

The Body Keeps the Time

Category: Watching the Clock

written by Pamela Adelstein | September 22, 2022

Have ever felt that sense of unease on a cellular level? Like something is amiss. Like nothing feels quite right in a visceral way. That feeling sneaks up on me at certain points in the year. Like when it is time to transition back to school. Or, deep in winter. Or, the anniversary of a difficult event.

We know that emotions live in the body. I have noticed that emotions manifest themselves somatically at certain time periods. That the body keeps time with its internal clock.

Sometimes when a patient reports a multitude of symptoms that seem to come out of nowhere, or a worsening of pre-existing symptoms without a trigger, I pause and ask about the bigger picture. Why now? What does this time of the year, or this time in their life, mean to them? People are insightful and wise. When given the opportunity, they notice their inner experiences, and will share them.

From a woman with pelvic pain: "My mother died at age forty-five of ovarian cancer, and my forty-fifth birthday is next month." (She did not have cancer.)

From a person with back pain: "My son was shot this time last year. He is paralyzed and depressed."

From a man with headaches and nausea: "February is a bad month for me. My parents died in February in different years."

From a person with shoulder pain: "July is the anniversary of my car accident. I needed shoulder surgery."

For me, my chronic neck pain has flared as fall crept up. Thoughts of Thanksgiving bubbled up when I felt particularly fatigued. Eventually I understood. Thanksgiving was the last time I saw my father alive.

Despite artificial light, climate-controlled homes, and ability to eat foods out of season due to global shipping, our body has retained its keen instinct about time. As hunter-gatherers, we needed to be finely attuned to the subtle changes in our environment, including the passing and marking of time. When deprived of these cues, as we were during the heights of the COVID pandemic, when many of our usual markers of time were unavailable, we became unmoored.

Religious and spiritual rituals, national holidays, cultural customs, family traditions and personal practices give us the opportunity to channel and mark time. We spend so much time in our heads. We must also spend time in our bodies, listening to our embodied wisdom.

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