

1-1-2004

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Recommended Citation

Rotondi, Michael (2004) "Desert Time," *Oz*: Vol. 26. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2378-5853.1412>

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Desert Time

Michael Rotondi



Chase was sitting on Dante's point on top of the Amargosa Mountain Range, which runs north and south defining the eastern edge of Death Valley, California.

The "Big D" he calls it. He had been sitting there for close to four hours looking into and across a space that is 30 miles wide and 100 miles long. Dante's is at the midpoint in the valley at an elevation of 800 feet above sea level. The desert floor is the lowest elevation in the United States at -247 feet below sea level. This is a good vantage for seeing it all and having a sense of its immensity in terms of scales—time and space.

Chase could not sustain any small thoughts here. This was a wilderness

extremely different than any he ever inhabited. He looked down at some small flowers at his feet standing two inches above the cracks in the granite. The bright magenta bloom $\frac{1}{2}$ inch diameter was so amazing. Perfectly formed in micro-miniature eco-system, thriving as a result of the moisture stored in the rocks since last month's rainfall. Spring was coming on and it brought forth evidence of worlds within worlds all with their own cycles rhythms and durations. He wondered how these living organisms, without the privilege of a large forebrain and two opposing thumbs had the intelligence to tell time. Every living organism had its own way of keeping time; it was imprinted.

He wrote his thoughts in his journal.



"Through evolutionary time, environmental time and cycles have left their stamp on the basic biology of organisms. Living creatures not only follow the rhythm of seasonal change, but also possess their own intrinsic rhythms. The daily alternations of light and dark, the yearly changes in the length of day and with the bigger creatures, the rhythm of the ocean tides synchronize these intrinsic rhythms."

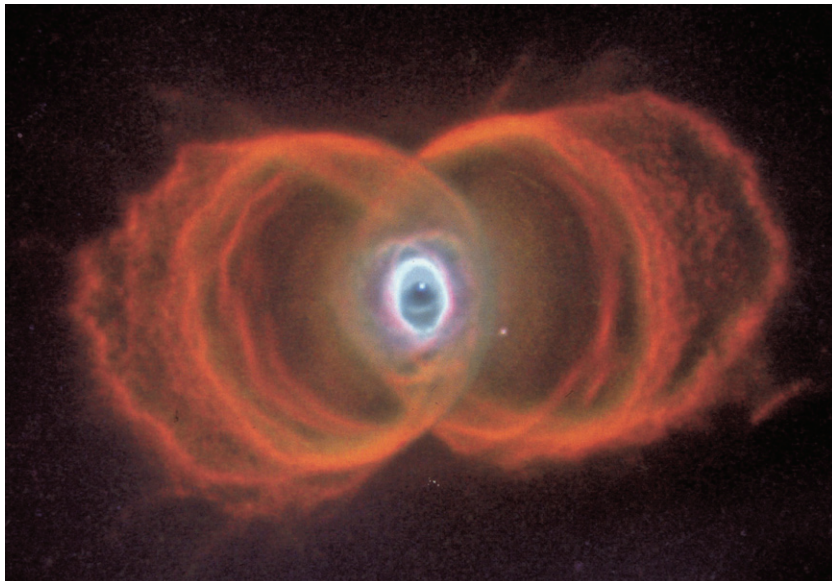
He looked up for a moment feeling a cooling wind across his bare arms. He continued writing.

"The human body has a variety of rhythms and cycles all synchronized into an oscillating harmony that gives a high degree of autonomy to the

component subsystems, each with their own internal logic. The overriding imprint within the body's genetic code is for there to be an integration of all systems into a greater whole as an operating system. This begins at the cellular level."

Chase stopped writing and began to read:

All organisms are made up of cells which are the basic structural units of all organic matter, flora and, fauna. They have a highly regulated internal structure, a code, that establishes the parameters for growth change, and transformation. Even at this micro scale, there is a dynamic sense of purpose which is to sustain its integrity as it supplies the larger organism



with all of its needs.

The dynamic organization within cells is paralleled by their interdependence with other cells. They are symbiotic. The properties of complex organisms are an expression of the separate activities of their component cells, but always in the context of the "specific environment" created by their inter-associations.

In principle this describes the relationship of part to whole. INTERDEPENDENCE. Unity and diversity.

Chase began to write in his journal again.

"The biological time structures are interdependent within the organism

and in turn scaling out, these internal systems are interconnected with the time structures of both the natural and man-made world. Environment cycles coordinate biological cycles and vice-versa. This is true, in principal, for behavior of all parts within all systems, at all scales."

He looked up the valley and through his binoculars at the people moving around Furnace Creek Ranch.

