

welcome

keeping time

GRANDFATHER CLOCKS. I recently saw a gorgeous antique in an old shop, and was struck by its noble, exacting beauty. We don't see too many tall cases anymore; is it because their bells disturb our sleep, and our sleep has become fragile, uneasy, a commodity more precious than keeping time? I am crazy for clocks and wristwatches. Good clocks get harder and harder to find; years ago I was presented with a handsome, heavy, brass carriage clock from a fancy purveyor, but when I pulled the little knob to open the hinged

back I was horrified to find the cheap black plastic works (cracked, even), sans AAA battery, that you would get in a \$10 travel clock. "Good" should mean that the works are as well crafted as the looks, the heart has as much integrity as the face.

A friend of mine has a ship's clock in his house. Its bells are calibrated to divide a specific and crucial workday routine, that of keeping watch on a boat. The clock rings off the increments of six four-hour watches, during which sailors watch the wind and waves, watch the sails and mast, watch the stars, watch the mermaids, watch over their mates' sleep. Eight bells, eight round and rich tones, mark the end of a watch. As they ring through the house, the bells are soft and melodious and haunting—they remind you of what it is like to be out at sea, which can be a time of joyously precise navigation, or a time of feeling lost. I do not know what those bells mean for my friend. But the bells that mark duty and responsibility, rather than salute the passing of the minutes, remind of the many ways with which we choose to honor the hours. Everyone finds his own way of keeping time.

Like countless mothers around the country, I have packed my firstborn off to college this fall, for his first year away from home. In other words, I have run out of time to teach him what it means to make a home; he will make his own now, makeshift at first, then more durable as the years unspool. The day of his high school graduation I woke at four in the morning and started crying, and did not stop until the ceremony that began at ten. A familiar story for many parents.

I offered my son a good wristwatch as his graduation present from high school; he had been wearing the small black diving watch my father had given me when I was 16. In spite of many trips to the repair shop, it lost nearly an hour a day, thus providing my son with the perfect excuse for not showing up to mow the lawn or practice piano. My friend who lives by the ship's bells happens not to like watches. He disapproved of my gift, of the delicious languor with which my son perused the showcases and honed his

sense of style at various watch boutiques. "That's the problem with watches," my friend said. "They waste time."

Well, I believe in wasting time; I relearned the skill from my children. There's nothing more luxurious than a glorious waste of time. We train ourselves, unrelentingly, to use time wisely, to buy things that keep time accurately and beautifully, to watch the time, and not lose time. But no matter what we do, time is fleeting, and the years at home with our children pass swiftly.

I wish I could stop time. I wish I could keep it without marking it off, without its passing. I wish my children could remain my children, home under my watch. I would pay anything to own a clock that chimed a mother's watch of her children's hours. This clock, as I picture it, would be large, but elegant; its hands commanding, but graceful; made of a fine-grained, highly polished wood that would endure, with a bright and sweetly open face that contained the sun and the moon and the stars. The children would never grow too old, and the Mother Clock would absorb their lives' blows; her tear-streaked veneer might buckle, but it would most certainly become radiant with a patina of care. Its bells would keep watch over schooltime, and bath time, and bedtime, and reading time, and time for pillow talk and the children's soft whispering confessions of anxiety and remorse and hope and cause for celebration. There would be no end to the watch. And one more

thing: let the bells on the Mother Clocks ring to remind us to save time, while we have the time, for good-night hugs, kisses, tucks, one more glass of water, and the endless murmured incantations that the babies (for they will always be our babies no matter where they live) sleep tight, that the bed bugs not bite, that their way not be perilous, and that their dreams be forever sweet.



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