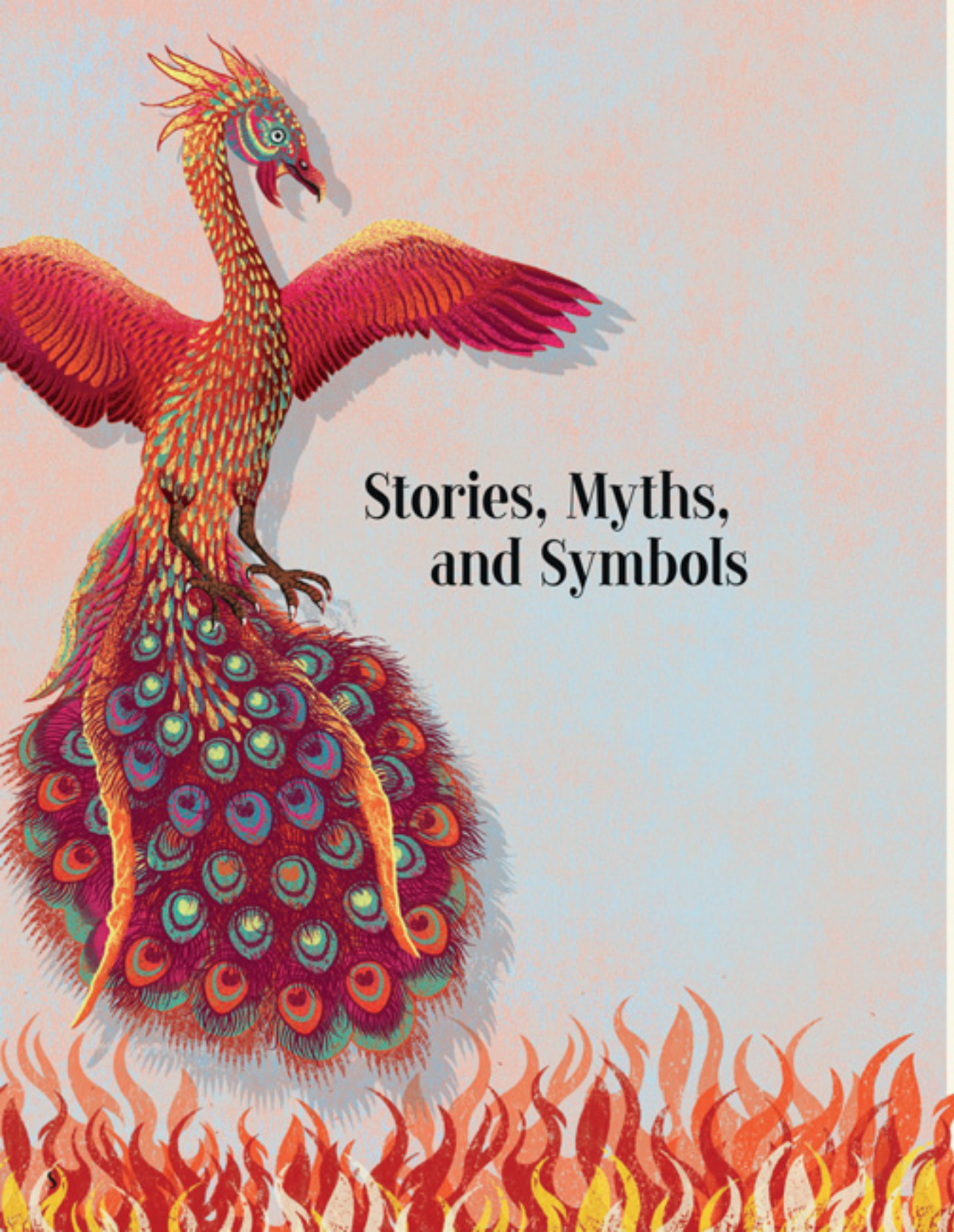


Stories, Myths, and Symbols

For as long as we can remember, people have been studying the heavens, and in doing so, gained valuable insight into time. But no one fully understood what time was, so stories were invented to explain it. And even if some of them sound fantastic and incredible, many of their heroes are still part of our lives today.



