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Beside the Fire: Time as a Visible Dimension

In *Einstein's Dreams* by Alan Lightman, I identify the most with the 15 June 1905 entry, where “time is a visible dimension” that people are able to look and travel through as if running on a physical plane (Lightman 133). Some choose to cling to the present to preserve precious memories, while others race ahead to pursue “better” lives. Lightman’s writing is not fiction, but a magnifying glass that announces secret thoughts and emotions people do not easily reveal about themselves otherwise; in turn, this book has revealed lessons I have learned myself.

Following Einstein’s dream, there are two main groups of people, the first being those who stay. “Some people fear traveling far from a comfortable moment. They remain close to one temporal location barely crawling past a familiar occasion” (Lightman 134). I have witnessed acquaintances, friends, and family in my life who cling to their favorite moments, especially those heartbroken from romantic relationships or a family death. These friends remain stagnant in time, neither progressing nor decreasing, drifting through the motions of everyday life. While most people move forward by pursuing academic titles, careers, love, or families of their own, the static bodies do not grow. My frozen friends choose not to develop beyond their dilemmas or challenges; in doing so, they are unable to attain maturity, wisdom, and—consequently—peace with whatever grief or mistake has been tormenting them. Choosing to remain frozen in time feels like the easy way to avoid any more pain. However, clinging to the present without ever stepping into the future turns temporary pain into eternal torture.

Contrary to those who stay, Lightman also addresses those who run through time, eager to leave their past behind. “Others gallop recklessly into the future, without preparation for the rapid sequence of passing events” (Lightman 134). I subconsciously surround myself with

runners. While not *every* friend of mine is a runner, the fast-paced travelers are the most noticeable. According to social media, the popular milestone is for women my age to be engaged—if not married—with a baby or toddler. In contrast, I have never been in a romantic relationship. Furthermore, I feel as if I am in an academic minority; for example, most other Honors students at my school have entered the program with an abundance of credits from Advanced Placement or Dual Credit classes, while I was homeschooled throughout high school.

My personal relationship with time is best described in Lightman's account of a young man pursuing a doctoral degree, discussing his thesis with a professor:

Sitting in his chair, the young man steps hesitantly forward in time, only minutes into the future, shudders at the cold and uncertainty. He pulls back. Much better to stay in this moment, beside the warm fire, beside the warm help of his mentor.

Much better to stop movement in time. And so, on this day in the small library, the young man remains. His friends pass by, look in briefly to see him stopped in this moment, continue on to the future in their own paces (Lightman 135).

Instead of following his peers and running ahead through time, this young man decides to stay by his mentor in the present moment and find his own pace. Although this student does not rush ahead, he still works. "Each month for the past eighteen months," Lightman narrates, "the young man has met his professor here in this room . . . for guidance and hope, gone away to work for another month, come back with new questions" (134).

Comparable to the young man, I am progressing at my own pace, neither choosing to cling onto time nor run ahead. My entire past involves people telling me to run, pointing out a million different paths to take up fast-track mountains and challenges to climb to the top of society's pedestals. I have had to learn that it is alright to move forward at my own pace; instead

of pursuing advanced classes for college credit, I spent my spare time in high school teaching piano, tutoring two local students, and writing, as well as contributing to my local church through singing, playing piano, speaking, and teaching. My choices allowed me to develop my personality rather than my report card alone, and I would not change my background—after all, it has brought me to where I am today.

As similar as we are, I have progressed more than the young man in Einstein's dream. I am learning how to let go of people and events. It is valuable for me to glean from my mentors' teachings and listen to their advice as much as possible. On the other hand, these leaders are human, and they are progressing—and aging—on their own levels. It is vital for me to follow my leaders, but I am frequently told that I possess leadership qualities; if I am to ever utilize those qualities, I have to be ready to take the reins one day. Until that day comes, I will remain sitting beside the fire, taking whatever I can get from my leaders, teachers, and mentors. I am content here, but I can not become too comfortable. The fire will one day burn out, and I will be the one to light it anew.

Works Cited

Lightman, Alan, editor. "15 June 1905." *Einstein's Dreams*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1993,  
pp. 133–137.