

The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

■ November 2011

Redefining Clock and Calendar

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When I answered the call to ordained ministry and began seminary, my skill as a professional organist and choral conductor came along with me. In fact, my musical training in a liturgical context probably led to my becoming a liturgist with a reputation for always regarding worship and music as two sides of the same coin. Everything I touched in my ministry encompassed both these disciplines. The churches I served over twenty years in California provided me an opportunity to use my musical skills as a priest. The culmination of this unusual career came in 1991 when I moved to New York City to establish an Office for Liturgy and Music at the Church Center.

In the months since I took early retirement in 2010, much has changed and much has remained the same. But one change that captures my attention daily is the way I see the passing of time differently.

Since I began school at the age of six (we didn't have kindergarten in my small hometown in 1952), my weekdays have begun early with the help of an alarm clock. Of course, Saturdays, holidays, and vacation days were different, and Sunday had its own rhythm, but for the most part, until retirement, I was forced into conscious activity on a daily basis by the clock. In other words, my time was not my own. I marched to the beat of somebody else's drum. It was not my privilege to decide when I would show up for school or work.

In retirement, I still march to the external rhythms of my continuing involvement in the worship of the church. The liturgical calendar still calls me to account as the seasons unfold. Music and sermon preparation still are governed by lectionary themes and season shifts. But apart from the liturgical drumbeat, accountability is something I discern for myself.

I continue to set the alarm, and it wakes me up Monday through Friday and Sunday. It is silenced on Saturday. But now, if I roll over and sleep a bit longer on Monday morning, arriving at the gym at 11:00 instead of 8:30, it doesn't really matter. The gym is there. I'm there. The obligatory workout happens. Nothing is lost. *Hmmm....*

The calendar is different too. Before retirement, the calendar reminded me of deadlines I had to meet. As a student, it was the final exam. In the parish, it was the looming dread of getting through the details of Holy Week and Easter. At the Episcopal Church Center, it was the inevitability of yet another General Convention.

In retirement, the calendar is still there. I preach and preside on a regular schedule. I need to remember family birthdays and figure out where I am spending Christmas. But the pace is remarkably different. I keep a list of things I want to get done, but does it really have to be finished this afternoon? Probably not.

And then, of course, there is the occasional wasted day. I think about what I'm doing for dinner and realize it is the only task I've accomplished over the course of the day. For a moment, panic rises within me, and then I realize no one is checking up. It's OK.

So, what do these changes in my perception of clock and calendar mean in my life day to day?

When I was a student or a cleric working for the church, my self-worth was pretty much defined by my relational dynamics with teachers, fellow students, bosses, and colleagues. Of course, my friends and family have always constituted another ongoing set of accountabilities, but I live alone and really need to depend on myself for a sense of structure, purpose, and meaning as life continues to unfold.

My first year of retirement was filled with the tasks of buying and selling apartments and moving into and outfitting a new home. That task is pretty much behind me now, and I am realizing, for the first time, just how much time I have. The realization suggests both a danger and an opportunity. What shall I do today? What shall I do next week?

A few weeks ago, I heard myself say, *Retirement is great. The check comes every month, and it has nothing to do with accountability or productivity.* I'm physically and emotionally young for my age, and so retiring to the recliner with remote control in hand is not a likely option. Thus, my task at the moment is to find a way to use the clock and calendar to shape a new life.

I recently received a call from a young musician working in an Episcopal church as choir director. His rector, a close friend of mine, connected us. This young man was trying to decide what kind of educational opportunities were available to further his career as a church musician. This was our second call. It must have lasted an hour or so. When I said goodbye with the offer to remain in touch, I spent a few minutes thinking about what had transpired between us. I realized that the experience I've had, over the last forty-five years as priest and musician, has value for a young man trying to forge his own path. I realized as well that the time I spent with him was time I had to give. I wasn't expecting his call, but it came, and I had the luxury of time to be with him.

So the bad news — the danger — is that I used to have the easy option of justifying my continued existence on this planet simply by performing to the prompts and specifications of others. The good news — the opportunity — is that if I can use clock and calendar to my advantage, I can figure out how to share the wealth of four decades of ministerial experience with people who might find it useful. That feels really hopeful.



The Rev. Dr. Clayton L. Morris serves St. Paul's Chapel in Lower Manhattan as a volunteer preacher/presider; he also works with the staff to develop innovative liturgical strategies to serve the thousands of pilgrims who visit St. Paul's — which famously became the second home and safe haven for first-responders to the 9/11 World Trade Center disaster. Dr. Morris served for nineteen years on the staff of the Presiding Bishop as Liturgical Officer of the Episcopal Church. Prior to coming to the Episcopal Church Center, he served churches in the Diocese of California as priest and musician.