Chronos

The ancient Greeks, who lived in cities all around the Mediterranean Sea, had at least one god for every purpose. The god of time was Chronos, who had created himself out of chaos—or nothingness! Chronos was time and he was also the creator of the world. According to legend, he formed an earthly globe from which all things originated. Even now, the original Chronos with a "C" is still linked with time, as in the word "chronological." If you want to talk about something chronologically, you do it in the order that it happened. Today, how we arrange our thoughts and stories is connected to the ancient Greek god of time. Not bad, right?

Or Kronos?

Over time, Chronos was often confused with someone with a similar name—Kronos with a "K." This Kronos was a titan who had overthrown his father, Uranus, the god of the heavens. Afraid that his own children would do the same to him, Kronos gobbled them up one by one, each an important god. Just in time, their mother, Rhea, hid the youngest child, Zeus, who tricked his father into spitting the children back out. This outlandish story reveals an important aspect of the human condition, which is that Kronos gives life and also takes it away.



Time to Be a Sun God

The ancient Romans, who ruled the Mediterranean after the ancient Greeks, also had a wealth of gods, many of whom they acquired from the legions of different, older cultures they conquered. The Romans gave these gods new names, new appearances, and at least one special symbol. Many Greek gods were changed into Roman ones. Even the gods of the ancient Persians, from an area we now call Iran, were transformed.
Zurvan was the Persian god of creation who personified time and space. The ancient Romans were fascinated by Zurvan. They renamed him Mithras and turned him into an invincible sun god. Mithras did well by the Romans. He was given a serpent to represent eternity and a torch to indicate the time of day, and he was crowned with a halo to signify the sun. Many centuries later, he became the role model for his "little sister," the Statue of Liberty.

Two-Faced God

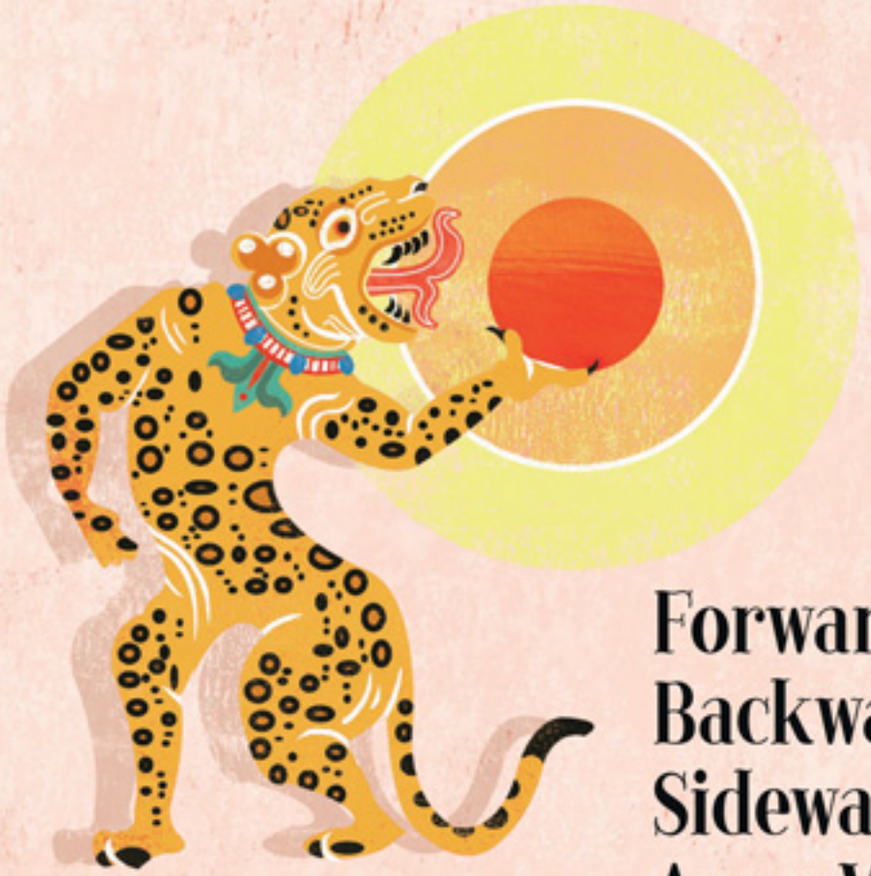
One of the few gods the Romans came up with themselves was called Janus. He was the lord of time and had two heads—one looked into the past, the other could see the future. The beginning of time was especially important to Janus. At the start of religious festivities, the ancient Romans always prayed to him first. January, the first month of the year, bears his name. Nowadays, though, Janus is not held in such high regard. When we say that someone is Janus-like or Janus-faced, we mean that they are "two-faced" or, like a snake, they speak with a forked tongue.





