

# Slow Time in a Fast World: A Spirituality of Rest

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In Michael Leunig's delightful series of correspondence, *The Curly Pyjama Letters*, the itinerant and restless Vasco asks Mr Curly a pressing question, "What is worth doing and what is worth having?" Mr Curly's reply is simple: "It is worth doing nothing and having a rest."<sup>1</sup> The simplicity of Curly's wisdom is compelling. The more I ponder it, the more I suspect there's a theology here worth exploring: that doing nothing could be a worthy pursuit, that rest could be virtuous. I'm intrigued.

## A Personal Struggle

My life is full, often overwhelming, sometimes frantic. The pace is routinely tiring, and the constant weariness discouraging. Daily life is the demanding division of work's insistent multi-tasking and parenthood on the run. The apparent demands and 'disconnectedness' of urban life threaten to fracture my own sense of balance and contentment. The expectations of others are only surpassed by the multiple expectations I have of myself. Yet, in all of this, when given opportunity to be still—to do nothing and rest—I discover an unnerving addiction to my own adrenalin.

I'm a product of my culture. I live, love and work in a society that thrives on schedules, calendars and the compulsion of the clock. To be alive is to be busy. According to one social commentator, busyness has become "*the new paradigm, the new ideal, the new badge of honour.*"<sup>2</sup> Here my worth is measured by the fullness of my diary. The busier I am, the more important I appear to be. Busyness is now a virtue.

In this context, weariness must be overcome. Indeed, according to Mr Curly, it is "*the most suppressed feeling in the world.*" Exhaustion is denied. *Soldier on!* is our mantra. My conservative Christian heritage has done nothing but turn up the volume. The words of an enthusiastic preacher from my youth ring in my ears: "*I'd rather burn out for Jesus than rust out for the devil!*" In the name of discipleship, busyness is a 'war wound' I've learned to display with humble pride.

"*It's worth doing nothing,*" Mr Curly claims. "*Surely not!*" I am conditioned to reply. Yet there is something here that resonates deeply, if only I can find the time to feel it.

## A Christian Call to Rest

Some time ago, I heard rest described as a profoundly Christian act. Increasingly, I'm inclined to agree. Consider for a moment the defining movements of creation and salvation in the Christian story. Obviously, rest

features prominently in the contours of both. In fact, it can be argued that in both, rest is of the essence.

At the conclusion of each day in the creation story, God assesses the creative work as “good” and “very good” (Genesis 1:5,8,10,12-13,18-19,23,31), an assessment that carries with it a sense of completion that draws each day to its end: “*There was evening and there was morning.*” As surely as night follows day, rest follows work. On the seventh day, we are told even more explicitly that God rested “*from all the work that he had done*” (Genesis 2:2-3). Here, in the genesis of the Sabbath tradition, God establishes a sacred rhythm of life that both honours the image of the Creator and nurtures the creation.

Salvation, too, is most fundamentally a call to rest, a call to return to life as God intended and created it. “*Come to me all you who are weary and burdened,*” Jesus says, “*and I will give you rest*” (Matthew 11:28). Or, as an early Aramaic version has it, “*Come to me and I will rest you. I will Sabbath you and you will find Sabbath for your souls.*” Jesus’ role resonates with that of the great shepherd: “*He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul*” (Psalm 23:2-3). Most broadly understood, salvation is being at rest with God, with ourselves and with the world. On a personal level, it has to do with being at rest with our past, present and future. It speaks of a deep contentment, a peace that passes understanding, an end to striving and craving: “*Be still and know that I am God*” (Psalm 46:10). “*Come to me and I will rest you.*”

When I contrast the daily ‘unrest’ of my own experience with the invitation to stillness that marks the intentions of the Creator and the call of Jesus, I sense an uncomfortable and dissatisfying distance.

### **The Violence of Busyness**

I spent ten years pastoring in Baptist congregations. I recall attending irregular meetings of pastors from the local area. Routinely our talk moved to the ‘unique’ pressures of Christian ministry. On more than one occasion we shared our ‘testimonies’ of busyness. In the spirit of unspoken competitiveness that underlay our conversation, one story topped them all. This middle-aged pastor told us that he had not been at home with his family for 41 consecutive nights, all in the name of ministry. A muffled gasp went around the room. It was a gasp of both shock and admiration. “*Now there’s a real disciple,*” we silently agreed; “*a person in demand, and one prepared to count the cost.*” In retrospect, I am appalled.

Prolonged busyness is a state of violence. According to the Macquarie Dictionary, violence is “*an unjust and unwarranted exertion of force or power.*” In my estimation, such is unchecked busyness, for it is an unwarranted, even unjust, state destructive to the human soul, community, and even the earth itself.

