

Haldimann H9

by Mark van Vuuren, RFSPE

I'm holding a wristwatch I've spent a great deal of time admiring, and it's taken a great deal of sacrifice working, saving, scrimping in order to finally own one. It's named the Haldimann H9, made by contemporary Swiss master watchmaker Beat Haldimann. It's a manual-wind, triple-barrel flying tourbillion, in a solid platinum case. For me it's the best movement ever made, and satisfies the dreams of early watch pioneers like Tompion, Harrison, and Breguet.



The watch glass is a totally opaque, black sapphire crystal. Totally opaque. It keeps time, but it doesn't tell time. Allow me to explain.


When we were young we had it hard. The world was different then; we lived in a shack on a plot, working the land, and my father and oldest brother worked in the coal mine. I recall cold, dark mornings, the warmth of the kitchen stove, inconstant meals, and hard work. Always hard work. Work meant money, and money meant food. One had to work. So every night, as my feet got used to the icy bed sheets, I would wind the old alarm clock, pull out the alarm pin, and then check again it had been pulled out. And check again just before putting out the candle.

When the early morning came too soon, my alarm clock rang, other alarm clocks rang, and slowly the household groaned into life. At 5:30 my mother started the kitchen fire and began preparing breakfast. At 6:30 my father and oldest brother left for the mine, and at 7:00 my second oldest brother left for the fields. Every second month my sister would leave for the main farmhouse at 5:00 to milk the cows. I was the youngest, the only one to go to school, so I was the family's Hope for the Future, and also secretly resented since hard labor was not my lot, even though all my free time was drowned in chores. The school bell rang at 8:00, and rang again at 2:00, the close of school. At 5:00 the family would start arriving home, and at 6:00 my father and oldest brother came home. I remember this time well because the house mood would change: They were tired, dirty and angry, and needed their solitude. We ate at 7:30, and at 8:30 started retiring. Sleep, labor, eat; repeat.

On Friday evenings, the pay-packets for the week were lumped on the table and apportioned. We then ate supper after which my father and my brothers would go to the local pub, which served the last round at 10:00. Sunday mornings we'd sleep late, requiring to be seated in the church only at 9:00.

When I was a young adult I was fortunate to work in an office, where work started at 8:30; tea-time was at 10:30, lunch from 1:00 to 2:00. We left at 5:00. When there was overtime work we grabbed it eagerly, limited to 5 hours a week, then home, relying on a regular bus service.

When promotion came, more responsibilities came my way, and time management became imperative: Staff meeting at 9:00, manager meeting at 10:00, labor disputes at 2:00, production review at 3:00. The day became a cacophony of time-controlled boxes, each with a different purpose and demand, each with a different feeling.



I remember it quite clearly: It was the first Saturday after payday. The dance was at 8:00; we met at 9:00. It was serendipitous, she later explained, as she had intended to go to another dance but the directions got mixed up. For the next few months I knew the bus timetable to and from her house by heart, and I saw her as often and for as long as I could, restricted by the last bus of the evening, restricted by knowing I had 7 non-negotiable hours of sleep to respect, for work meant money, and money meant food.

One night I missed the last bus and walked home, and at midnight, stopping to catch my breath, it dawned on me: I was in love like I had never been before, and the world was magnificent. We married at 3:00 in the local church where my father and oldest brother were buried, and a year later, just after 3:30 in the morning after a difficult birth, my firstborn announced his arrival.


Promotion time again, and I became a consultant, offering various services across departments and divisions, filling in a timesheet, getting paid according to the intellectual value I transferred within a set time. Where time was not billed, money was lost.

Home life and a family was something completely new to me. I had the responsibility of our baby son from midnight to 6:00, welcoming the early hours with a sense of positive purpose against the memory of my youth. My parents sacrificed their freedom when they had children, and committed themselves to a life of slavery to support us. We, the children, had a difficult upbringing balancing small pockets of gratitude and humanity against a hard life and wanting love from exhausted parents. Now a great deal of that was gone. The promise of a better life, a better humanity was becoming evident. There was now time each day in which to purposefully create joy. Times were set for rising, meals and bathing, but also for joy and laughter, which was a pleasant change from a commitment to sleep or labor. If only my parents were alive to see this.

