





SUNDIAL

Juanjo Seijas



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For children who grow up in wintry climates, few experiences in life will ever elicit the same pure joy as a Snow Day. Unlike holidays, whose pleasures can be diminished by weeks of anticipation, snow days are undiluted serendipities. In the 1970s in rural Wisconsin, school closings were announced on local AM radio, and we'd listen with the volume turned way up, trembling with hope, as the names of public and parochial schools around the county were read, with maddening deliberation, in alphabetical order. At last our school would be named, and in that moment anything seemed possible. Time was temporarily repealed; the oppressive schedules of the adult world magically suspended in a concession to the greater authority of nature.

The day stretched luxuriously before us. An expedition into the white, muted world would be first. We would marvel at the new geography of the woods around the house and the inflation of familiar objects into puffy caricatures of themselves. Stumps and boulders had been fitted with thick cushions; the mailbox wore a ridiculously tall hat. We relished these heroic reconnaissance missions all the more knowing they would be followed by a return to the cozy warmth of the house.

I remember one particular snow day when I was in the eighth grade, that liminal stage when one has access to the realms of both childhood and adulthood. Almost a foot of snow had fallen in the night, followed by fierce winds and biting cold. In the morning, the world was utterly still and blindingly bright. My childhood companions were teenagers now, more interested in sleep than snow, but I could not resist the prospect of a transformed world. I bundled myself in down and wool and stepped outside. The air felt sharp in my lungs.

Trees creaked and groaned in that peculiar way that signals deep cold. Trudging down the hill toward the stream below our house, I spotted a dab of red on a branch: a male cardinal huddled in the heatless sunshine. I walked toward the tree and was surprised that the bird didn't seem to hear me. I drew closer still and then realized with repulsion and fascination that it was frozen on its perch in life position, like a glass-eyed specimen in a natural history museum. It was as if time had stopped in the woods, allowing me to see things that were normally a blur of motion.

Back inside that afternoon, savoring the gift of unallocated time, I heaved our big world atlas off the shelf and lay sprawled on the floor with it. I've always been drawn to maps; good ones are labyrinthine texts that reveal hidden histories. On this day, I happened to open the atlas to a two-page chart showing the boundaries of time zones around the globe—the kind with clocks running across the top, showing the relative hour in Chicago, Cairo, Bangkok. The pastel colors on the map ran in mostly longitudinal stripes except for some elaborate gerrymanders like China (all one time zone) and a few outliers, including Newfoundland, Nepal, and central Australia, where the clocks are set ahead or back relative to Greenwich Mean Time by some odd noninteger amount. There were also a few places—Antarctica, Outer Mongolia, and an Arctic archipelago called Svalbard—that were colored gray, which, according to the map legend, signified “*No Official Time*.” I was captivated by the idea of places that had resisted being shackled by measures of time—no minutes or hours, wholly exempt from the tyranny of a schedule. Was time there frozen like the cardinal on the branch? Or simply flowing, unmetered and unfettered, according to a wilder natural rhythm?

Bjornerud, M. (2018) *Timefulness. How Thinking Like a Geologist Can Help Save The World*. Princeton University Press.



























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Juanjo Seijas

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