The Speed Trap

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Slow Down: Finding your natural rhythm in a speed-crazed world

The Speed Trap

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The alarm rings and you hop out of bed. Another day is off and running. A quick shower. Wake the kids and rush them through breakfast so they won't miss the bus. Down a cup of coffee. Shovel a bowl of cornflakes. Hurry out to the car, not forgetting a swift kiss on your partner's cheek. Hitch it to the freeway, making a mental note to grab some takeout Thai on the way home. (The kids' soccer practice starts at 6:15 sharp.) Weave back and forth looking for the fastest lane while the radio designer works the minutes--8:33, 8:41, quarter to nine. Reaching work, you sprint into the building and leap up the stairs three at a time, arriving at your desk with seconds to spare. You take a couple of deep breaths, then remember that the project you didn't finish last night must be faxed to New York by 10:00. Meanwhile, you've got five voice-mail messages and seven more on e-mail, two of them marked urgent.

More and more it feels like our lives have turned into a grueling race toward a finish line we never reach. No matter how fast we go, no matter how many comforts we forget in order to quicken our pace, there never seems to be enough time.

It wasn't supposed to turn out this way. As a kid in the 1960s I remember hearing that one of the biggest challenges of the future would be what to do with all our time.

Curiously, there has been scant public discussion about this dramatic speed-up of society. People may complain about how busy they are and how overloaded modern life has become, but speed is still viewed as generally positive--something that will help us all enrich our lives. Journalists, business leaders, politicians, and professors feed our imaginations with visions of the new world of instantaneous communications and high-speed travel. Even many activists who are skeptical of the wonders of modern progress, the folks who patiently remind us that small is beautiful and less is more, look on speed as an undesirable asset in achieving a better society. Four-hour-flight, one-hour-trains, they assure us, will cut pollution, and modern links across the planet will promote human rights.

Revising the speed, in fact, is often heralded as the answer to problems caused by our overly busy lives. Swamped by the accelerating pace of work? Get a computer that's faster. Feel like your life is spinning out of control? Increase your efficiency by learning to read and write faster. No time to enjoy life? Purchase any number of products advertised on television that promise to help you make meals faster, exercise faster, and finish all your time-consuming errands faster.

Experiences like these have made me question the wisdom of zooming through each day. A full-throttle life seems to yield little satisfaction other than the sensation of speed itself. I've begun voicing these doubts to friends and have discovered that many of them share my dis-ease. But it's still a tricky topic to bring up in public. Speaking out against speed can get you lumped in with the Flat Earth Society as a hopelessly hopeless and romantic others who refuse to face the facts of modern life. Yet it's clear that more and more Americans desperately want to slow down. A surprising number of people I know have cut back to part-time work in their jobs or quit altogether in order to work for themselves, raise kids, go back to school, or find some other way to lead a more meaningful, less hurried life--even though it means getting by on significantly less income. And according to Harvard economist Juliet Schor, these are not isolated cases.

Fed up with what compressed schedules are doing to their lives, many Americans want to move out of the fast lane: 28 percent in one study said that they have recently made voluntary changes that resulted in earning less money. These people tend to be more highly educated and younger than the U.S. workforce as a whole although they are being joined by other people who are involuntarily trade job cuts for more free time.

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It's not supposed to turn out this way. As a kid in the 1960s I remember hearing that one of the biggest challenges of the future would be what to do with all our time. Modern life has revved up considerably in the last thirty years, in no small part because of the advent of the personal computer and many of the time-saving innovations it has spawned.

Sachs believes that speed is an under recognized factor fueling environmental problems. As he puts it, "It's possible to talk about the ecological crisis as a collision between time scales--the fast time scale of modern life with the slow time scale of nature and the earth."

In his view, genetic engineering, with all his potential for ecological havoc, is an example of how we interfere with natural processes in the name of speeding up things. Sachs points to the example of genetically engineered crops: "The very essence of the GM [genetically modified] crop is that it is designed to be planted and harvested, and it needs to be harvested quickly."

There is growing recognition that faster speeds are not just a natural fact of the universe. It's an issue for public attention. What has not been discussed before now is: What kind of speed do we want?

Jogi Pangahat, a designer who works with communities in India, defines the issue as not simply whether speed is good or bad, but whether the world of the future will allow a variety of speeds that will work for our human scale.
speeds. He worries that a monoculture of speed in which the whole world is expected to move at the same pace will develop globally. India and other traditional societies of Asia, Latin America, and Africa are undergoing culture shock as the rule of Western efficiency bears down upon them. People who once lived according to the rhythms of the sun, the seasons, and nature are now buying alarm clocks, carrying pocket calculators, and feeling the pressure to move faster and faster. At the conference, Panghaial warned that inhabitants of the industrialized nations may feel this loss as much as the traditional peoples do because less modernized cultures provide inspiration for finding a slower, simpler way of living—"including the two-week vacation in the Third World that has become a necessary ritual of replenishment for many of us."

Sachs and Panghaial raise the question of whether we will have any choice in determining the tempo of our lives or will we all be dragged along by the furious push of a technologically charged society. When I hear friends complain that their lives move too fast, they're not talking about a wholesale rejection of speed so much as a wish that they could spend more of their time involved in slow, contemplative activities. One can love the revved-up beat of dance music, the fast-breaking action on the basketball court, or the thrill of roller coaster rides without wanting to live one's life at that pace. A balanced life is present and I think the best way to broaden human happiness. And speed has brought major improvements to our world. But in taking advantage of its possibilities, we have become blind to its drawbacks. While the acceleration of life that started with the first steam locomotive didn't crush our bones, it may have crushed our spirits. Our lives have been simplified. I rarely drive a car. I ride my bike. I just don't do all the things that make me crazy. And my husband, who is from India and has a much calmer approach to life, has been instrumental in helping me slow down. He has taught me to just do one thing at a time."

