

Non-fiction by Jon L. Adams

VISUALIZING TIME

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Everyone visualizes time as a diagram. Diagram: *n. A schematic plan or drawing designed to demonstrate or explain how something works or to clarify the relationship between the parts of a whole.* No matter who you are or what was your cultural genesis, you cannot discern or make manifest the concept of time without arranging it in some sort of comfortably non-abstract image. You cannot conceive of anything so abstract as time without a known matrix over which to lay the abstraction in order to humanize it and render it recognizable.

I offer an example:

Distance is an abstraction to most people. Mathematically it is finite and can be numbered, but to most individuals numbers are abstract enough. In order to explain distance to ourselves we overlay the concept on either a map or on the imagined landscape around us and make comparisons. You are told that Europe is twenty-eight hundred miles 'that way.' The sum of the miles is mostly over ocean and incomprehensible in and of itself. So to get to an understanding of the distance you can compare it to the space between your spot in New Jersey to someplace you visited in California or Mexico. You used the matrix of the map you carry around in your head. You made that map when you went to California or Mexico, and you already know about the distance involved. That comparison removes the abstraction peppered with difficulties such as the Atlantic Ocean, great circle routes and the unfamiliar terrains beyond the horizon.

Another example:

Death. We don't experience death and live to tell or write about it. We do experience something similar - sleep. Like death, sleep turns off the consciousness and makes us immobile. We assume death is much like sleep,

and in our lives and literature we refer to it as just that, 'the long sleep.' We make the abstraction a concretion by visualizing it as something we understand.

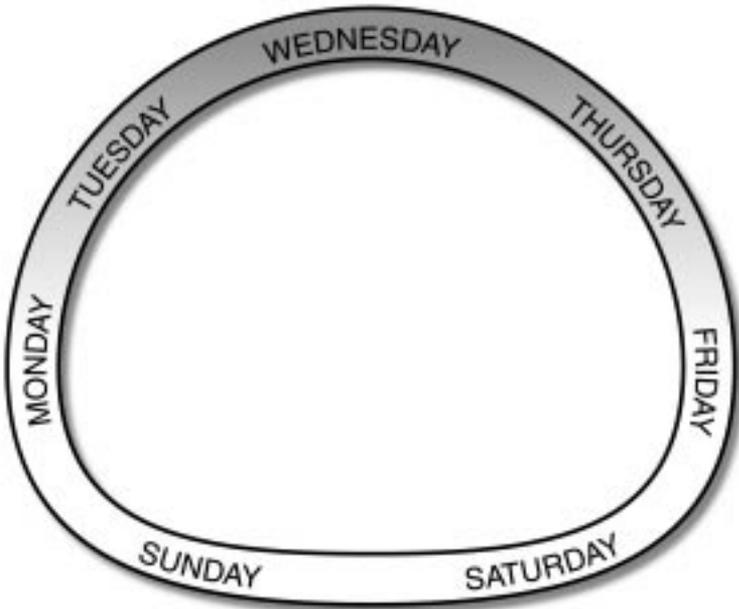
Time is certainly abstract in form. It has no shape or color, no sound or taste. It is featureless, nonconforming and infinite. We can't hold it in our hands. Yet we can grasp its form because we wear watches and have clocks. We have calendars and memories. Time is situated so that we are always on its moving sidewalk, but we can turn and look back at something we saw or experienced months or years ago. We can also project our imagination forward to plan or propose something that time has not yet revealed. We move along through time effortlessly, always in the present, but we are always looking backward and forward, and we need to visualize time in order to do that.

How do we visualize time? What kind of chart or map do you employ as your matrix to visualize time? The process requires a hypotyposis (a figure through which visual experience is represented or evoked through the verbal procedure) that relies on a catalogue of the reader's visual experiences.

I will explain my own visual representations on the following pages, with visual diagrams.

The Day:

I have the image of each day structured exactly like the wristwatch I wear or the clock on the wall. My day is round. It has a morning and an afternoon-night. My visual image of a day is that simple. Each morning when I awake my day begins at the exact time my eyes first read the hands on the clock. It ends when I last check the time and go to bed. The Day is the simplest form of time recognition, and its parts, the hour and the minute are considered in my visual repertory in exactly the same manner. They too are round and precise.



