

Clocks of the heart: Time in a hospice room

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [December 14, 2004](#) issue

The holidays are here, with their intricate blessings and woes. There are presents to buy, visits to plan, cards to send and meals to prepare, at least for those who are so inclined. Those who are not may spend as much time resisting the blandishments of the season as others spend giving in to them, but either way few escape the Holiday Time Machine. Some of us board at Thanksgiving while others hold out till Hanukkah or Christmas Eve, but sooner or later most of us enter that quiet room where all the walls are windows. Looking through them at long-gone scenes so fresh we can still pick the smells out of the air, we may suspect that time is a trick we play on ourselves, to fool us into thinking the past is over.

The truth is that there are no clocks in the heart, where my father is still laying another log on the fire, my mother is still drinking her second cup of coffee, and my two sisters and I are still sitting in identical flannel nightgowns on the living room floor, waist deep in waves of wrapping paper that stretch from us to the Christmas tree. I know what luck this is, to have such places in my heart, but their sweetness does not stop them from hurting me. As real as these people are, I cannot touch them anymore. I can only feel them within me, where they go on teaching me more about what it means to be human than I often want to know.

If I feel more during the holidays, then that is not only because these days are such strong heart-magnets but also because the world pulls so hard in the opposite direction. During the very season when I want to burrow in, the culture becomes intent on luring me out. No sooner does the sun set early enough for me to indulge my melancholy than the Christmas lights come out, with reminders that there are only 30 more shopping days left. My wish to attend to things eternal goes to war with my wish to finish my holiday chores. There may be no clocks in the heart, but there are clocks everywhere else, all of them reminding me that I am late.

Never was this collision clearer to me than it was two years ago, when my father lay dying at the Hospice of Atlanta. I rode there in the ambulance with him, past yards full of frostbitten grass and plastic snowmen. It was 12 days before Christmas. It was final exam week at Piedmont. The driver got lost twice, and I said things to him that I regret. Inside the hospice, I walked by my father's stretcher past the nurses' station, where cartons of Christmas cookies lay open on the counter. No one was moving fast enough for me. There was not nearly enough noise, given the gravity of the situation. Everyone but me seemed to know that death was no emergency.

Still able to speak, my father never asked where he was. The sight of my face seemed enough for him, so I stayed that night in his small, quiet room, with moonlight seeping through the drapes. Every time he made a sorrowful noise, I got up to see what I could do. Every time the nurses turned him over, I petted him back to sleep. Because there was no clock in my heart, I never tired of rising. When my family came the next morning to relieve me, I discovered that I did not want to go.

At first I thought I did not want to leave my father, for fear that he would die while I was gone, but after 15 minutes in holiday traffic I knew it was more than that. I did not want to leave the state of grace inside that room, where I had only one thing to do and not a doubt in the world that it was the only thing worth doing. I did not want to leave that place of the deeply real, where my father and I were both in labor. I did not want to be with anyone but him, my family and the nurses who cared for him so tenderly, because there was no pretense among us, no need to chat, lie or glitter.

Over the days that followed, I did what holiday chores I could at a nearby mall. Standing in line behind shoppers yelling into cell phones or watching them struggle through doors with too many bags, I began to feel sorry for people who did not have a hospice room to go back to. Who could not benefit from such a sanctuary, where there was no sound for hours but two people breathing? Where else could one find the time to notice that the morning sun was more lemon-colored, while the afternoon sun had more honey in it? In what other economy could a sip of water make everything better for another couple of hours, or a fresh shirt be all one really needed?

When my father died three days before Christmas, I was there with him in that room that had become my Bethlehem. He breathed out; I breathed in, and sometime after dark I walked into the holy night, surprised to find the dazzling stars still in their places. People warned me the holidays would be a sinkhole after that, but it is not so. I simply have one more stop to make in the Holiday Time Machine, where my

father is still lying in his bed like a babe in a manger. I cannot touch him anymore, but I can live with that. It is enough to sit with him a while, struck dumb by the gift of being human.