Another speaker at the conference, Ezio Manzini, director of the Domus Academy design institute in Milan, sees hope for a more balanced approach to speed springing from the same source that fuels the acceleration of our lives: modern mastery of all that stands in our way. "This is the first time in history in which people think they can design their lives," he said.

In an age of technological marvels, we've come to expect that solutions will be found to help us overcome our problems. So if the problem now appears to be too many things coming at us too fast, we'll naturally begin looking for ways to slow down. Humans may have opted for slowness in the past, but they have also never had to contend with constantly soaring speeds not only diminishing the quality of life, but also eroding the future of the planet. As Wolfgang Sachs declared to the audience in Amsterdam, "Slow is not only beautiful, but also necessary and reasonable."

**How to Hasten Slowly**

All this stimulating talk at a splendid conference is fine, but how do we even think about the enormous undertaking of slowing down a world that's been on a spiral of growing acceleration for more than a century and a half? Especially when the captains of the global economy dictate that speed is an essential ingredient of tomorrow's prosperity? How do we begin to apply the brakes in our lives when the world around us seems to be stomping on the gas pedal?

Right outside the theater where the conference was held, the city of Amsterdam itself seemed to offer an answer. More than almost any city in world, Amsterdam has consciously curtailed the speed of traffic, creating a delightful urban environment in which a bike rolling past at 15 miles an hour seems speedy. Strolling the narrow streets for just a few minutes, you encounter all sorts of shops, restaurants, nightclubs, parks, public squares, banks, and movie theaters—an impressive array of shopping and entertainment that would take at least an hour's worth of driving and parking to reach in most American cities. You're moving slower than in a car but experiencing much more.

Amsterdam's efforts have been widely imitated around the world by advocates of traffic calming, a burgeoning popular movement that seeks to improve safety and environmental quality by reducing the speed of cars. The speed of traffic-calming techniques like speed bumps throughout Europe, Australia, and now North America provides a stirring example of how a grassroots movement can bring about the slowing down of society.

This idea of calming could be taken out of the streets and into workplaces, government, and civic organizations. It's true that transnational corporations wield near autocratic authority in today's global economy, but a spirited worldwide campaign for shorter work hours, more vacation, and a less intense work pace might crystallize worker discontent into a potent political force that would undermine that power. Juliet Schor contends that additional leisure time, not further economic growth, will be the chief political goal of the coming age. (We've already seen the start, with women's groups and labor unions leading a successful campaign for family leave policies in American workplaces.)

But before any political movement can take hold, people need to begin thinking differently about speed and how important it really is. For 150 years we've been told (and believed) that the future will be speeded up. And in the present and just the best way to broaden human happiness. And speed has brought major improvements to our world. But in taking advantage of its possibilities, we have become blind to its drawbacks. While the acceleration of life that started with the first steam locomotive didn't crush our bones, it may have crushed our spirits. Our lives have been simplified. I rarely drive a car. I ride my bike. I just don't do all the things that make me crazy. And my husband, who is from India and has a much calmer approach to life, has been instrumental in helping me slow down. He has taught me to just do one thing at a time."

We all have a chance to slow down. Maybe not at work or in raising kids, but someplace in our lives. It might be turning off the rapid-fire imagery of television and taking a stroll through the neighborhood. It might be scaling back the household budget and spending Saturdays fishing or gardening instead of shopping. It might be clearing a spot on your daily calendar for meditation, prayer, or just daydreaming. It might be simply deciding to do less and not squeezing in a trip to the bookstore when you don't have time for a relaxing visit.

Manzini has another suggestion. "In Italy there is something called the movement for slow food," he says. "It's a group of people who have decided to promote the idea that there are things that matter more than speed. The idea of defending the quality of something that is slow is very interesting to me." Launched after the arrival of McDonald's in the heart of Rome, the group soon attracted 40,000 members in 40 countries.

That's how I've started the "Slow Is Beautiful" revolution in my own life—right in the kitchen, scaling back my busy schedule to find more time for cooking good meals and then sitting down to enjoy them in a festive, unhurried way with my wife, son, and friends. Even cleaning up after dinner can offer a lesson in the pleasures of slowness, as I learned a white back when our dishwasher went on the fritz. Before that I had always just tossed dirty dishes into the machine as fast as possible and hurriedly wiped the counters so that I could get on to more worthwhile activities. But when I was forced to wash dishes by hand, I discovered that although it took longer I had more fun; I'd put some jazz or blues or zydeco on the stereo and sing along, or just daydream as I stacked dishes and glasses on the drying rack. What had been 5 or 10 minutes of drudgery, filling the dishwasher and desperately wishing I was doing something else, turned into 15 or 20 minutes of relaxation. Our dishwasher is fixed now, but I still find myself looking forward to cleaning up the kitchen. A lot of nights I wash the dishes by hand anyway, and when I load the dishwasher, now I do it slowly and without the slightest hint of displeasure.

Workers of the world, relax. You have nothing to lose but your microwaved burritos and your overstuffed Day Runners.

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Special to Utne Reader, March/April 1997.