LONG WALKS & ANARCHO-PRIMITIVISM

a blog about change

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Available free on-line at: http://www.fraw.org.uk/lwap/

View the video for this post here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=urbVB0u9tmc

Part 4: *'Time Without The Machine'*

I have no mobile phone; I have no watch; but I have time. Many have questioned how I dare wander abroad without the technologies of time measurement and mobile communication. In this post I explain, in reply, my querying of their 'necessity'. Our modern era, which began when clocks measured the hours of the day, is now measured to the nanosecond by digital machines. Our first great task is to release the escapement that binds us to the machine's time-frame. Yet, from YouTube fantasies of going wild in the woods, to lectures bemoaning ecological destruction, few grasp their imprisonment by time.

Shifting our perceptions of the world to create ecological change is not simply about abandoning 'modern' technology. The true challenge people face is breaking free of the instrumental mechanism that binds them to the modern world: *machine time*.

When the clocks change from Winter- to Summer-time, birds do not adjust the time of the dawn chorus. We have leap years and even leap seconds because human measures of time don't conform to the natural world. And no matter how clever humans think they are, time's arrow will ultimately reduce their grand schemes to dust.

Human-devised measures of time hold within them powerful political and economic forces. They trap people within patterns of activity they become habituated to. Machine time, measured and parcelled out by industrial society, affects people's frame of reference, and how they perceive themselves within the world around them.

There's a lovely little, often overlooked aside near the beginning of the film, *'Easy Rider'*. *Wyatt* (Peter Fonda) throws away his watch, which had in any case stopped, before they set off on their mythical quest. To find their authentic 'being', they first had to abandon machine time. It had no meaning or necessity where they were heading.

The 'work ethic' isn't simply holding a compulsion to work hard at your job. Industrialism took away people's ability to manage and measure, 'in their own time'. It imposed an order of time, externally regulated by clock-makers and time-keepers. And with that came the control of labour, which enabled complex industrial systems to evolve, to reach its high-point with globalised 'just in time' manufacturing.

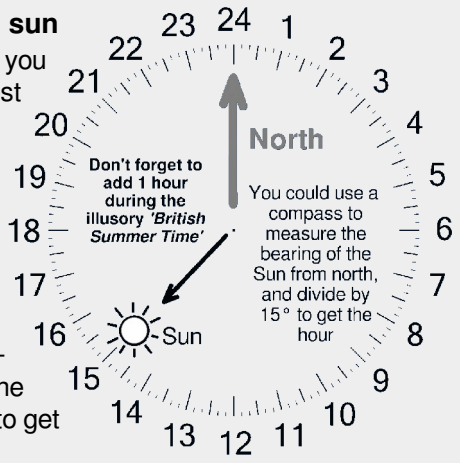
In the modern world, time both dulls the senses and orders people's lives. Deprived of stimulus, people are required to *"kill time"*. Yet so often, from work to play, people measure themselves 'against the clock', rather than against their own unique enjoyment or fulfilment of the moment.

The alternative, 'natural' time, is all around you – in the sun, the moon, and the stars. To eliminate machine time, you just need to reconnect and work with it!

Telling the time by the sun

By knowing where north is you can deduce time to the nearest hour or so. Imagine a 24-hour clock (or just point with use your arms if necessary). *'6am'* is east, *'Noon'* is south, and *'6pm'* is west.

If you had a compass you could simply measure the Sun's angle. But a rough estimate of where the sun is on the clock face is usually enough to get within half-an-hour or so.



Also, remember to add an illusory hour for *British Summer Time*.

To escape machine time is to become aware of your environment

As someone astutely observed: *'You're making the mistake of thinking we are suffering from a problem with a solution. We are suffering from a predicament with an outcome.'* To change that outcome, you must change the mechanisms that govern how you live in the world – *such as time*.

You, are a natural living being.

Natural living beings, humans excepted, do not wait for the prompting of a machine to tell them when to do (or not to do) something. They take cues from the natural world and their own instincts. By sharing those perceptions in common, they are free to synchronise their activity with other living organisms – over days, seasons, or years.