It was at 3:00 when the phone rang, and that same night at 10:00 he was pronounced dead. The funeral service was at 9:00.

On reflection, my son's early death hit me rather hard. I had hoped for, anticipated, a fulfilling childhood for him, one I never had, and wanted to enjoy his fuller life with him. I had plans, savings, ideas for adventures and experiences that culminated into something worthy, something contrary to a labor-filled existence that had filled so much of my own life. From living memory, my grandfather and father had worked in a mine; this was the first generation in our family to afford free time; this death felt wrongful. I wondered aloud, "Was his death a punishment, or did this slip through cruel fate's fingers?"

I stared at the mantle clock, specifically at the 10, and felt that that hour would always represent tragedy for me. Actually, every hour, every minute on the clock held a life experience for me: I was born at 4:00 in the morning; my sister went to work at 5:00; the kitchen fire started each morning at 5:30; at 6:30 my father and oldest brother left for the mine. At 8:00 the school bell rang; it was at 9:00 when the mine caved in. At 10:10 my mother aborted the twins. At 2:00 the school bell rang again; at 2:35 my second-oldest brother died in a wheat harvester accident. At 2:45 my father and oldest brother were buried. At 3:00 I married my wife; at 3:30 my mother drowned, her body never to be recovered. At 5:00 office hours ended; we ate at 7:30 and started retiring at 8:30. At 10:00 that evening, he was pronounced dead.



There it was, my entire life, summarized, on a circular dial. I imagined streaks of light, of various colors and intensities representing my life experiences, hurtle towards the clock face, directed specifically to the hour and minute of its experience. The room filled with light lines travelling to the dial, and as I recalled more of my life, the room lit up even brighter.

Then, I recalled my wife's experiences. These, too, became light beams of various colors and intensities heading to the clock face to be represented. Two overly bright red beams stood out from the rest, heading to the 8 and the 9. The dance was at 8:00, we met at 9:00. This was our meeting place, and our hearts' meeting; sweet, wonderful serendipity ... Wait! She didn't have to be there, she said she got the addresses mixed up.

The room went dark, and the bright cacophony of light beams was replaced with a cold silence and then a cruel message came to me: Time was present at all the elating, mundane, and destructive moments that defined each moment of our lives. Thousands upon thousands of variables randomly clashed each day, each moment, and we interpreted and reacted randomly to each. It was mere chance that I was born, in that moment, into a serf household, mere chance I had that job, and went to that dance. The room was dark; I could hardly make out the clock face, when suddenly a white light beam shot from the 4 into the room. I was born at 4:00; then another light beam shot from the 5, then the 6, and continued round the face, emanating from each hour, and once it returned to the 4 it continued, now coming out at each passing minute. These were my multiple lives, each filled with diverse values, each subject to chance.

"But I love her!" I cried out, and a golden beam shot from the 12; it was midnight when I recognized I had fallen in love, and slowly additional golden beams of light traversed the clock face, for each moment I would fall in love in each of the other lives I could have lived. "I loved my son!" I shouted in anger. Just after 3:30 on the clock face a green light shone forth, and again, steadily, other points of green light shone into the room, each the first-born child of each life that chance offered. Again it was dark, a cold, silent darkness, and the cruel message concluded: From the time of your birth, each life experience that shapes your multiple lives, each is real, serendipitous, each insignificant.

In defiance I held the whisky tumbler high in the air and drunkenly shouted, "I am not insignificant! We are not insignificant!" The glass cracked in my hand, the cold whisky, mixed with a small trail of blood, ran down my wrist, down my arm. I felt my strength returning. I brought my arm down, smashed it through the glass side table and roared even louder, "We are not insignificant!" I half lay, half sat in the chair, crazy-eyed, sobbing. Only 3 grey lights emanated from the dial now, when my son died, when the mine caved in, and when my mother drowned. Then other grey lights popped up and started filling the room, each from a point in time my other lives would suffer death, and I knew it to be true.

When that happens, well, some of us recover and try, try again, to create order of the universe. I couldn't; I didn't. It was a few months later that I returned home, then back to the office. The bosses were nice about it, and all the wall clocks and desk clocks were removed from the department. It's hard going.

I sit here now, at peace, whisky in one shaky hand, in the other I hold my Haldimann. It keeps time, but it doesn't tell time.