

Counting Down the Minutes **Joe Bruner**

The doomsday clock is an interesting conception: it is a physical, tangible symbol for the extinction of the human race. Symbol as it may be, however, it is more than that. It is real. You can literally find it in the University of Chicago's Bulletin office! Symbolically though, it represents how close the "end of the world" – as perceived by humans – is, measuring nuclear warfare (since 1974), and climate change (since 2007). Currently it is set to three minutes to midnight (the symbolic equivalence of human death) due to the world's inaction towards climate change, the modernization of nuclear weapons in the US and Russia, and the increasing build-up of nuclear waste. As terrifying as this may sound, this is not the closest to midnight the clock strikes. It hit 2 minutes in 1953 after both the US and Russia set off nuclear tests within just a few months of each other.

As fascinating as the history of the clock is, and to see how close the human race has come to self-destruction according to an international community, it is not particularly helpful in describing what steps can be taken to set the clock back. On an international level, agreements can be signed and policies can be set. That, however, is done by Presidents, and given there aren't very many of those in the world (comparatively speaking of course), the decision making can be left to them, and the action-doing can be taken up by the rest of us citizens.

Three simple actions can be taken, when considering sustainability. It is a statement so simple, that most probably have not thought deeply about the meaning of the words: reduce, reuse, recycle. Each word is represented by one of the arrows in the recycling symbol, and what many people also don't know is the phrase is written in the order of the actions. For example, it makes no sense to recycle, when the product can simply be reused. Another set of three that is crucial to the sustainability movement are three terms dubbed by environmentalists: equity,

environment and economy. More simply, sustainability is reduced to people, planet and prosperity. The basic idea is that, as identified by environmentalists, to be a sustainable society, people need success in these three qualities: having a social mindset that sustainability is an important goal, the physical practice of conserving or preserving natural resources, and a thriving economy to fund the necessary innovations to conserve those very resources. Without one of these qualities, it is very difficult to have the other two, and without a complete balance, society's way of life is inherently unsustainable, which is another way of saying the clock strikes midnight, and people will die.

Are you sustainable? Have you fully embraced the mindset of living sustainably? Because the odds are, you haven't. I know I haven't, as much as I try to. It is difficult, especially surrounded by fellow college students who don't seem to care whether their recyclable bottles end up on the floor or in the trash. Sticking with the college student environment, consider how many students have iPhones with cracked or shattered screens. Kudos to those who try to keep using it until it gasps its last breath, but many quickly go to the store, not to fix it (because Apple doesn't even bother fixing broken screens) but to get a new one. In many cases, screens crack because the student is careless or is playing with the phone. If only students would put the phone in their pockets before running, on one college campus there might be a handful of students who keep phones running for much longer. Now multiply that scenario by the entire industrialized world. How many less iPhones would need to have been produced in the year 2014 alone? How about since the creation of the iPhone? This reduction in production has not happened yet, because sustainability is more than just an individual action: it is a mindset, a way of life. 3 minutes to midnight.

If reducing is not possible, then reuse. While many students simply replace their cell phones, there are those who keep using it until it ceases to function: bravo! The act of replacing the cell phone, sometimes a week after being purchased is such a sad one. This society has actually *backtracked* on sustainable production. Think for a moment, those who are familiar with the Nintendo video gaming system: how often do you hear “Oh, I still have my old N64, it still works fine” or “I still play my Gamecube, some of Nintendo’s best games were on that system. You hear it pretty damn often given that the N64 is now a 19 year old piece of technology. But who still has a perfectly good, operating iPhone first generation? No one, because of Apple’s business model of updates forcing you to constantly buy the new phone, simply because they feel like making apps incompatible or even changing the charger design... In a society where this regression has not only been allowed to occur but has pervaded it, sustainability as a mindset and people’s awareness of limited physical resources is clearly not prioritized. 2 minutes to midnight.

