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OPINION

Clocks, the steady sound deep with us

Big and small timekeepers, the biggest of them all is being built in Texas.



Back in 1859, the clock tower in Westminster Palace in London was the largest clock in the world. (JOHNNY GREIG / Getty Images)



By Christopher de Vinck
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The clock tower that sits at the north end of Westminster Palace in London was, at its completion in 1859, the largest clock in the world. For the last four years, until New Year's Day, the giant bells were silent while the entire clock tower underwent a complete renovation. Can we endure the silence of the clock? Do we wish we could stop time for a number of years and refurbish our souls and ring out with glee once again when our confidence and health returns?

My wife and I are visiting the cardiologist for the first time this afternoon so that he can listen to the hopefully steady ticking in our hearts. She is 69; I am 71. When we were married 45 years ago, one of the first things we purchased together was an antique regulator school clock. We liked that clock because we were both school teachers. I liked the key that winds the mechanics. I liked how it looked on the wall, but the ticking sound drove me crazy.

An open window in summer with the cacophony of tree frogs and crickets soothes me to sleep. A ticking clock will keep me up for hours, so when I hung the clock for the first time on the living room wall, after I turned the key and pushed the pendulum for the first time, the clock exhaled its steady, "Tick. Tick. Tick." I thought it was wonderful until the night when I was in bed and I heard, "Tick. Tick. Tick." So ... for many years before I went to bed, I stopped the clock at 7 in the evening and pushed the pendulum again at 7 in the morning, until I gave that up and just stopped the clock altogether.

The first pendulum clock was invented by a Dutch scientist, Christiaan Huygens, a friend of Galileo and the philosopher René Descartes. This clock changed the world, creating time standards and schedules for trains and factory workdays, important elements in the fast growth of life in the 18th and 19th centuries. Clocks change the world.

The clock tower is grand, the pendulum clever. My little regular clock is a charming antique, but none of this compares to what is being built in the western hills of Texas.

Jeff Bezos, the brave creator of Amazon, with the help of Danny Hillis, an exceptionally clever, successful [inventor](#), [entrepreneur](#) and [computer scientist](#), are building what they call The Clock of the Long Now, a 10,000-year clock. Bezos wrote that the installation is a 500-foot-tall mechanical clock powered by day/night thermal cycles, synchronized at solar noon. (Sounds wonderful, but my scientifically challenged mind thought just one big key to wind this up would be easier.)

A clock 500 feet tall! The White House is 70 feet tall. Five hundred feet is half the height of the Eiffel Tower. It is made of stainless steel, will keep time for 10,000 years, will tick once a year, and chime once every thousand years.

Why such a clock? The Long Now Foundation, spearheading this project, wrote, "If a clock can keep going for 10 millennia, shouldn't we make sure our civilization does as well? If the clock keeps going

after we are personally long dead, why not attempt other projects that require future generations to finish?”

I like that, making us think about projects we can finish in time, like peace on earth, good will to all.

Maybe this clock being built in a mountain will remind us that the Earth swings back and forth in the giant pendulum of the universe, that the tides wind us up each day, that we need to live with gratitude that the ticking hearts inside our bodies and the bodies of our ancestors have been working effortless for millions of years.

Perhaps this giant clock can remind us that the Earth is our mother with a heart, with lava spilling through her veins, with water quenching her thirst, and we have to protect her from choking, a reminder that we need to maintain her pulse for us and for future generations.

I would love to be a hobbit and visit the inside of this Texas mountain to look at the giant gears. On the first page of J.R.R. Tolkien’s famous book, he wrote, “In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit. Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort.”

The clock tower of London, the cardiologist this afternoon, the sounds of falling water and tree frogs — I like the idea of a steady sound deep with us. I like the idea of a giant clock in a hobbit hole on the wrist of the world, keeping track of our progress, one tick at a time as we try to make our way toward the comfort of our souls.

I like how Bezos and Hillis blend science and metaphors of hope together in their Texas mountain project.

H.G. Wells wrote in his famous novel *The Time Machine*, “Face this world. Learn its ways, watch it, be careful of too hasty guesses at its meaning. In the end you will find clues to it all.”

Tick. Tick. Tick.

Christopher de Vinck’s latest novels are “Ashes” (Harper Collins) and “Mr. Nicholas” (Paraclete Press). He wrote this column for The Dallas Morning News.

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