



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

In and out of time

2 November 2025 © Rachel Mackintosh

On 21 February 2023 Archimedes' arrow of time is released, to speed over 254 days to its destination: death.

On 21 February we receive news of Clay's terminal diagnosis and driving home from the hospital appointment I begin sobbing. This is not a problem for my driving, actually, but Clay suggests I pull over. Which I do into the side of a car minding its own business in the next lane. The kindness of the stranger in that car, who is not angry but concerned, sets the tone of the next 254 days.

The arrow speeds on. And here I draw a graph of an asymptote. Half the time and half the time and half the time, yea even unto infinity.

Half of the arrow's 254-day race lands us at 28 June, our granddaughter Billie's fourth birthday — a day with the infinite possibility of growth and discovery. And it's a weekday, so we have the usual debrief of our days, of the joys and sadnesses, the embarrassments and triumphs. This day, half way through, is a day full of life. As we hurtle on time's arrow.

Whizzing half of the remaining 127 days to Thursday 31 August. We are visiting Virginia Theological Seminary, where Clay was formed as the priest he would be for the rest of his life, and we meet an extraordinary stranger, Tom, who asks us about our calling stories and learns of the doubting priest who worried he wasn't holy enough but, nevertheless, he persisted. And that stranger sings us a new hymn: "Even angels will hear the news; what once was lost is found." And so we are, together. Found. In love. In life.

And still the arrow speeds on. Half again of the remaining 64 days brings us miraculously to my birthday, 2 October. And Clay believes in celebrating and he makes me a gift of a beautiful fountain pen from which, in times to come, will flow the words of my grief and my life. And the selfie taken at our dinner table this night shows a person so much older than his years, as his body gets ready.

And half of the remaining 32 days as time is compressed and the arrow speeds on, finds 18 October, a day when we are monitoring iron and blood sugar and eating separate meals as Clay can stomach only protein drinks now and still he remains resolute and talks of his disappointment that he can't vacuum at the moment but he can climb the stairs and be in bed next to me, in love. In life.

So half of the remaining 16 days later is 26 October, the arrow rushes now and I come home early from a conference in Wellington because Clay has driven himself to hospital in extreme pain, a place he has been in and out of countless times in the past 16 months and it feels like just one more brief visit when I come to find him in the overcrowded emergency department and wonder how many nights it might be this time until he comes home again. And the arrow speeds on.

And half and half and half because if it is always half we will never get there, and we will hold it off until infinity, such is the miracle of an asymptote.

And half of the remaining eight days is Monday 30 October. By now we know that these are the last days. Nil by mouth. Do not resuscitate. And a few close friends come and I work out who needs to know and email Clay's sister and daughters in the USA and arrange for Waldo to come in to visit.

And half of the last days is Wednesday 1 November and Sophie arrives from Australia and Clay is not conscious any longer but I have learned that hearing is the last sense to go before someone dies and Sophie sings "I wanna hold your hand" and I hold his hand and he holds mine.

But half and half and half doesn't actually stop time's arrow and on 2 November 2023 — two years ago today — Clay dies.

And then timeslowsrightdown. Only for me. The time between 2 November 2023 and 2 November 2025 is an eternity for me.

For months and even a year all my interactions have Clay at their centre, spoken or unspoken; I know people know.

And then that peters out. Death after all happens every day, all the time, and is unremarkable. So people get on with their lives. Except that this one particular death is remarkable to me. And it has slowed time down. This has been the most unexpected feature of grief for me. People will say they can't believe it is two years already. And I feel separated from them on my slow slow slow road where I can't believe it is only two years.

And I have so much time to contemplate the nature of time.

And I take scientific phrases that I don't fully understand, like the space–time continuum, and see them land in a way that makes sense to me now. When we look into a telescope at stars we are looking billions of years into the past. Time and space and place.

And I take literary quotes that I don't fully understand, like “The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there,” and see them land in a way that makes sense to me now. Because time is also a place. This time is a country I walk alone, as time's arrow keeps hurtling for everyone else. Or so it seems.

I missed you quietly today.

But it cannot be that I am really alone.

The Greeks had more than one concept of time. They had Chronos, chronological time, the one we all understand unless we start thinking about it. They also had Kairos, a time that is not chronological, but is a time of possibility and great things. Kairos is a subjective,

qualitative "time between," a moment of indeterminate time when something special happens. This is the time Clay and I fell in love. It is a time for spiritual awakening. It is a time that defies Archimedes' arrow.

And so this time now that is a country where I walk alone, where Clay will never know what a second Trump term looks like, is also a universal country, because we all experience grief. Someone is always dying.

Then eternity happens. And that is slow.

And eternity is also a concept of time. And there are more quotes to help us appreciate this, or at least live with it. This from 17th-century Welsh poet Henry Vaughan:

[<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45434/the-world-56d2250cca80d>]

I saw Eternity the other night,
Like a great ring of pure and endless light,
All calm, as it was bright;
And round beneath it, Time in hours, days, years,
Driv'n by the spheres
Like a vast shadow mov'd; in which the world
And all her train were hurl'd.

So many people have contemplated these questions. And this common contemplation brings us in from the apparent isolation of our own particular stories, our own lonely roads.

We have the Greeks and the Welsh, for most of us is in this congregation our cultural forebears, to knit us back together.

We are also on this land.

Anne Salmond has written about Māori cosmology and how it clashes with the notion of the arrow of time. But if we look at this and think of Henry Vaughan and of Kairos, we may find a connection here too. Salmond quotes Patu Hohepa [Salmond, Anne, *Between Worlds: early exchanges between Maori and Europeans, 1773–1815*, 2nd ed, Penguin Random House 2018, p512]: “*Time is a moving continuum if seen through Māori language, with ego being a particle whose own volition and direction is not bound to time. Time swirls like koru patterns, three-dimensional spirals.*”

So, though we experience time’s arrow, we also grow and connect spiritually through Kairos, and through the ring of pure and endless light, and the swirling koru. How do you experience time? What do you experience out of time?

Last week Kate quoted Carl Sagan. Here I quote his widow, Ann Druyan, on her experience of Kairos.

[<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/506561-when-my-author-husband-10538-died-because-he-was-so-famous-and>]

When my [husband](#) died, because he was so famous and known for not being a believer, many people would come up to me — it still sometimes happens — and ask me if [Carl](#) changed at the end and converted to a belief in an afterlife. They also frequently ask me if I think I will see him again. [Carl](#) faced his death with unflagging courage and never sought refuge in illusions. The tragedy was that we knew we would never see each other again. I don't ever expect to be reunited with [Carl](#). But, the great thing is that when we were together ... we lived with a vivid appreciation of how brief and precious life is. We never trivialized the meaning of death by pretending it was anything other than a final parting. Every single moment that we were alive and we were together was miraculous — not miraculous in the

sense of inexplicable or supernatural. We knew we were beneficiaries of chance. . . . That pure chance could be so generous and so kind. . . . That we could find each other, as **Carl** wrote so beautifully in *Cosmos*, you know, in the vastness of space and the immensity of time. . . . That we could be together for [that time]. That is something which sustains me and it's much more meaningful. . . . The way he treated me and the way I treated him, the way we took care of each other ... while he lived. That is so much more important than the idea I will see him someday. I don't think I'll ever see **Carl** again. But I saw him. We saw each other. We found each other in the cosmos, and that was wonderful.

Amen.

Meditation / Discussion question:

- **How do you experience time?**
- **What do you experience out of time?**