The environment: the second of sustainability’s three pillars. Consider the latest US elections as evidence. Because 37% of this country was motivated enough to vote, we made Jim Inhofe the most powerful man in the world on environmental action (besides Barack Obama) and he believes that climate change is a Weather Channel hoax. This brings in a whole slew of political baggage which is complicated and messy. Sustainability no longer is just the practice of reducing, reusing and recycling. Now it becomes about election seasons and pampering corporations for Super PACs, and serving constituents while remaining productive within a reasonable scope for Congress. The concern for the environment becomes backlogged within the bureaucratic maze of the US Federal legislation process, meanwhile the Great Pacific Garbage Patch continues to swirl around endlessly, trapped in the vortex of the deep ocean currents. Beyond the Patch, consider even any US highway roadside, or perhaps even what lurks under the

bushes in your very front yard. Trash. Heaps of it. So much trash that we have run out of ideas of where to put it. A prime example is the biggest sledding attraction in my hometown, *Mt.*

Trashmore. It has been appropriate dubbed because visitors are literally sledding down a retired landfill. 1 minute to midnight.

The economy is, if anything, even murkier than politics and the environment, but also perhaps the most supportive to future action. About seven years ago, the United States (indeed the world) suffered its greatest economic failure since the Great Depression in the 1930s. However, it is significant to note that recently each passing month has surpassed the latest highs, and unemployment seems to continuously be staying constant or going down, all good signs to slow economic recovery. At the same time, headlines have emerged declaring visionaries such as Elon Musk investing billions in safer private transportation, innovations for public power sources and renewable energy. In fact, one claim has been made that solar panels will be very close to affordable in the free market by the 2016 US elections, which will begin to significantly challenge the oil domination on the consumer market, and for the first time putting efforts of sustainable energy into a public debate, forcing voters to ask why sustainable energy should be a reality if it is affordable: something that lurks in the nightmares of every oil company executive. Considering the three pillars, this seems the most promising. 30 seconds to midnight.

The story does not quite end there, however. Imagine for a moment, that all three components were geared towards sustainability. Would society really be sustainable? Or is environmentalism complicated and messy? You are up against 7 billion bodies that must consume and reproduce. Say everyone holds onto his or her cracked and beaten iPhones like battle scars, or a machine was invented to suck up every tiny piece of the Pacific's plasticky

soup, or even if a way was found to both replace oil as fast as it was used *and* to negate the harmful, excessive greenhouse effect, would we be sustainable?

Imagine that you are a US government agent who has been handed a world that has met these three standards. They have just recently been achieved, so no standard for measuring the success of sustainability has been created yet. What will you do, as the sole member of the Sustainability Measurement and Achievement Committee (SMAC), to judge the society sustainable? Will you count the number of “gas guzzling” cars on the street as opposed to “environmentally friendly” ones? Even if you had all the manpower in the world and that was possible, what would the determining ratio be? Factors would need to be taken into consideration, so many it’s almost impossible to keep track of them. Things like average miles-per-gallon (likely using this figure would designate cars as “gas guzzling” vs. “eco-friendly”) or how well the car is maintained. Does the driver turn off the car at long red-lights, or is the car left running frequently, burning gas, even when waiting in a parking lot or school pickup zone? Moving on from cars, would you measure all the matter produced for the US and compare it to all the matter thrown away? Again, how would you do that? Even if I had tasked you to measure the 300 million Americans rather than the 7 billion people on the planet, the task would still be too daunting to take on. It would be impossible. 10 seconds to midnight.

And yet... there is that goal. Every day scientists, environmentalists, volunteers march to the drum beat of the ticking doomsday clock. They strive towards sustainability. Why? Because it’s the only way this planet has a chance of sustaining human life, of turning that clock back. A friend of mine last night said, “if you give the environment cancer, it gives you cancer right back.” I would like to think the opposite is true too. Those who are concerned with the environment’s welfare cannot change society’s mind, for society’s mind is made up. However,

we can change people's minds. One person at a time, keep a cell phone here, use a refillable water bottle there, and eventually the mindset might just change. With the economy indicating the possibility of real innovations coming quickly, the only question remains, will they come quickly enough? Tick tock tick tock...

At Least Germans can speak German

Joe Bruner

Mark Twain once wrote an essay titled “The Awful German Language.” If you are not familiar with the essay, the basic premise is this: the German language is awful. He has a slew of examples at his disposal, which he uses as evidence of the language which, according to him, is “slipshod and systemless... slippery and elusive to the grasp.” What he failed to recognize, is the structured rigidity that Germans are so famously stereotyped for helps to provided much structure to the language. Structure that is missing in Slavic languages for example. Slavic languages include Czech, Slovak and Polish among others, and speaking as an American university student who studied Czech for four whole months... they all sound the same. Compared to German, Slavic languages are slippery, slick and smooth. There are 4 reasons why.

