

Turtles all the way down: Ours is to nurture passionate fidelity

by [Gordon Atkinson](#)

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Children living on the edges of time zones are the ones most aware of the arbitrary nature of timekeeping. On the Western edges, they whine about being called indoors on summer evenings when the sun is still shining. On the Eastern edges, they are rightly offended when the winter sun starts to go down at 4:30 in the afternoon.

Even the best of our adult explanations are not good enough for them. They know something is not right.

I must admit that when I contemplate leaping from today to tomorrow when crossing the International Dateline, I get a little suspicious myself. What's going on here? Who decided to divide the day into hours and the earth into zones? We slice and dice time to suit our needs. Meanwhile the sun quietly makes its way across the sky, unconcerned about how we choose to mark its passing.

Of course nowadays we live in the age of the atomic clock. No longer are we held captive by lesser timekeeping instruments made of springs or quartz. We take comfort in the knowledge that our government has very expensive clocks stored somewhere, and they keep time according to the ancient and unchanging motion of atoms. No one has ever seen an atom, mind you, but we are convinced of their existence and happy to let them keep time for us.

If you ask me, inventing the atomic clock was the easy part. All we had to do was hire a few scientists and engineers to conceive, design, and produce the darn thing.

Setting the atomic clock; that's the tricky part.

May 4th, 1952

Well gentlemen, that does it. The world's first atomic clock is now operational. We have entered a new era of timekeeping. We will never again be bound by the arbitrary and capricious machinations of clockwork gadgetry. Nor are we limited to mere 100ths of a second. The atomic clock is accurate over a period of 10,000 years to within nanoseconds.

[Enthusiastic applause]

And now it only remains to set it.

[pause]

Uh, Joe? What time you got?

I like the atomic clock and even set my own watch by it via the internet. It's just that I don't understand the nature of the reality that stands behind it. Doubtless there are scientists or chronologists who could explain all this to me, but I'd still like to know who set the first atomic clock. And who vested that person with such awesome authority?

If you're bothered by the idea that our entire system of keeping time comes down to something arbitrary, rest easy. Most everything we do or say is equally as shaky. Descartes whittled reality down to all that he felt he could know with certainty and ended up with only a five-word sentence. "I think, therefore I am."

If he wanted to base his whole life on things he could know for sure, five words can be somewhat limiting.

A story is commonly told of a scientist who had just finished giving a lecture on evolution when an elderly woman came forward to inform him that she believed the world rested on the back of a giant turtle.

The scientist asked the obvious question. "On what does the turtle stand?"

She smiled and said, "You're clever, but not clever enough to catch me. It's turtles all the way down."

You laugh, but doesn't that story have a familiar ring to it?

John: Why do you believe the Bible is the word of God?

Jane: My daddy told me it was.

John: Who told him?

Jane: His daddy.

I mean no disrespect to the Bible, but when it comes to the authority of scripture, it is most definitely mommies and daddies all the way down.

Still, if the Bible's credentials seem to disappear mysteriously into the mists of history, it stands in good company along with our calendar, paper money and the idea that people may own land.

John: You say you own this land?

Jane: Yep.

John: How do you know you own it?

Jane: I bought it from someone.

John: Who'd he buy it from?

Jane: Someone else.

Back of everything is some kind of faith. No matter where you look, whether in science, philosophy, religion, or real estate, if you dig deep enough, you will always find turtles, all the way down.

The good news—gospel news actually—is that faith is not only inevitable, it is a gift from God. Faith is a kind of spiritual exercise for earthly children who are learning humility and worship. Faith is not a manufactured certainty, where you claim to know everything about God and mouth off about your personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

I've never really understood exactly what that "personal relationship with Jesus" stuff means anyway.

No, faith is about humility, acceptance and being at home in your skin and in your place in the scheme of things. It is not our burden to know absolute truth, which is further good news since we are not able to know it. Ours is to nurture passionate

fidelity.

Faith is measured breathing in the face of uncertainty. Faith is turning your heart to faithful living when your mind has reached the end of its rope. Faith is the choice you make when you face the darkness.

Faith is a Mona Lisa smile that gently appears on your face when you peek under the tablecloth and find that once again it's turtles all the way down.

www.units.muohio.edu/dragonfly/time/accurate.htmlx