

29th December 2020

Late

"Five minutes! Zounds! I have been five minutes too late all my lifetime!"

Hannah Cowley, *The Belle's Stratagem* (1780)

Now that the Postal Service is up-and-running again after Christmas, it's the time when late Christmas cards are delivered. You know the kind of things I mean: the card from someone you know is always disorganised; the one from the person who's felt obliged to send you one after they've got yours, but they've been too late in posting it for a pre-Christmas collection; or a card that's been stuck in the post. "Better late than never" is a mantra that works well with late-delivery Christmas cards.

I hate being late. I've always been a stickler for timekeeping. I sent some work to a publisher earlier this year well before the deadline, and got a message saying, "You're a publishers dream!" I liked that.

It's the same with appointments. I'd rather be early, even sitting in my car waiting for the *exact* time for my engagement, than run the risk of being late. I *hate* being late – even though it irritates my wife big-time!

When I was small, and, like all children, I dawdled when we were going somewhere, my mother would constantly say, "Hurry up!" There was good reason, of course, for we had no car in those days, and travelling by public transport meant you had to be ready at the right time or else you missed your connection. But it was drummed into me. So, even *now* I can hear my mother's voice, "Hurry up! Hurry up!" and I'm terrified I'll be late.

I'm better at this than I used to be – at least I *think* so, though I suspect my ever-patient wife wouldn't agree. Perhaps I'm getting more "chilled out" in my later years, even though the insistent voice of my mother still appears to be a determining factor in the way I live my life.

In *The Belle's Stratagem*, an 18th century romantic comedy by the dramatist Hannah Cowley, the harassed servant of Saville, one of the principal characters, confesses to being "five minutes too late all my lifetime". Perhaps my mother might have a word with him. Zounds! But then, maybe she's got enough to do to keep me running to time!

A prayer for today

Lord, am I too late to come to you in prayer?

Are you as stressed in your waiting as I've been getting here?

"Worry not, my child. I'm just delighted you've turned up at all!"

An original reflection © Tom Gordon

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