That unrelenting busyness does violence to the human condition is increasingly obvious. Most evident is the impact upon personal health. Ongoing fatigue and exhaustion pressure the human body in ways it is not designed to withstand. Evident, too, is its impact upon the wellbeing of the family unit or household. Prolonged time together is an endangered species. Its impact,

however, is more complex and its implications go beyond the individual, or even the immediate family. To simplistically lay the blame for this 'state of violence' at the feet of the individual is to misunderstand the powerful impacts of society and technology upon the shape and experience of daily life. In this violent state, the individual both 'acts' and is 'acted upon'.

The title of Stephen Bertman's recent book, *Hyperculture*, effectively sums up the state of our cultural milieu.<sup>3</sup> Individual and collective life in the information age is experienced at a breathtaking pace. The extraordinary flow of information at ever increasing speeds via the internet, emails, television satellites, palmtops, desktops and laptops leaves few of us unaffected. As our society enthusiastically embraces this new 'immediacy' and all its obvious benefits, delayed gratification is increasingly unnecessary. Thanks to the proliferation of mobile phones, voice mail, email and SMS messages, delayed responses are tolerated impatiently. And change is par for the course; no longer a reactive state of emergency, change is now a fact of daily life. Consequently, change management has become a standard part of any decent manager's tool kit.

Over a decade ago, the psychologist Kenneth J. Gergen identified a new kind of human personality emerging from the constant and unrelenting bombardment of the senses, the speed of daily life, and the rapidity of change. He called it "*the saturated self*."<sup>4</sup> The human psyche simply cannot absorb or even filter in any meaningful way the constant saturation of information, encounters, and change.

More recently, Bertman has described the human psyche as being held captive by the "*power of now*"—that is, the velocity of everyday existence is at such speed that we can no longer engage meaningfully with the past or anticipate thoughtfully the future. What is immediately in front of us is all we have time for. The demands or 'tyranny' of now are simply overwhelming. Time to cultivate the soul is in short supply, for the soul speaks of a totality, drawing together in one place the past, present and future. This desperate lack of meaningful perspective that only time can bring results in a cultural, relational and spiritual shallowness for both the individual and the society of which she is a part. In Bertman's words, "*the power of now replaces the long term with the short term, duration with immediacy, permanence with transience, memory with sensation, insight with impulse*."<sup>5</sup>

As human beings function in such a state for a prolonged period, it becomes habit, instinctive, the most comfortable and, therefore, preferred state. Addicted to our own adrenalin, we prefer news bites to thoughtful analysis, newspapers to journals, power naps to prolonged sleep, microwaves to cooking pots, 'now' to 'later'. We've become impatient with those who want to 'dwell' on the past, dismissive of those who critique the status quo, and exhausted by those who challenge us to think proactively about the future. We simply don't have time.

Jürgen Moltmann, in his commentary on the contemporary "*distress of time*", describes the modern person as "*homo accelerandus*:"

*"He has a great many encounters, but does not really experience anything, since although he wants to see everything, he internalizes nothing and reflects upon nothing. He has a great many contacts but*

*no relationships, since he is unable to linger because he is always 'in a hurry'. He devours 'fast food', preferably while standing, because he is no longer able to enjoy anything; after all, a person needs time for enjoyment, and time is precisely what he does not have.'*<sup>6</sup>

The degree to which we see ourselves in Moltman's caricature may vary, but the majority will concur that the pace of life today has indeed accelerated and we are different people for it. Busyness is indeed a force—at times a violent one—to be reckoned with. Reckoning with it rather than surrendering to it is crucial if we are not to be completely disempowered by it.

In suggesting that busyness is a force to be reckoned with, I am not proposing that time is something over which we must somehow wrestle control. This is not a vote for better time management. Time is not a commodity to be owned, managed, traded or saved. Time is bigger than we are; it envelops and contains us; it precedes and outlasts us. Further, I am not suggesting that technological change is bad; a force to be resisted at all costs. Certainly not. The benefits to our society are innumerable. I, for one, am not considering relocating to a desert commune, as though I must somehow choose between a life of speed, change, and hyperactivity, and one of serenity, stability and simplicity.

What I am suggesting is that living in a prolonged and unchecked state of busyness is to live in a violent state destructive to all that is sacred; that we must therefore reckon with its force and find a way to reconnect with the rhythm of time given to us by God; that we must rediscover a "*holy slowness*"<sup>7</sup> as an expression of Sabbath, a fundamentally different experience of time set apart from the routine pace of daily life and work.

