

Pagan teacher and author of "Slow Time," Waverly Fitzgerald talks about rethinking her relationship to time

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Lately it seems that many of us are living as if we are over-caffeinated hamsters on well-greased exercise wheels.

We run and run as fast as we can and still don't manage to arrive at our destinations. At the end of the day there are still a slew of chores undone on the to-do list. We struggle to find time to savor the company of our loved ones, enjoy life and relax. Our physical, emotional and spiritual needs often are abandoned due to the demands of modern life.

Spiritual teacher and author Waverly Fitzgerald believes we'd all benefit by changing our ideas and relationships with time. In her new book, "Slow Time," Fitzgerald, who has written for Beliefnet and Sage Woman magazine, provides exercises and ideas intended to inspire people to align themselves with nature's natural rhythms — night and day, the monthly lunar cycle and the yearly solar round — rather than living their lives to the frenzied beat of industrial time.

I spoke with Fitzgerald, 56, about the benefits of living in harmony with seasonal cycles, her own struggles with the tyranny of the to-do list and the universality of nature/time centered celebrations in the world's religious traditions. She lives in Seattle.

How did you get interested in slow time?

I'm one of those people who always has more things to do than I have time to do them in. I'm a writer, so I have all these creative projects I'm trying to complete, and I was getting frustrated about not getting things done. So I started looking at all the time management books and tools that existed — and I found that no matter how ardently I implemented those ideas, it still wasn't getting me more time.

Then one day I had this epiphany. I was preparing for a class that I was teaching that night, when I looked out the window and saw this crow go hopping by real fast. I was like, "What's that?" and then I saw this cat right on his tail! So I ran out of the house, discovered the crow was hurt and spent the next few hours guarding the crow from the cat until someone came to help the poor bird. I didn't get a chance to prepare for my class that evening — I had allocated two hours for that purpose, but I was able to teach perfectly well only having 15 minutes preparation time and having this great story to tell. People say that tasks expand to fill the allotted time, but I realized that time was much more fluid and mysterious than we think. The two hours I thought I needed was really an arbitrary number. And that was the start of a whole shift in my thinking about time.

You make a distinction in your book between what you call "natural time" and "artificial time." Isn't time really an abstraction? So how can it be natural?

That was my quest (in writing the book), to answer that question. What is natural about time? And the answer had to do with looking at different time intervals and noticing that some of them you can actually see, touch and smell. You can tell when it's day and when it's night. You can observe the moon in the sky and after a few days of observing it you can know whether it's waxing or waning. You can know what season it is by walking outside. These are all, for me, examples of natural time.

What I noticed about all of those cycles was that they were, in fact, cycles. They had, if you will, an "on" and "off" position, or a maximum and a minimum. And then they had a slow gradual progression to and from that state. That's really different than when you look at a calendar, a schedule or a clock, where everything is completely regular and all times are presumed to be exactly the same. There are blank spaces on the calendar, and you can put the same amount of activity into each of them. There is this sort of unnatural — that's why I call it artificial — aspect to them, which I think gets us in a lot of trouble

because we think, "Oh, we can do this thing in this amount of time," when really all of these other factors play into it that are not under our control.

You're not suggesting we throw out our calendars and clocks, are you?

No. There are really good reasons why those tools were developed to synchronize activities. But I think as biological beings we also need to be aware of our natural rhythms, including the need for rest. I think many people believe that when you sit down at your desk you should be working flat out at the top of your productivity for the maximum amount of time. At least that's the ideal. But there something called the ultradian rhythm, a biological cycle where there is an arousal period, a period of waking up and becoming alert, and then a period of getting restless or bored or unfocused and then a time of rest. If you start to observe that cycle in your life, it allows you to have a more relaxed and effective approach to your daily tasks.

I think people often don't notice when they are at their most comfortable or creative or the times when they need a break. And you can look at the year that way, too, and ask yourself, how do the seasons affect you and what is your relationship to them? How could you plan your life so that you are actually not treating yourself like a machine that has to behave the same way no matter what the set of circumstances?

How have you incorporated these ideas into your own life?

In a lot of ways. For instance, I do my planning by season, in terms of my own life and what I want to accomplish. I find I'm much more productive in fall and spring, whereas summer is the time when I am most likely to be scattered and restless, so I don't plan to do any of my writing work during the summer.