'Standard time' is an abstract, human created phenomena; and is as implicit to the ongoing ecological armageddon as global consumerism itself. It must be dismantled to ensure our future survival.

The world needs to function at a much slower pace. Change your externally imposed measure of time and many more things become possible. You are freed of one of modernity's restrictions upon your freedom to choose. E.g., *"time is money"*.

Let's say I'm out walking one evening, late as usual, searching for a sunset. Most people would consult their time-measuring device to know the time. That doesn't help, though, as the time of sunset and sunrise changes almost every day. This requires consulting yet another technocratic authority – the mathematically-derived almanac – to show when the local sun will set. *But what if you have neither?*

The time until sunset does not mean the same at Noon as it does half-an-hour before. It is our direct experience which gives time meaning. I need to know the time of sunset *near* sunset, not at Noon. Using just your fingers you can make a good estimate of when sunset will arrive – *see box below.*

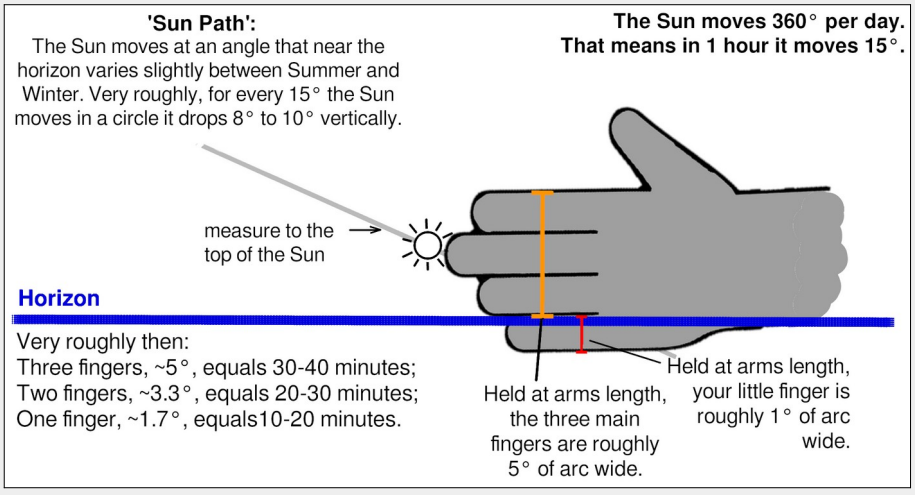
Measuring the time until sunset by observation

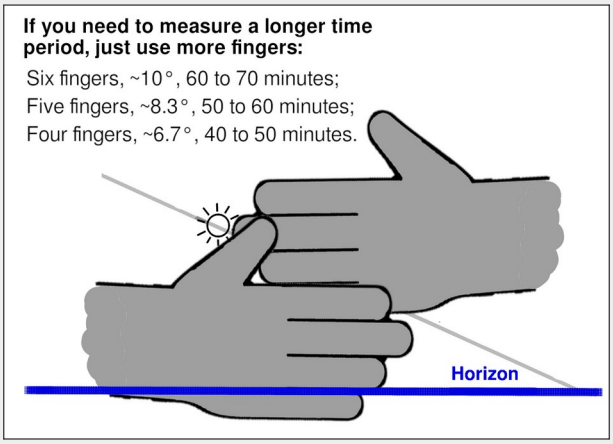
Knowing the time until sunset is a basic intuitive skill that can be developed by observation. With that skill you can change your walking plans, know when to stop and put up the tent, or guess how much longer you can stay outside.

The sun moves at a constant rate; fifteen degrees per hour along an imagined circle in the sky called *The Ecliptic*. The angle of this line to the horizon varies with the time of year. Down near the horizon though, the change in the slope of that line isn't enough to significantly change your estimation of how long you have till the sun sets.

Put your arm out straight with your flat palm facing you at a right-angle. Most people's arms and fingers are about the same size, which is how this rough estimation works.

