

Deadlines: Faith at Work

by [Garret Keizer](#) in the [May 23, 2001](#) issue

Louie Armstrong is supposed to have said, “Never mind creativity, man, just give me a deadline.” It’s a beautiful credo, one with which any self-supporting writer or artist can readily identify. As Armstrong doubtless knew, there are times when a deadline doesn’t diminish the inspiration; it *is* the inspiration.

The word itself is inspiring: “dead” to suggest finality (and what you will be if you don’t finish the job); “line” to suggest the clear and fine distinction between making it and not making it. There is, after all, such a thing as a moment of truth.

Anyone who’s worked with a deadline (or with Christ’s vivid awareness of the “night [that] is coming, when no one can work”) knows what a blessing it can be. Curse it though you might, it always blesses you. First of all it gives you that sense of urgency, even of crisis, that moves the will. The poet Andrew Marvell writes: “But at my back I always hear / Time’s wingèd chariot hurrying near.” Marvell is not writing a melancholy meditation about death, by the way; he’s speaking passionately “To His Coy Mistress.” Workers with a deadline can know a passion not unlike that of lovers.

Deadlines also compel us to seek help. Yes, the old-fashioned barn raising was an exercise in community and low-tech ingenuity; it was also a recognition that you only have so much time to lay a roof before it rains or snows. “It is not good for the man to be alone” because 1) a single day is too long a time in which to be lonely, and 2) a single day is too short a time in which to do almost anything else. And is there any camaraderie like that of partners laboring under the same gun? Race me against a competitor and I’ll run fast, but send me dashing to some goal with a gang of my friends and I’ll run faster still.

Deadlines force choices. To quote Marvell again: “Had we but world enough, and time, / This coyness, Lady, were no crime.” If all of us had as much time to ponder our choices as we wished, many of us would still be standing at the ice cream window we first stepped up to at age four. But as Mom or Dad reminded us, “We haven’t got all day.” A deadline spares us from dying in our indecisiveness. A deadline is the mother bird that teaches our fledgling desires to find their wings—by knocking them out of the nest.

And that brings us to the fourth virtue of deadlines: their mercy. They save us not only from our procrastination but also from our perfectionism. Yes, with more time we might have done better . . . and we might not. No matter: The time came to do or die, and we did and lived. And whatever the results, the reviews, the sales or the tally, we are done—“It is finished”—at least for now. You tend to see a deadline as the door about to slam in your face, but if you make it through on time—even if you don’t make it through on time—a deadline turns out to be the door that opens upon the sabbath. Left to our own devices, we would probably never finish. We would live like young children who resist going to bed. But the curtain comes down, our eyelids come down, and we are borne aloft and at last “on eagles’ wings” to our rest.

I fear that deadlines are losing their place in our world. We seem to regard them as yet another barrier—like the speed of sound or the Ten Commandments—that needs to be eliminated if we are ever to meet “our full potential.” In place of what he humbly and defiantly requested, Louie Armstrong would nowadays be given a fax, a cell phone, an overnight mail account number and a recording studio that would enable him to revise his compositions until the Last Trumpet—or should I say, until the hell of our own making froze over. Our “solution” to a life with too many deadlines is to make the deadlines more flexible, more “merciful,” with the

result that our lives are more merciless. Our work is never done, in part because we have changed the concept of “done” from an absolute to a relative category.

Of course, we are doing the same thing with our mortal existence, increasing our longevity, enhancing our vitality, all in the name of “allowing people to live fuller, happier lives.” But I wonder if this phrase ought to be revised to read, “allowing *some* people to live fuller and happier lives,” while others—the poor and the young—wait in a line that scarcely moves because those privileged to stand at the front of it are still deciding which of the 5,700 flavors of ice cream is going into their cones.

In the past the church has found it necessary to raise its voice in defense of life and on behalf of the weak. No doubt it will always need to do so. I wonder if the church now needs to raise its voice in defense of death and of deadlines. I wonder, in other words, if the church needs to proclaim the distinction between everlasting life in Christ and the everlasting bustle, worry and self-preservation that we mistake for “life.” The sting of death, after all, comes partly from the denial of death. And the breaking of the sabbath sooner or later becomes the breaking of our hearts.

In six days God created the heavens and the earth. And on the seventh day his work was done. And he saw that his work was good. And he saw that the creature made in his image was good, too—but prone to trouble. And it was as if the Creator himself said, “Never mind creativity, O Man, I’m giving you a deadline. Keep it holy.”