### **Rediscovering Slow Time**

I have already noted the origins of the Sabbath tradition in the creation story. As this tradition develops in the experience of Israel, the seventh day is a day set apart from those that precede and follow it, a holy day. Its distinctiveness requires intentionality of those who honour it, a conscious choice to step outside the stream of work into a different space—a sanctified space that restores and renews; one that reintegrates what has become fragmented and strained. In a sense, it's about moving from one experience of time to another; from time that is linear and sequential, purposeful and progressive, directed toward a goal, to a time that is not directional in shape, but a spherical whole that draws the pieces of yesterday, today and tomorrow together.<sup>8</sup> As such, Sabbath is about much more than ceasing work. It's about routinely reconnecting with our origins, living fully the present moment, and anticipating the freedom for which we are ultimately destined. It is time given to 'being' and 'stillness' over 'production' and 'movement'. It is time for the soul.

In his recent book, *Tyranny of the Moment*,<sup>9</sup> the Swedish social anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen, argues that revaluing 'slow time'—an experience in which the values of speed and efficiency take a back seat—is essential to our survival. Dawdling is a virtue, Eriksen claims, when dawdling is an intentional slowness nurturing the 'gaps' necessary to human re-creation and creativity.<sup>10</sup>

Slow time is time given to re-group, re-think, assess, feel, grieve, imagine, daydream, remember, and anticipate. Without it, the soul, both of the individual and of society, is poorer.

We cannot and should not live all of life in slow time. God worked for six days and rested on the seventh. Slow time is by nature periodic, yet routine. It follows fast time; it concludes or begins. However, the fact that it's not the majority of our time does not detract from its sanctity. Too often, fast time is so insistent and loud that slow time slips away unheard and unheeded. As Eriksen observes, when fast time and slow time meet, fast time wins. To revalue slow time does not mean we give it more space than it warrants, but that we give it the space and respect that it deserves, and routinely so.

In light of my own struggle with busyness and the consequent 'restlessness' that underlies my discontent, I'm committed to the reclamation of slow time in my daily life. In what follows, I outline my own small efforts in this direction. I offer this as a work in progress and only to illustrate the possibilities.

### ***Scheduling verandah time***

Because my family and I live on site in an educational institution in the inner city, we decided not long after moving in to purchase a small house in the country to which we can escape periodically. It is more than 100 years old and is fronted by a verandah that runs the width of the house. It's a place that needs lots of attention and in time we'll get around to it. More than anything, it's our place to be. Very quickly the front verandah became my favourite place in the house. I have an old wooden chair where I sit, looking out over the elm trees that line the street and the parkland just beyond, listening to the morning song of the magpies, and nodding hello to those who stroll by. It's a place where fast time seems alien and out of place. As much as we love this place, finding time to be there is a constant challenge. Fast time is insistent and demanding. Unless we plan 'verandah time' well ahead in our schedule, it gets crowded out.

Not everyone owns a country house with a verandah, nor would we all want to. However, in a scheduled world, slow time—whatever form it takes—needs attention and some degree of planning. Scheduling time to do nothing may sound like an odd pursuit, yet for me it's vital. Sabbath time in the Old Testament had numerous and detailed laws governing the sanctity of its place in community life. While I may want to dismiss the legalism that coloured my boyhood experience of the Sabbath day, these laws do remind me that my unmonitored bent for productivity and busyness will most often win over without the routine discipline of slow time in my life.

### ***Filtering***

I am often overwhelmed with the prolific flow of information that infiltrates each day. The sources and the speed at which they generate information—information designed for my immediate consumption—are increasing all the time. I am an avid reader of newspapers, yet as I move quickly from one story to another, I'm often frustrated by my inability to recall the detail of what I've read. I love books, yet I become easily overwhelmed by the plethora of

material being published just in the fields related to my own teaching and writing. The act of reading moves from pleasure to pressure. I am often struck by the poignancy of a particular report on the evening news, yet as the newsreader move on with the next story, I have little time or space to actually feel anything in response. So it is with my daily encounters with students, friends and colleagues. As with most urban dwellers, I have numerous people move across my horizon every day. I am constantly apologizing to people for my lack of time.

The art of filtering is a necessary one for me to propagate. The reality is that only information genuinely digested becomes knowledge; digestion takes time. Growing in wisdom has more to do with the internalising and 'living' of selected knowledge than the unfettered accumulation of information, and with allowing certain relationships the time to flourish rather than flit by unnoticed and undervalued. With this in mind, I've sought to be a more pro-active filterer.