And I plan my days in a similar way. I do most of my writing in the morning. I find that it's easiest for me to just get up and go to my desk and start writing — I sort of allocate that as sacred time. I do my day job in the afternoon, so I'm really reserving the best time of the day for what is most important to me.

You're a freelance writer, so you have more flexibility than a lot of people. Living this way could be difficult for someone on a typical work schedule.

Yes, that's definitely true. One of the things I notice in Seattle is that we have a lot of darkness in winter. It gets dark around four in the afternoon and the sun doesn't come up until maybe eight in the morning. So if you're going to work in an 8:00-5:00 job, you are leaving the house when it's dark and coming back home when it's dark. That seems very unnatural to me. It would be great if we could arrange it so that working hours actually changed in relationship to the amount of light in the day and people could actually stay home in the winter. But I realize it's often just not possible to get your workplace to change your schedule.

What are some of the biggest benefits of slowing down?

Improved health is one of the most important ones. A lot of my students report that they start to feel much better (when they slow down), and I think it's because of taking time to rest. That's something we hardly ever allow ourselves to do.

It seems like Americans have less free time than they have ever had, though I don't have any statistics to back that up.

I think it's true. There is a great book by James Gleick called "Faster," and that's his premise. I know that I spend probably an hour or two hours a day on e-mail. I never spent that much time a day on the phone before I had e-mail. The demand on us to communicate with people is much higher now because of technology. And the world is going faster. I think eventually, people will say: "This is not acceptable. This is not the way I want to live!" And we will all start looking for ways to make changes.

How and why do religion or spirituality and slow time intersect, do you think?

Most of the major religions have a seasonal liturgy, even though it may be sort of buried. If you look at Christianity, with the Easter cycle and the Christmas birth, there is this lovely use of the seasons to tell a

story, and the same is true in the Jewish religion. And, of course, the pagan religion really works with this notion of the seasons and the cycle.

So there is a very deep connection between this notion of cyclical time and spirituality. And there is a message of hope that things will come around again, that we may feel despair but spring will come again. It is a pretty profound metaphor that is imbedded in our lives.

How did you get interested in seasonal celebrations?

I was raised Catholic and really enjoyed the elaborate ritual of those festivals. And I have always been fascinated by folklore. That was why I wanted to study the festivals and the way that people celebrated them. I think it's a way of connecting with time that is particularly rich and also concrete. Natural time is to me a way of taking the particular moment and making it special, and also having it being really tangible. You know, you're eating certain food or you're dancing around the maypole, and there is some participatory aspect to it. It's not just an intellectual thing. And time is so often an intellectual thing.

You connect with many different spiritual traditions; do you follow one specific faith or practice?

My faith is a pretty eclectic blend of Catholicism and Paganism, with a little bit of Buddhism thrown in on the side.

How has your understanding of time affected your personal spiritual practice?

I have a regular cycle of seasonal holidays that I celebrate. For example, I always have an egg-dying party in spring and a big spring feast with my family on spring equinox, which is also Persian New Year. The whole notion of setting a table that has all of these flowers and eggs and fresh greens on it is part of the tradition of Christianity with the Easter table, and Judaism with the Passover table, and part of the Persian culture, too. I have been doing those things for a long time, and they are just embedded in my life right now.

What is the next big seasonal holiday in your tradition?

I call it Candlemas. Some people call it Imbolc. And for me it's the start of spring, which is not most people's understanding of when the season starts. Candlemas is celebrated on Feb. 1 and 2, and here in Seattle the first buds are on the trees and the first green shoots are coming out of the ground already, so there are really very clear signs that something is changing. I also like to use it as a new beginning time, so instead of doing New Year's resolutions on Jan. 1, I wait until Feb. 1, and then make some kind of intention — that I'm either going to symbolize in a collage or a pledge that I'll make to myself. For me it's really the start of a new year.

What is your pledge going to be this year?

I think it's going to be around writing a series of essays on getting to know the plants in my neighborhood. I am an amateur naturalist learning about plants in the city.

Why did you decide to self-publish "Slow Time"?

I had tried to sell it over and over again without much success. I would get a publisher interested in it, and then they would disappear, or an agent interested, and then they would not be able to sell it. So, I just got frustrated, and I decided it was time to sort of launch it into the world and have it be available to people.

You are posting a chapter online every month this year that people can download for free. I guess the idea is that really patient people can eventually have the entire book for free?

It's a trick to get people into slow time, yes. If they take their time they can get the whole book by the end of the year. But I confess I'm hoping they get impatient and decide to buy it!