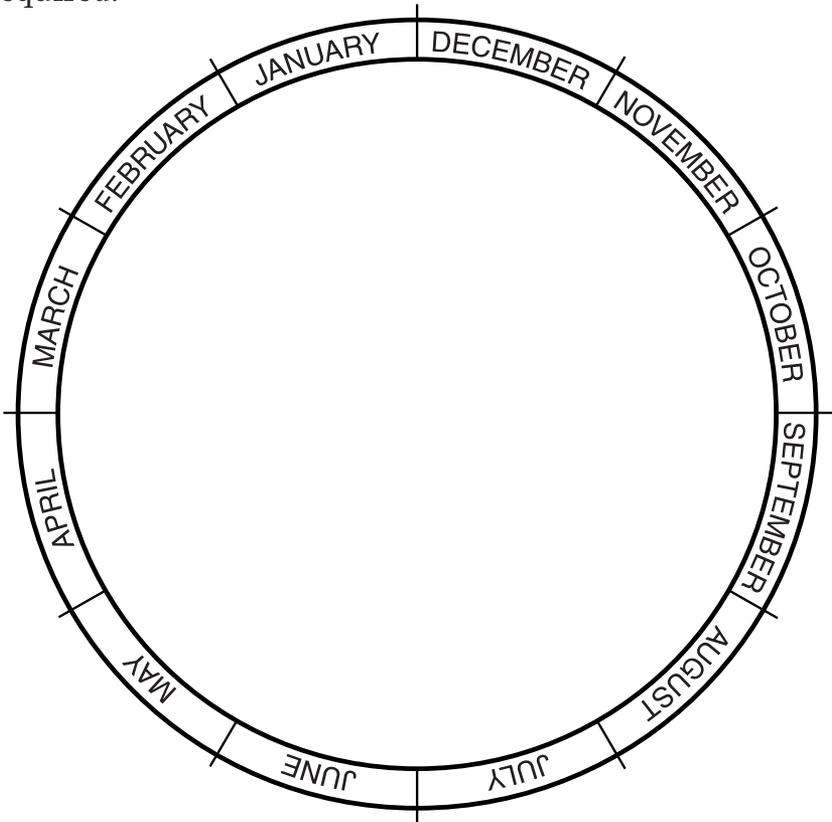
The Week:

I see the week as a continuum something like a clock, but not quite. It too is round but is misshapen more like an egg. On the bottom are Saturday and Sunday, with Friday night and Monday morning curving at the ends of the weekend. The remaining days are an arch stretching from wake-up on Monday until dusk on Friday. The sketch (above) illustrates how I visualize my week. Notice

my week has no numbered dates. I leave that to calendars.

The Month:

I am a creature of the culture, so I see the image of a month exactly as it looks on whatever calendar I use at the time. It is linear right-to-left (by succeeding days) and up-to-down (by succeeding weeks). The only differences I see are the length of the months in days. No sketch is required.

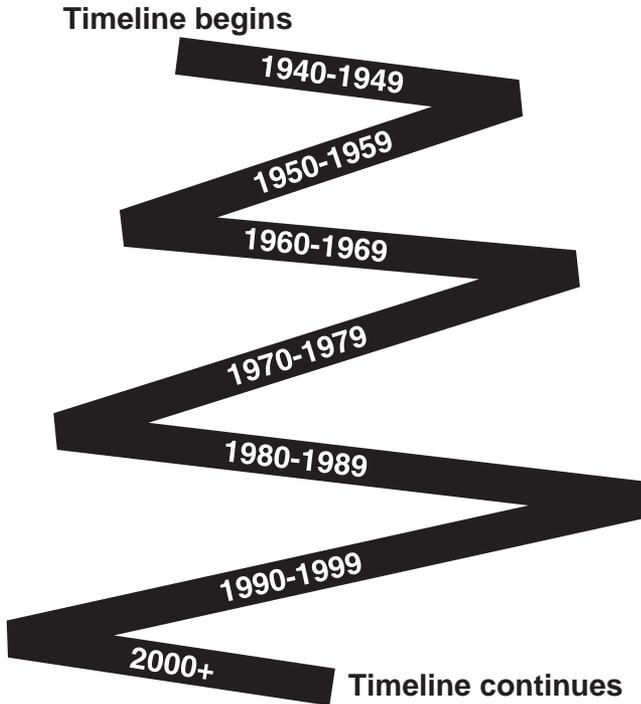


The Year:

This is where my particular visualization of time may depart from yours. (What is yours? Can you sketch it?) My image of a year (above) resembles the track our planet takes around the Sun. It is a circle, with only the titles and border marks included as modifications in its arc. The

year's wheel is constantly moving clockwise and my position never changes in relation to the circle, only the circle moves.

Presenting figurative visuals of how I perceive measures of time, exactly what I have done to this point by beginning with the shortest spans, involved circular figures except for the month which is a fixed visualization established by my use of the common calendar. Beyond the year my perceived figures change. They now become linear. Decade, centuries, millennia, the years simply stack one upon the other, extending from top down ad infinitum. This image requires no illustration.



The Life Timeline:

I visualize another linear span quite differently, however. That is my own lifetime. My visual of my life extends backward in a zigzag path that bends at angles

according to decades. I attribute this to the way I have socially adjusted to the use of the decade as one of life's historical memory markers. I recall the parts of my life in terms of the 'forties, fifties, sixties, seventies, eighties, nineties' and whatever we will use as the name of this first decade of the new millennium.

The final diagram is a graphic depiction of how I visualize my lifespan:

What I have attempted in this essay is to explain and represent how I visualize or picture in my mind's eye the measurements of time. My hypothesis of explanations as graphics are the 'Rorschach' pictures of how I perceive those abstractions.

I have sampled friends and colleagues regarding this subject and nearly all of them have graphic perceptions of time, some similar and others quite unique and very different from my own. It would be an interesting project to design a questionnaire and perform a random survey on the subject. The survey would require that the participants sketch their examples.

Time is, according to St. Augustine, *"Nothing else than protraction, but of what I know not; and I marvel, if it be not of the mind itself."*