- I still read the newspaper, though I give less time to the whole and more time to those articles I choose to engage with at depth. Further, I now seek to pursue a conversation with someone in the course of the day about the content of the story or article I've given most attention to.
- I still read books, though I'm seeking to be even more selective in what I read and give each one more time and space to feel and respond to. This means the number of books I read decreases, but their potential impact increases. I am learning to hold more lightly my own self-expectation to be an 'expert' in my field, and live more reasonably and humbly with myself.
- I still watch the evening news when I can, yet I now choose to avoid the current affairs programs that follow and do little but fill space in my already crowded head. A daily evening walk around the neighbourhood does much to bring to the fore those issues that remain just below the surface at the conclusion of the day.
- I've committed myself to the discipline of scheduling two prolonged encounters each week that will take me beyond the task-oriented relationships of work or student-teacher transactions. Setting time aside for more in-depth encounters may seem plastic to some, yet if I do not ensure such encounters are happening routinely, more often than not they don't.

### ***Giving sleep its rightful place***

While I've never had much trouble sleeping, I have routinely chosen to economize on sleep. I am regularly unsettled by those who profess to need a minimum of sleep to maintain an inordinately high level of productivity. I admirably wonder if I can do likewise. I've come to equate sleeping-in with laziness and afternoon naps as a waste of time.

I have two small children. Though they resist bedtime with the greatest of drama and deception, I see nightly just how deeply and peacefully they sleep. Furthermore, I see daily the consequences of both adequate and inadequate sleep. As adults we learn to cover and compensate for our weariness. Children are not so gifted. Their comparative honesty teaches me much about the importance of sleep. Indeed, sleep is God's gift. *"In vain you rise early and stay up late,"* the Psalmist says; *"toiling for food to eat—for he grants sleep to those he loves"* (Psalm 127:1-2). I am learning to heed Mr Curly's wisdom when he urges Vasco to feel his "noble tiredness" and make *"a generous place for it"* in his life. I am learning to listen more attentively to the rhythms of my own body and to acknowledge sleep as God's daily gift of slow time.

### ***Choosing slow time in daily life***

Much of my daily schedule and work must, by necessity, be lived and tackled in fast time. I have resources at my fingertips that help me to work efficiently, productively and responsively: telephones, email and internet access, administrative assistance, transport, appointment diaries, photocopiers, etc. I would not want to be without these things, yet I've learned that such tools are there to enable and empower me, not to enslave me. Life is full of choice. The fact is, when I'm feeling most frantic and overwhelmed—an inevitable part of life in a fast world—I still have choices, no matter how 'out of control' my situation may feel. For me, slow time is essential to my every day wellbeing, but slow time is always a choice. Choosing to do certain things slowly has a cost, for doing things slowly is slow.

- I choose to walk my children to school rather than drive them.
- I choose to read journal articles rather than newspapers on Mondays and Thursdays.
- I choose to answer emails only once a day.
- I choose to let voice mail take telephone calls at meal times and when we have guests.
- I choose to set one hour aside each morning for reading and reflecting.
- I choose to sit in a local café every Wednesday morning away from the phone and the office for writing.
- I choose not to wear a watch.

Though listing these things might appear self-indulgent and simplistic, I do not present them as acts of virtue. They are simply choices that enable me to find space each day for some 'holy slowness'.

### **Conclusion**

I began with Mr Curly's words, "It is worth doing nothing and having a rest." This fascinating proposition that doing nothing could be a worthy pursuit and that rest could be virtuous is one that sits increasingly well with me. The rediscovery

of slow time is a way to embrace both of these intentionally and restfully. We live in a fast world. Fast and slow time will always need to coexist. Finding ways to embrace both and to move routinely between them is essential. My argument has been that if we choose an either/or approach, slow time will always lose. To live exclusively in fast time is ultimately destructive to the human soul and to society. Rediscovering slow time as an expression of Sabbath is to rediscover the image of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Leunig, Michael. *The Curly Pyjama Letters*. Ringwood: Viking, 2001, pp 26-28.

<sup>2</sup> Mackay, Hugh. "Busyness, Our Latest Harmful Drug of Addiction." *The Age*, July 14 2001, Opinion.

<sup>3</sup> Bertman, Stephen. *Hyperculture: The Human Cost of Speed*. Westport: Praeger, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Gergen, Kenneth J. *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Society*. New York: Basic Books, 1992.

<sup>5</sup> Bertman, *op.cit.*, p 3.

<sup>6</sup> Moltmann, Jürgen, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and Ellen T. Charry. *A Passion for God's Reign: Theology, Christian Learning and the Christian Self*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998, p 39.

<sup>7</sup> A phrase used by Jürgen Moltmann in a public lecture I attended in Pasadena, California, in 1998.

<sup>8</sup> A distinction made by Bertman, *op.cit.*, p 195.

<sup>9</sup> Erikson, Thomas Hylland. *Tyranny of the Moment: Fast and Slow Time in the Information Age*. London: Pluto Press, 2001.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p 155.