Put the line between your little finger and ring finger level with the horizon where the sun is likely to set. Then move the hand so your fingers are just touching the sun. Each finger represents about 1⅔° of arc (the Sun itself is ~½° wide). It takes the sun ten to twenty minutes to drop by that amount (it's not precise because it varies by the time of year, and how wide people's fingers are).

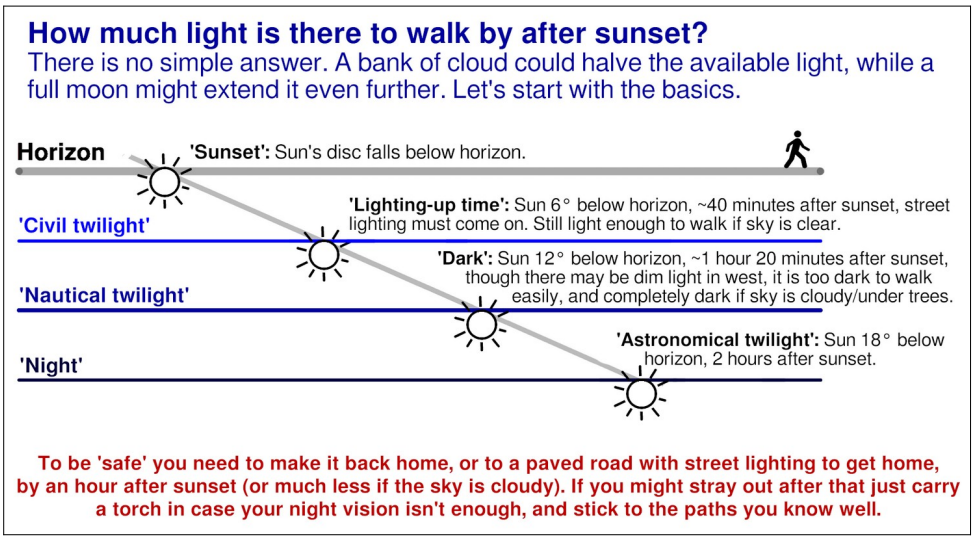




Count how many finger-widths between the top of the sun's disc and the horizon, multiply by 10 to 20 minutes, and that's how long until sunset (with practise, you can be more accurate).

How do natural beings know the time of sunset? They just look at the the sky.

Natural beings don't need trigonometry-derived predictions for when the sun will set (or rise); and they don't need a clock to know the time in that moment to measure from. Everything they need to 'know' about the time of sunset is available right in front of them – and those same features are there for you to use too.



To measure the progression of time you need to be aware of your own movement

If I know how long it is until sunset, I can decide where I want to see it from. Then I can judge how long I will have to get home again before darkness makes my movement difficult. *No watch is required!*

Of course there are other factors involved in judging time and daylight. Most notably, cloud cover. A cloud bank on the horizon where the sun is setting might reduce the useful light after sunset by half-an-hour.

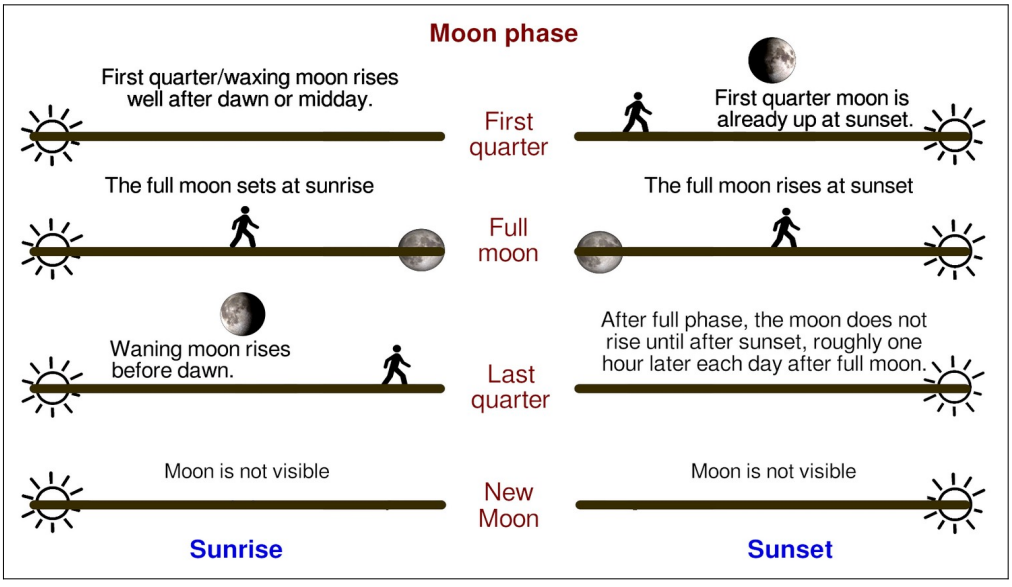
That's a matter of experience; of being able to view the world *as it is*. Using your instincts to survey the sky will let you know what's going to happen to the levels of daylight well before sunset. *It's not something that a smartphone will be able to tell you!*