Phoenix

The phoenix is another figure that represents time. It originates from the era of the ancient Greeks. In the US, the capital of Arizona is named after it. Sports teams, television networks, and many other organizations also bear the name of this mythical bird. According to ancient legend, after the phoenix lived for five hundred years, it set itself on fire in order to rise again from its own ashes, repeating this fantastic ritual every five hundred years.
That the phoenix can keep renewing itself gives people courage. Even today, "to rise like a phoenix" is a common phrase that suggests that even the most total failure is an opportunity to start over—regenerated, refreshed, and with renewed strength. Long live the phoenix!



Forward, Backward, Sideways, Away We Go!

Yesterday was yesterday and what's gone is gone, even if we hold on to a few photos and memories of the past. The present moment is brief, immediately gone. We'll come to that later. Most of us are already thinking about tomorrow even though it's still today. We practice for the weekend basketball game or for the summer theater performance. Our mind is focused on the future because that is where time is heading—always in one direction. Just like a river. And we have no choice but to swim into the future. Well, at least that is what we believe.



Time in Circles

The ancient Egyptians experienced time differently. Past, present, and future did not exist for them. Instead, they divided time in two ways: Neheh, the time that goes around in circles, and Djet, the eternal perfection. The ancient Egyptians stumbled on to the idea that time was repetitive by watching nature. They came to realize that many things happened in cycles. The sun rises and sets again. Every year, the Nile burst its banks and flooded the land, leading to new growth. By the end of the year, there was drought. But with every new year and with every new flood, the cycle would begin again. The ancient Egyptian sun god, Ra, was responsible for this whole cycle because he appeared on the horizon every morning, sped across the skies, and then sank into the underworld of Osiris in the evening, where he united with Djet—eternity—at midnight when everything started afresh.

Round and Round

Many other cultures see time as a cycle based on the recurring patterns in nature. It is not just the sun rising and falling all the time, the moon does, too. Spring, summer, autumn, and winter occur in the same sequence. Crops grow and get harvested. This happens over and over. Is life itself a constant cycle taking place again and again? Even the ancient people of the Maya believed that the world started up anew and then perished again. The Maya believed that the jaguar, a night predator, ate the sun every evening. He would then spit out the sun in the morning.

Looking Back

So who said the future is ahead of us? The Malagasy people of Madagascar believe the future approaches us from behind and moves through us. Because we have eyes only in the front of our head, we can only "see" present and past events, while the future remains unknown because it can't be seen.



Right Here, Right Now ... So Long!

Let's forget about the past and the future for a moment. Let's look at the present—the right here and now! How long does "now" actually take? If you think about "right now," it is already over. The present is quite difficult to really catch hold of. It slips right out of your hand.
Researchers have discovered that we only feel like "now" for about 3 seconds. If something occurred longer than three seconds ago, then we regard it as already gone.



Don't Even Think about It!

