



## DON'T MISS IT

The Pitch Drop Experiment at the University of Queensland, Australia, became famous in recent years when its curator, Professor John Mainstone, died without ever having seen its results. The longest-running scientific experiment in the world, the Pitch Drop was set up almost a century ago by a physicist who sought to prove that a room-temperature funnel of tar pitch, or bitumen, was liquid rather than solid, and that it would eventually drip from its container and then drop into the beaker below.

Professor Mainstone watched the experiment with an eagle eye, yet he missed seeing each of the drops that occurred during his vigil: in 1962, and 1970, and 1979 — when he was out of the lab over a weekend — and 1988, when he left the lab for five minutes to get a cup of tea, and finally, in 2000, when a camera aimed at the funnel malfunctioned and failed to record the long-awaited fall of a drop of the viscous black substance.

Sadly, Professor Mainstone died of a stroke just a few months before the latest drop of pitch, in 2014, but he always remained optimistic about the experiment's value and its effect on his life. His successor, Professor Andrew White, says the experiment fascinates people because “it really forces us to think about time in a different way. This is a constant process, but it's a slow process. You can measure your life in a number of drops, and I think people find that very thought-provoking.”

So much of what we do in academic life demands patience. Whether we are cultivating cell lines, coding surveys, creating poetry or music, combing through archives, or composing a book, our work often moves at a seemingly slower pace than the world around us.

Yet patience, time, and a steady gaze are necessary tools of study in any field. As we navigate new technologies that have sped up daily life, we

increasingly face distractions that compete for our focused attention. In our hyperconnected state, we need to carve out time for contemplation and reflection — the true pathways to discovery, fulfillment, and a sense of purpose for the work we do every day.

The Pitch Drop Experiment might also be a good metaphor for teaching. Students of any age take time to absorb what they learn, and a teacher's effect on their lives might not be visible until years after they have left our classrooms. Watch as we may, we may not be around to see it.

How can we teach our students the values of reflection, contemplation, and patience? A first step might be modeling these values ourselves. We won't always see the impact of our guidance and advice, but we can value our students' perspectives, and keep our attention on them during the short time they spend with us each day. Let's make sure we focus our gaze.

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