As I walk often, I know how far I can move in a particular 'time'. Again though, I don't mean *'X miles per hour'*, measured by the clock. I mean from one place in the local landscape to another. Having a sense of how quickly I move allows me to vary my route at any time without a map or a clock.

After the sun sets daylight fades at a predictable rate. The uncertainty begins half an hour after sunset. Thick cloud will block most of the light. On a clear day you may still have enough light to see for an hour.

Half an hour to forty minutes after sunset, at *'civil twilight'*, street lights come on. If it's not cloudy there's still enough light to see to walk cross country. Eighty minutes after sunset, *'nautical twilight'* is when the eastern horizon is completely dark; though there will still be dim light in the north-west. Only about two hours after sunset does it become totally dark; which in midsummer, north of the Scottish border, it never does.

One factor I use to change that, and often plan walks around, is the moon. By using moonlight you can stay out a little later after sunset, or go out well before dawn, without the need for artificial light to guide your way.



To use moonlight you need to know the phase of the moon. This tells you not only how well you might see to walk, but also how well you might see meteors, or the northern lights, because it is not full or bright. On a route you know, with a clear moon you can walk across open country without a torch.

The phase of the moon will predictably tell you when it will rise and set: Before full, the moon is always up at sunset; after full, it rises after sunset. And by knowing the phase of the moon, you can also use it to tell the time.

To get that knowledge just look for the moon each day. Very quickly you can learn to associate time and the phase of the moon. Without 'making time' to sense the world your instincts will not develop.

Most importantly, to perceive time in your environment you need to slow down

Years ago I worked on a community project in Jamaica. On my first night at the project, looking up at the sky, I could sense just how far I had moved around the globe. All the stars had shifted northward in the sky. *I truly, physically felt four-and-a-half thousand miles from home.*

This is the last, most difficult phase of becoming aware of time in the natural world: *the stars*. It's well worth the effort, though.

There are many different stars and constellations which methodically move in a pattern over the seasons. Just a glance will tell you the time or the season. It's a skill that's really useful when camping-out and you don't take a watch with you.

Lovers of stone circles like to think about the alignment to the sun. I think the alignment of stars is of equal significance to how these sites were used. By looking at the sky, and seeing a constellation rise for the first time in the evening, you can feel: Winter is coming *(Orion)*; or Summer is nearly here *(Bootes)*.

There are a group of constellations – the circumpolar stars – that never set. They just go around-and-around the pole star.

The most famous of these – *The Plough*, or *The Great Bear* – can also be used to tell the time with good accuracy *(see above)*. At midnight in March, June, September, and December, the two lead stars point in predictable directions. By sensing the orientation it's easy to read-off the passing hours at night, just like the sun during the day.

Time is a 'comfort blanket'; it anchors us reassuringly in an ever changing world. But 'standard time' is an illusion, and one that can be manipulated to influence our lives. That is not the case with 'natural' time. Learning to exist, more slowly and less 'precisely', within that natural frame frees you from the ever-pressing pulse of machine time.