

CALL TO WORSHIP

In 1971, Jane Fonda won her first Oscar with a film called Klute. She plays a wannabe actress financing her professional strivings with performances in . . . another . . . “profession” – one sometimes called the oldest profession. In the middle of one such “transaction,” the camera shows her skillfully working in a glance at her watch. I saw this film in an actual movie theater, and I still remember the audience’s reaction of mild shock and nervous laughter. As utterly compromised as this commercialized intimacy obviously was, there was still something unsettling about so coldly and explicitly subjecting it to the dominion of the clock. Perhaps, in some metaphorical way, the audience caught a glimpse of themselves in this scene.

We’ve come along way since this early example of the science of time management. Google has just announced development of a new email software program called “Autopilot” designed to make the work of answering email more efficient. The announcement began with a confident declaration: “Email will never be a thing of the past.” I almost quit reading when I heard that depressing news, but I forged ahead. “However,” the announcement continued, “actually reading and writing messages is about to be a thing of the past.”

Autopilot can “scan every one of your incoming messages and automatically send the perfect reply.” By reviewing a large sample of the messages you have actually composed and sent, it will calibrate for tone and punctuation, and even replicate your particular profile of common typos. Google claims over 99% accuracy for this time-saving innovation, due to its inclusion of what it calls “human-like qualities such as compassion and wisdom.” “It’s just like you,” beams Google’s roll-out announcement, “but automated.”

Our relationship with time has a quality of tunnel vision. We treat it mainly as the yardstick of productivity. And since we treat ourselves as engines of productivity, the “uber-manager” called time is the yardstick of us too. What is the spiritual cost of this? Must it be so?

Come, let us live in the questions again today. Come, let us worship together.

postscript: The Google announcement actually was an April Fool’s Day gag – it appeared and disappeared on Wednesday, April 1. It nonetheless made a valuable contribution. The fact that no one expressed incredulity at it on Sunday morning shows how far we really have come – that an idea as ridiculous as Autopilot would just seem like the latest slug of hash landing on our cafeteria plates with a plop. And cousins of Autopilot actually ARE in making. Maybe Google learned a lot about its market from this practical joke.