1. *Letters*

The smallest unit in any written language is the letter, and having to learn more or less letters than a native language can be one of the greatest challenges, because letters dictate pronunciation. In the English language, there are 26 letters. In German, 30 letters, and Czech has 42 letters. To start with, the additional letters in German are mainly the three diphthongs of the alphabet. A diphthong is a single letter that has two sounds. This may sound weird to English speakers (but then again, letters with no sounds are equally weird). The combinations are ae, oe and ue, and they are marked as a, o, or u respectively with a pair of dots over the single letter. The fourth letter, often American students’ favorite, the ettsett. The symbol looks like a capital B, but no part of the letter is completely closed off, and the straight line becomes a loose tail, and it symbolizes two consecutive “s”. (ß) It is kind of cute for a letter, and as a classmate told me,

would be funny to imagine walking into a bar. But given its slick and loopy ways, is probably the last letter I'd want to run into on the street.

In Czech, there are significantly more letters and sounds. These different letters are still within the Roman alphabet. Some consonants have a dash angled to the right, and some of them have a little hat, called a hatchek. The dashes simply elongate the sound, while the hatchek softens it. A hard “d” sound becomes a softened “dee-yuh” (said very rapidly). There is also a double letter, ch, which is treated as a single letter, and produces a much more guttural sound. It stands out in contrast to words such as *musíte jít* (*moo-see-tay jeet*), or *hledáme* (*hle-dom-ay*), making it all that more noticeable in words like *poslouchat* (*po-s-low-kkkkkat*), or *chceš* (*kkkkk-sesh*). The soft curvatures of the ‘s’ or the ‘i’ are made distinctive when matched by the guttural roar of the ch, which makes it sound like the speaker is trying to cough up a hairball.

The letter that every American hates however is the R with the hatchek. Aggressive in everyway imaginable, written out phonetically, it sounds like a rapid fire td td td. However, it appears to also have a ‘j’ sound, and is said so rapidly, even when slowed down for linguistic thickheads like me, is too fast to comprehend. Dvořák is the most famous example of how the letter r works. I wish I were exaggerating how difficult this letter is, but my host father in the Czech Republic shared that it took him (a native born Czech I might add) nearly two decades to learn how to pronounce the letter. Not even Czechs can speak their own language. At least Germans can. Don't let the cute little hat fool you: hiding under it is a fierce and ferocious beast, just waiting to trip your tongue, waiting to feast on American fools.

2. Verbs

To start off his essay, Twain complains about the verb, first and foremost. It's simple though. The active verb is the second position in the sentence. All other verbs stay in their infinitive form and are placed at the end of the sentence. Once you learn what positions are (basically think who, what, when, where, how as different positions of a sentence) the placement is easy. Another complaint, separable verbs. No one wants to put "de" in the second position and "parted" at the end of the sentence. No one. On the other hand, 2nd position is a friend, creating a clear and logical placement for *all verbs in the language*. You probably wish English were that simple! It becomes a matter of learning and memorizing which tenses use which verbs. All secondary verbs are placed at the end of the sentence, no matter which tense.

In the Czech language, to discuss verbs, there must also be a discussion of pronouns, because they are one and the same. Not technically, but Czech does not use pronouns! Conjugation, which is one of many concepts that does not really exist in the English language (to the degree it does in others) determines the pronoun being referred to, and therefore the context of the entire conversation. If talking about yourself, you introduce your name with the pronoun, and then after that just the verb. An introduction looks like this: "I am Joe. Am student. Am Creative Writing major. Am not employed. Yet." Now this is convenient. The conjugation solely works, so you don't have to. That is until you see how varied verb conjugation is, even within the same verb ending groups. At least German is consistent with the groups, and any exceptions lie outside of the verb ending groupings.

3. *Nouns*

Nouns. Another thing that German does right, which Twain acknowledges, is that every noun is capitalized. Every single noun. This is a blessing. You get a basic categorization of the

words of nouns and non-nouns. Basic grammar and position placement can then help you figure out verbs, reducing the puzzle even more.