"This holds true for even a human social organism, although we put up such great resistance to this inevitability. Perhaps this is a good thing in the long term. Maybe our resistance, which manifests as the dialectic between individualism and altruism, is in essence not anti-

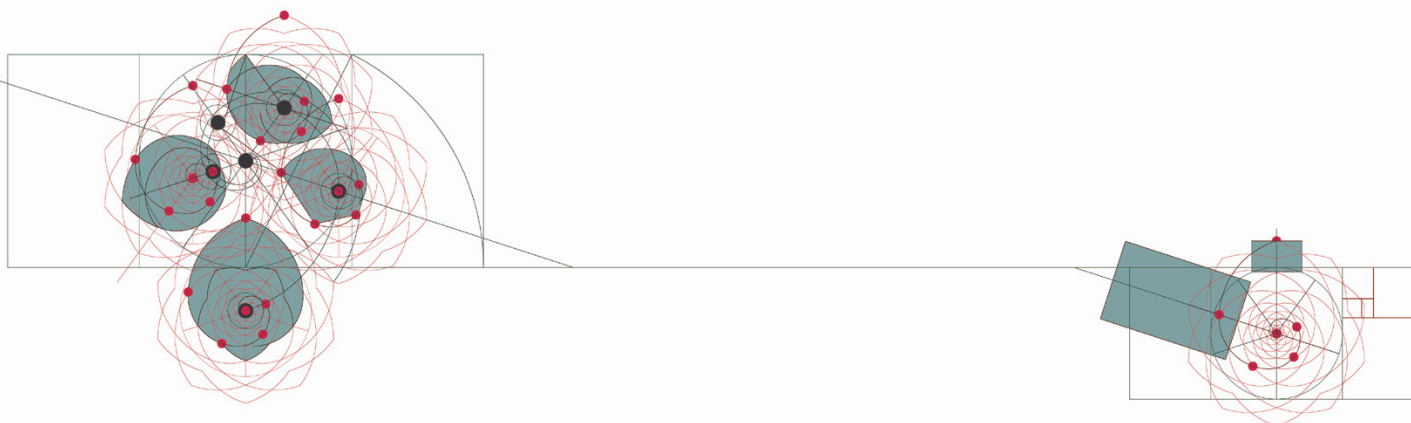


social, selfish behavior, but intuitive resistance to the ultimate conformity of entropy. The heat death of the universe, everything becomes warm and brown."

"A society is not an autonomous entity. The order of society is only accounted for by its defining characteristics. This may be specific to its internal organization but the wider background, which permits the continued existence of society must be taken into account. There is a complex interweaving of forces and influences that comprise all global societies scaling back to units, individual members of the society belong as well to a more general society. Part to whole, one to many. Ultimately, its all one thing."

Chase turned and stared across the valley to the Panamint Range. The light of midday had just flattened everything. The valley seemed static, with no middle ground, for a moment, it appeared two dimensional.

"In the world we have constructed, each generation has its defining characteristics and behavioral patterns that take form in the artificial time structures that are constructed, somewhere between conscious thought and instinct, to reduce the impact of randomness on experience. They are adaptive responses to a human world that continually accumulates more and more putting everything in closer proximity moving at greater velocities for short distances and dura-



tions. It is a quantum world from the micro to the mezzo.”

We experience this as a composite non-sequitor.

Four days ago, Chase was in central Los Angeles. He recollected walking through a crowded marketplace midday with all of his senses operating with keen attention along with all of his wireless communication devices. His entire body was an extraordinary central information processing unit with a capacity for direct and remote transmitting and receiving. The depth of the focus of his five senses could change at will, moment to moment, as he moved along at variable speed, picking up data from various activities all happening simultaneously but with no particular correspondence. He was experiencing bits and pieces of many unrelated events taking place all for different motivations and with different purpose. He felt challenged.

Throughout history, direct experience in real time was contingent on proximity. Our bodies and mind evolved an internal logic that directed its reactions appropriately. Time and place were dependent and simultaneous. This is no longer the case. Our spatial arrangements are different now, based on telecommunications, computer systems allowing us to experience the simultaneity of non-local events. Our experience of time and conception of space has been transformed.

We perceive a world at full size while having a knowledge of worlds within worlds at almost unimaginable scales visualized in the image of particles colliding unpredictably in a spontaneous manner. In two generations what seemed to be predictable became probable and then, now only speculative, based on pattern recognition. Our sense of the world has come full cycle. It is full of mystery once again. We cannot rely on the knowledge of prior experience to anticipate what might happen next. The world that we have constructed to some degree (and still unfolding) is no longer in our control, although we pretend it is. So what are we to do?

The adaptive response of culture has been to prescribe norms — conventions — and to build belief systems that help us tackle the challenges of existence. In doing so, they must rule out many alternative goals and beliefs and thereby limit possibilities. This channels our attention to a limited set of goals, which requires that we erect boundaries. This is the good and bad news.

This is a major conflict in a society that places greater value on rights than it does on responsibility, which translates into the extreme focus on individualism at the expense of altruism.

The imprint in our deep cellular memory is one of survival, of choosing life.

Whenever we are threatened, especially collectively, we begin to behave in selfless, altruistic ways, which social scientists define as the organismic model of human society. We behave like molecules that operate according to the welfare of the entire organism. We sacrifice ourselves to help ensure the survival of the species.

