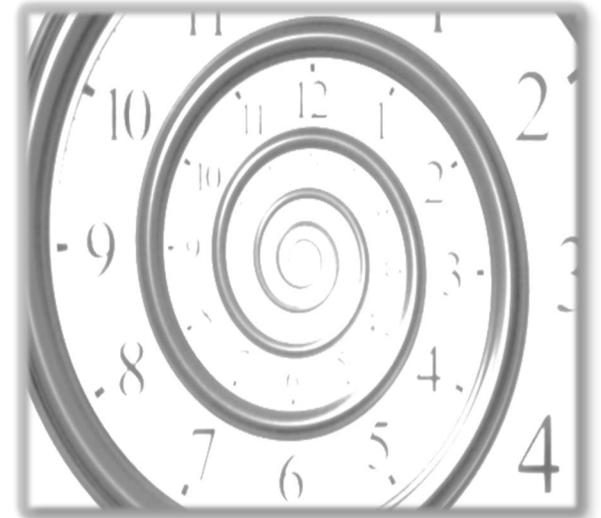
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