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Darn those digitals!

By Catherine Stover

A FRIEND recently made the mistake of giving me a fashionable digital watch for a gift. I was so upset that I started to cough.

"What are you coughing about?" he asked. "Everyone has at least one of these. They come in every color."

He frowned and his Dukakis-like eyebrows came together.

"I don't know how to say this," I sputtered, "but.... digital watches change people's orientation toward time."

He rolled his eyes.

"And they do it in a very 1980s sort of way."

My friend leaned back and took a long drink of his strong coffee. He knew I was about to climb up on my soapbox. So I did.

"TRUE or false?" I asked. "This is the first decade where you are apt to hear someone say, 'It's 11:58' instead of, 'It's almost noon.' "

"True."

"True or false? It's not just nerds who are saying 11:58 anymore. It's mainstream America."

"True. Because it's what digital watches tell you to say. They tell you the minute."

"Right," I said, knowingly. "They don't show you the cycle of time and where you happen to be...."

"I knew you'd start with something like 'the cycle of time,' " he complained.

"True or false?" I continued. "You have a broader perspective when you look at the face of a clock."

"True. But...."

"True or false?" I interrupted him. "When you look at a digital watch, and all you see is the minute, you feel jumpy."

"Jumpy?"

"As in 'stressed out' — the 1980's most favorite phrase."

"Well...."

He was hesitating, so I leaped in again: "True or false? Seeing what minute it is makes you think the minute is important."

"True."

"The minute is so important that you must act now," I said.

"Maybe."

"You must act. You don't have time to think. You feel rushed, stressed out...."

"So you think digital watches are responsible for the stress of the '80s? Come on."

I continued:

"Say you have a deadline. You look at your watch. If you look at a face — a familiar face — you can say, I have awhile yet before it's 3 o'clock. But if you look at digits, you are told it's 2:48. You have to stop and think, 'Is that *before* a quarter to 3 or after?' Then it hits you — it's 2:48! Every minute counts! You must rush!"

"But what if you need to know exactly what minute it is?" my friend asked.

I was waiting for this question. I forced myself to remain seated.

"Who needs to know exactly what minute it is? My answer is no one. But the Digital Mentality answer is you *do*. You need to know exactly what minute it is because every one of your minutes is important because *you're* important."

"SO digital watches are also responsible for the inflated egos of the '80s."

"Right," I said.

"And for the stress."

"Right. The evil twins of the '80s."

"So I should have bought you a windup clock."

"I already have one. A Big Ben. Every night I wind him up. Then I lie down and listen to him unwind. I tell myself, 'Big Ben is unwinding now, and so shall I.' "

"Shall? Do you really say *shall?*"

I ignored him. "Then I say, one cycle has come to a close. A new one will begin tomorrow. And I'll be ready."

"So that's your prescription? That's your way to deal with the 1980s?"

"It's as simple as that."

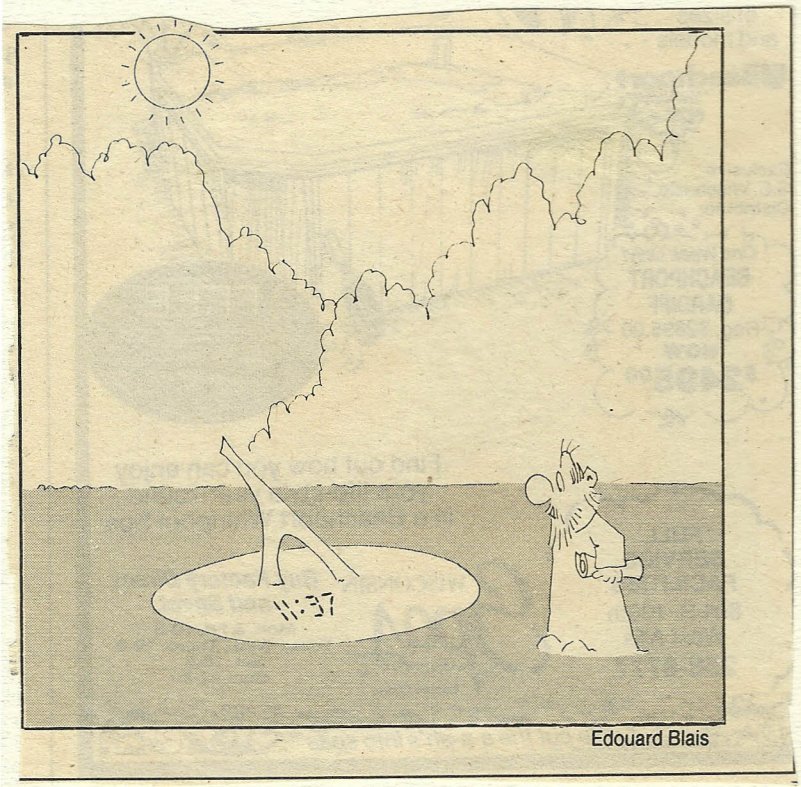
"So I guess I should return this thing."

He looked at the gift, his empty coffee cup and his own watch. He stood up.

"Got to run," he said. "It's 9:52."

"No you don't," I said, pouring some more coffee. "It's not 10 o'clock yet." W

Catherine Stover, a Waunakee free-lance writer, is a former writing instructor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. She also was one of the winners in this year's Young Writers' Contest.



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