The Czechs have a different system, noticeably more obscure. They do not capitalize their nouns, which can make looking at billboards or signs a positively nightmarish experience. Rather, they have an interesting trick using letters. First however, I must tell you about gendered languages, if you don't already know. Like conjugation, almost any other language in the world except English has gendered nouns, and these genders tend to be masculine, feminine and neutral. The reason this matters is it comes up with the use of adjectives, and this is true in both German and Czech, which shall be the fourth point of this essay. In the Czech language, the last letter of nouns almost always determines the gender of the noun. If a word ends in a consonant, you know for sure that it is a masculine noun. No other part of speech or gendered noun will ever end in a consonant. If the word ends in 'a' then it is always a feminine noun, and if the noun ends in 'o' then it is always a neutral noun. Now, of course, like all languages there are exceptions. Nouns can also end in 'e' or 'i' and these nouns can be either feminine or neutral. If you don't know, well, you're just plain old out of luck.

4. Adjective Endings

The second complaint Twain marks down in his essay is adjective endings – a phenomenon, like gendered language and conjugation, that exists in almost every language in the world except English. Based on the gender of the noun: masculine, feminine, and neutral, the adjective endings respectively change. After these endings are memorized, the only complicated part is learning different cases. These include Nominative, Accusative, Dative and Genitive. The English language has these same four cases, though students rarely learn them by name any

more. And compared to Latin's 7 cases, German students should dance with joy. And yet, Twain writes that he once met a Californian student in Heidelberg who would "rather decline two drinks than one German adjective." Of Twain's complaints, this is perhaps the least exaggerated and most legitimate, adjective endings are hard and do require pure memorization, but once the pattern is figured out, much like the rest of the language, logic and order follow.

In the Czech language, adjective endings follow the same kinds of rules, the one major exception is that feminine nouns change in the accusative case rather than masculine nouns. The application is different though the rules are the same, which was actually helped by my understanding of German.

And that is perhaps the bottom line here. These complaints raised by Twain and I: they are a privilege. It is a privilege to know and speak two languages, let alone be familiar with a third. It is a privilege to dissect languages and see what makes sense, and what is illogical. In his essay Twain deconstructed the language, and then proposed six changes he would make to improve the language himself. I will not go so far with the Czech language, but rather compliment it on its beauty. German to me is rigid and logical (with exceptions to the side of course) and the sound of the language reflects that in its harsh sounds and strict letters. Czech is far more fluid and soft, utilizing a greater alphabet to take advantage of greater subtleties of phonetic capabilities. By reducing words that are needed (compressing them into simply verbs), the language is able to 'cut corners' in music and poetry to reduce the artistic quality to the essential core.

Foreign and Domestic (Architecture)
Joe Bruner

From an objective glance, one might look at Chicago and ask what's so great about it. After all, it's the land where summers are unbearably hot, and the winters are even colder. Lake Michigan is simply melted glacier water, making it unpleasantly cool even on the hottest day, and during the winter the only thought of comfort is a warm house, sitting by a fire place, glad that no collar bones were broken slipping on black ice that day.

What about autumn though? Or the spring? The air is warm, the sun is kinder and the Earth is filled with flashy colors, leaves or flowers, depending on the season. Wrong! The spring is wet, and autumn is dark, and in both cases sneeze attacks are flying through the air either as leaf mold or pollen. So again, Chicago: what's so great about it?

Yes, despite the frigid wind, there is still something magical about sledding down slopes of snow or perhaps stuffing a chunk of ice down a friend's shirt as payback. This is emphasized all the more because the fact of returning home, meaning clothes get to dry out, grabbing some hot chocolate to go with those marshmallows all while the sensation of feeling returns to the tip of the nose.

It is these moments of closure, of the satisfaction of tiring one's self out over running through snow, that create the sense of camaraderie in Chicago Winter-wonder Land. The shared misery of slipping on black ice, brushing the latest snowstorm off the car, shoveling the sidewalk and hanging up Christmas lights are what make the sticky humidity from summer (which makes it feel like death is at the door) worth every second.

In the time that I have gone to college (and since have moved to Alabama – away from Chicago) I have been back home twice: once in the Winter and once in the Summer. When I moved away from Chicago, it was a bright sunny Chicago winter morning. It was not

particularly cold, nor warm (as it never is in January). Sitting in the back seat, watching the towering office buildings pass by with looming shadows, a realization struck: that this city was here long before I was, and it will continue to function long after I leave.

