

Life is too short to waste on speed

Rich Heffern | Oct. 19, 2010



(Dreamstime)

It's an ancient Russian custom to sit down at leisure, preferably on your luggage, before embarking on an ambitious trip. The British have perfected the frequent cup of tea and a sit-down to gather their wits before, during and after any task that takes more than an hour. Some Mediterranean and Spanish-speaking countries are justly famous for the siesta, a civilized practice of shutting down for a time after lunch for a nap before resuming the day's activities.

All of these customs and practices are devotions in the great, and much neglected, spiritual practice of slowing down.

I have a spot in our city's community garden. All of us there have mastered the fine art of not doing much. We hoe weeds in between our crop rows for half an hour then take an hour break to discuss how the year is going and what the harvest will be like in the fall. In spite of -- no *because* of -- this practice most of us have a respectable yield every year.

My wife and I once took a canoe trip during which, in a whole day, we covered about three miles of a swift but meandering river. It was one of the best days of my life.

We started out reasonably early and soon found that the best way to get down this river was to take our sweet time. There were too many sights and sounds that were not to be missed. Bright red, yellow and blue, fantastically-shaped wildflowers at river's edge had to be inspected closely. The ringing cries of kingfishers and the airy screech of red-tailed hawks overhead had to be heard. The phenomenon of crawfish scurrying backwards to get undercover as we glided through the shallows had to be witnessed, as well as the leaping of small fish out into the air only to plop back, leaving widening rings on the water.

The thrills of white water were tame that day, so we slid from side to side to give a more realistic impression of rapids. Our side-to-side motion became more erratic until we reached a critical angle that tipped the canoe, which sank like a stone and had to be righted and baled. That called for a dry-out and a tea break on a nearby sandbar.

As I took my turn to steer, I noticed how the oar made swirling eddies as it moved and pushed the canoe along. The water swirled and air seemed to be drawn down into the green water and then bubbled up to the surface again like jewels.

Maybe there is no such thing as doing nothing. Slowing down just allows us to become involved in the joy of looking and listening.

Philosopher Blaise Pascal gave up mathematics to contemplate what he called the "greatness and the misery of man." He wrote, "Most of the evils of life arise from man's being unable to sit still in a room."

If this is true, it only follows that slowing down is a great virtue.

In William Demmet's book *The Promise of Sleep*, he cites a study on students at Harvard University. They were encouraged to sleep an extra hour and a half. At first, they objected because of their busy schedules. But they went along. The result: Grades went up. Sleep debt lowers IQ points. So staying in bed may lead to a heightened state of functionality.

An old Yiddish saying is: "Sleep fast, we need the pillows." It could be the motto for our age of multitasking.

I often see a man or woman passing my house on the sidewalk, running and pushing the baby carriage with several dogs attached to it, and doing all this while talking on a cell phone. On a recent drive on a wide boulevard I made it a point to observe the speed limit. It was like I was standing still, as cars rushed past me at sometimes 20 or even 30 miles per hour over the posted limit. My car was like a stationary stone in a rushing flood of folks anxious to get to the red traffic light a few seconds ahead of everyone else.

Studies have shown that rushing and doing too many things at once are direct causes of rudeness, accidents, blunders, neglecting children, indigestion.

There is, thankfully, a slow movement. Its creed, as expressed at SlowDownNow.org [1]: "We shall slow down in the office, and on the roads. We shall slow down with growing confidence when all those around us are in a shrill state of hyperactivity (signifying nothing). We shall defend our state of calm, whatever the cost may be. We shall slow down in the streets, we shall slow down in the hills, we shall never surrender."

One of the movement's activists, Dr. Dormer, conducted 81 meetings in his laboratory that simulated a typical workplace conference room. All participants had not previously napped that day. Sixty-one percent of the participants fell asleep in the meetings. But that number rose to 73 percent in the presence of PowerPoint. And when a presenter read from the slides, that number rose dramatically. On 12 occasions, the presenter herself fell asleep in mid-sentence.

The biological costs of ignoring stress are staggering, manifesting in cardiovascular and other systemic diseases and even, new research shows, in accelerated aging. The psychological costs are equally large with anxiety, depression, eating disorders and other emotional illnesses associated with unmanaged stress.

Our spiritual traditions have always offered solutions to this problem. An antidote to the state of always being in frenetic frenzy is to pay attention, on purpose, in a systematic way, in the present moment. That is, we need to be mindful. We can develop a wise relationship with our sensory experience through mindful meditation. Mindful living is a way of life that urges people to find calm by connecting with the present moment.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, professor emeritus at the University of Massachusetts Medical School has spent much of his professional life bringing the medical world's attention to the wisdom of the body and the healing that can

happen when we get in touch with our senses and our mind. He has been a proponent of mindfulness -- a Buddhist concept that can be best described as awareness. Awareness of everything, awareness of our senses, our body, our mind. Kabat-Zinn believes in using that awareness to learn to open up new dimensions of well-being and integrity, of wisdom and compassion and kindness in ourselves.

He says: "Mindfulness is a certain way of paying attention that is healing, that is restorative, that is reminding you of who you actually are so that you don't wind up getting entrained into being a human *doing* rather than a human *being*."

When we practice mindfulness in our everyday life we are less caught up in and at the mercy of our destructive emotions, and we are then predisposed to greater emotional intelligence and balance. Living mindfully gives us more satisfaction in our job, in our family and in our life in general.

I need to fix a cup of coffee and think about that.

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Links:

[1] <http://SlowDownNow.org>

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