Although this is short lived, it is the great wonder that lies within tragedy. We are all one. We deny this in many ways, but it is a fact. In all of our diversity, we are a unified whole. One people, one planet, so to speak.

Chase began to write again in his journal,

“I cannot sustain any small thoughts here, final thoughts for the day,”

These vast mute open spaces and the slow evolutionary geologic processes are less than visible, yet there is much to be learned about the desert and in turn ourselves.

The desert holds the promise of being an external teacher in the most transparent ways.

The desert compels me to ask simple questions that I have realized over time — are truly unanswerable — and this is where faith enters.

Keeps me coming back, searching for the answers.

What is it?

Why do we come here?

What do we see?

How does it affect us?

It is what it is, just enough and nothing more.

No body fat. Everything works everywhere all around. Although everything has great presence you have to look twice to really see. Invisible in plain view. Unique and inevitable at the same time.

Untouched nature is like this, especially the desert.

What compels me to come here?

Why do I feel large and small here?
Everything is clearer here.

Little thoughts evaporate in these ever-expanding spaces. Time and physical scale is almost beyond comprehension.

Being here, we are immersed in a geologic/biologic process that has been ongoing for tens of millions of years.

A slow, continuous process is operating at such an immense scale that, in relation to our constructed world, it seems to stand still.

This can be reassuring. And alarming.
Depending on one's disposition and outlook.

We tend to fear:

Emptiness and

Blank surfaces

We do not always value silence.

They are the realm of our creative imagination, where our inner reality can be experienced.

In grand spaces that are scaled so immensely
We have the opportunity to begin a process that
connects us to the infinite—however we define it
where everything, past, present, and future exists as one.
Time present and time past.

as

T.S. Elliott wrote

Four Quartets

*Time present and time past
Are both present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.
What might have been is an abstraction.
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.
What might have been and what has been*

point to one end, which is always present

.....at the still point of the turning world.

The infinite has always stirred
The emotions of humankind
more deeply than any other question:

The infinite has stimulated and catalyzed imagination
and reason as few other ideas have.
But also the infinite more than any other notion
has confounded us.

The two sets of words, that form two clusters of concepts.
The historical dialectic on the subject are about:

There are two infinities:

The outer, which is expansive and described as:

Boundlessness
Endlessness
Limitless
Eternal

The other, the inner which is about singularity and convergence and
described as:

Unity
Wholeness
Absoluteness
Perfection

The first cluster conveys a sense of potential.
The second, a sense of actuality.

The perplexing problem is that we are finite creatures, physically,
with a capability to ponder the infinite,
metaphysically.

But our minds need the physical
space of this magnitude to be a catalyst.

Imagination on this order is not self-perpetuating.
Context is key, so coming here is essential.

We are stewards of our own consciousness.

There were deserts of the bible,
places of exile, punishment,
but also purification.

The DESERT fathers—
the early Christian monks like Saint Jerome
retreated to the Egyptian desert
for solitude,
to purify and contemplate the infinite.

The desert is a place of wonder.

Everything is clearer here,
literally and figuratively.

Why do the mountains look so far away
and so close? Size erases distance.

There is no middle ground here
just foreground and background
If there is a middle ground it is
the ever changing figures of dust or clouds
that intercept light,
throughout the day
showing us
the prismatic color spectrum
that is embodied in white light.

The middle ground is an index of the two great invisible forces,
Sun and wind.
They are experienced in extremes.
They are intense and volatile.
Their power humbles and teaches us.

There are stories about how they have given and taken life.

Throughout each day the world around us
is revealed in special ways.
What seems flat, smooth, and featureless midday,
will at other times reveal ridges, hollows, clefts, and contours
Form intercepts and separates light from dark.

The Panamint Range is long with unique shapes made by shifting plates and
erosion. The valley was formed over ten million years ago over the alluvium that
is now the valley floor which is 10,000 feet deep. How long did it take?

Human time is fast.
Natural time is slow.

Fast learns, and is discontinuous
Slow remembers and is continuous.
Culture resides somewhere between.

Perhaps for some it moves too slowly
So we try to tame it, conquer it by blanketing it with our camouflage
as if we are ashamed of it.

The desert in its pure state remains a minority taste.
We appreciate it and talk about it as we do a loved relative
who has passed long ago,
leaving us with mythical fond memories like
the big fish that got away.

Many have come here for climate and therapeutic waters.
Some of those, come for a total immersion in an extraordinary
aesthetic that encompasses both infinities macro and micro.

All of it comes together, to meet on a shifting line we refer to as the
horizon. The margin of two worlds overlapping,

In-between all of the extremes
one place and another
one thing and another
one event and another

A zone which holds the promise of origins.

Where there is stillness and silence.
This is where new life emerges
which eventually becomes a new center.

The desert is a place for both the artist
and the monk.
Both know that in this place
through disciplined practice
they can internalize nature
so that they can realize
new capacities of mind.

Everything is clearer here.
Especially the fact that it's all one thing.