This is what makes the return home all that much stranger. The first time it was mid-evening, pitch black under a dull and miserable overcast sky. The moment the taxi turned onto my street, I felt a shudder within me, as if my soul had recognized the home it had long been deprived of. 364 Days. It had been 364 days since I had been in Chicago. In that time I had nearly completed half of college, gone through more heart-ache than I thought could have happened to me, and firmly established my roots with the best friend I'd ever had.

It seemed fitting that the friend's house I was staying in was on the same block as the house I grew up and lived in my entire life. There was time for that in the morning, but first it was with much anticipation I greeted my family friends. The excitement was palpable, and dinner that night was quite enjoyable, catching up on college stories, hearing what the old high school was like from my friend's younger sister and so on.

The bizarreness did not end with being a guest in a friend's house however. The next morning, I took a chilly walk down the frozen, salted and slushy sidewalk to the end of the block where my house was situated. Just like they had always been, there were the train tracks across the street, on top of the slight hill, leading to the train station about 1000 feet away. That is not what caught my eye however. Instead, my eye was drawn to the big blue block that now protruded from two sides of the roof of the house: additions that had been made to extend the upstairs into two additional rooms (aside from the two that already existed). Closer to the ground however, the two bushes at the edge of the front walk had been excavated and the side row of 8-foot-tall bushes had a huge gaping hole, to allow room for the large dumpster that was sitting

unceremoniously in half the yard. The ground was muddy and slick with half-frozen slush, providing an unkempt look as the construction workers prepped the house for the spring rush of house sales.

Walking around the house provided ammunition for even more anguish. The backdoor had been filled in, and a sliding glass door had been placed on a different face of the porch. From the glass door, I could see much of the interior had been reshaped – the pantry, kitchen, sunroom and my bedroom had been redrawn into a different, more convenient layout of rooms. I stepped back, stunned for a moment. My bedroom no longer existed. This home was no longer mine. I would never be able to take friends or a partner back here and show them my memories of growing up in that house. Not entirely.

But what exactly does this mean? Certainly it is weird being a visitor to your own home, but it also means that progress is being made, change is happening, and children growing up *now* will reap the benefits. A new family moved into the house during the Spring after all the renovations were completed: a fence put around the house now, bringing the total of fenced houses on the block up to two, and a new little bush was plugged in the hole in the middle of 8 foot bushes. The irony of the family is they came from Mississippi with two children: almost exactly the family that moved down to Alabama.

Growing up, I would complain to friends about my house, and in later years, shortly before I left for college and we moved, I learned the livable space in the house was about 1000 square feet for four people, with piles and stacks creating a complicated maze moving around the house. The bedroom for my brother and I was about half the size of a dorm room, we had two bathrooms and one shower, and since the house was over 100 years old, cold and hot water had to be combined manually. The door to the attic was awkwardly placed in the kitchen, the

dishwasher had to be connected by a hose, and there were narrow walkways and doorways connecting each room, leading to awkward standoffs when multiple people wandered.

All-in-all, it was cramped, it was old, and it was home. I have lost count the number of times I fantasized about being in a bigger house, but now that the layout is new and improved, and my childhood bedroom is gone, the fondness of memory obscures the frustration of living in that house.

There were also external factors that are included in that domestic architecture. In the winters, shoveling snow started out fun, but then became just as hot, sweaty and tiring as the summers were. Every year, curiosity rose and was satiated in how much the cracks in the sidewalk would expand due to the freeze and melt, freeze and melt. Eventually it became tradition, shoveling over the same cracks, and being reassured they were still there, no more or less than the year before. In the summer, the grass would grow long and thick, and require mowing every weekend. Picking out the dead lilies in the fall was another memorable task, as was raking leaves from the yard to the street for the street sweepers to come by and clean up on designated days, though they only cleaned on occasion.

It is fun to reminisce and recollect the less enjoyable parts of living in the north suburbs of Chicago, but what does it all actually mean? There is a part of it about growing up and letting go. That room will never come back and I might as well be comfortable with that, because the alternative is being upset the rest of my life. There is also a part of it about life just being the way it is. There is no greater comment, no greater message. It was home. Now it's not. And that's the way it is just going to be. A sidewalk is just a sidewalk. It will never be a memorial, no matter how hard you fight, because it probably won't be there the next time that you go by and visit "home".