Living in the present depends on how much you think about time. For example, when you are completely absorbed in a game, a book, or schoolwork, you stop thinking about everything else. At that moment, you are totally in the world of now. What's more, you are happy because you are not thinking about the past and the future.
Many adults find it hard to forget about time and live in the present. Their minds are mostly set on the future and what they have to do at a certain time. They think about what needs to be done at work, who they still need to send a message to, remembering to call grandma, when to do the shopping, and on and on and on. And to-do lists and cell phone reminders do not make things easier.

This constant life in the future is stressful and often puts grown-ups in a bad mood. It's a habit you might want to avoid. In fact, lazing about and simply not thinking about time could be good for your health! Some adults work on forgetting about time. They meditate or practice yoga and they sometimes even manage to achieve a state of timelessness.





The Long and Short of It

If you get bored or start focusing on time passing by, you find that time starts to drag. Do you think that time itself is bothered about this? For example, when you are waiting for a bus, five minutes can drag on forever. It is even worse when it comes to pain. Even though you know it will be over in five minutes, those five minutes can feel like a lifetime.

It would be nice if five minutes stretched out when you're doing something exciting. But no, the opposite happens! You've probably noticed that when you're having fun, a whole hour can feel like a mere five minutes.

Happenings

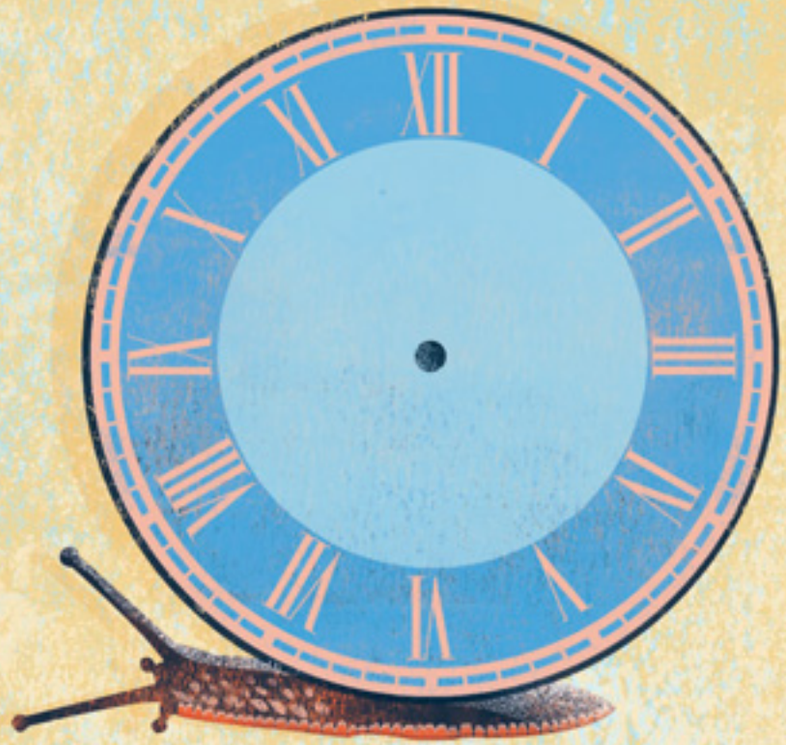
How long it takes us to do something depends entirely on how we perceive time. And that has everything to do with what happens to us during that time period.

The more things that you experience through a passage of time, the shorter the time would seem to be. That's when people might talk about time flying by. On the other hand, the less you have to do over a given period of time, the longer that time appears to take.

What about tidying up your room? It's obvious. There is not much to do, but it seems to take ages. As if time has slowed to a crawl—if not come to a complete stop.

The Paradox of Time

Now this is where it starts to get crazy, especially when it comes to our memories. It seems that everyday activities like packing bags, tidying up rooms, or taking out the trash not only take forever to get done, they are also quickly forgotten. Yet exciting things like adventures with friends that fly by so quickly can stay in our memories for a long time.





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