



# Slow Time in a Fast World

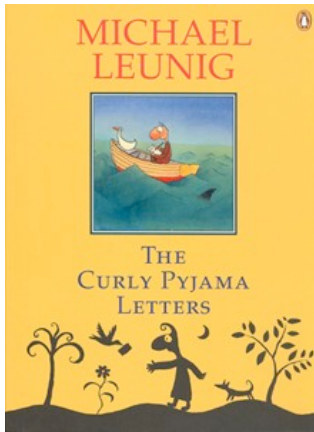
## A Spirituality of Rest

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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 and sometimes frantic. The pace is routinely tiring and the constant weariness discouraging. Daily life is the demanding division of work's insistent need for multi-tasking and parenthood offered on the run. The demands and disconnections of urban life threaten to fracture my own sense of balance. 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 only turned 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'm conditioned to reply. Yet there is something here that resonates deeply, if only I can find time to feel it.

## The Call to Rest

I once heard rest described as a profoundly Christian act. It's true. Consider the defining movements in the Christian story of creation and salvation. Rest features prominently in both. In fact, rest is of the essence.

At the conclusion of each day in the creation story God declares the creative work as 'good' and 'very good' (Genesis 1:5,8,10,12-13,18-19,23,31). It's a daily assessment of completion and wholeness: 'There was evening and there was morning.' As surely as night follows day, rest follows work. We are told even more explicitly that on the seventh day 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 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). 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

In my early years of pastoral ministry, I attended irregular meetings of church leaders 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 response of both shock and quiet admiration. ‘Now there’s a real disciple,’ we silently agreed; ‘a person in demand; 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.’ Such is unchecked busyness, for it is an unwarranted, unjust state destructive to the human soul, to the community, and even to 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 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 of daily life. In this violent state, the individual both ‘acts’ and is ‘acted upon’.

The title of Stephen Bertman’s recent book, *Hyperculture*, sums up the state of our cultural

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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 embraces this new ‘immediacy’ and its benefits, delayed gratification is anathema. 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, it’s now a fact of daily life. Change management is now 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 filter the constant saturation of information, encounters and change.

More recently, Bertman has described the human psyche as 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. All we have time for is what’s immediately in front of us. The tyranny of now is 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. The 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 preferred state. Addicted to our own adrenalin, we favour news bites to thoughtful analysis, newspapers to journals, povernaps 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.

In his commentary on the contemporary 'distress of time', theologian Jürgen Moltmann 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>

**“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.”**

The degree to which we see ourselves in Moltmann's caricature may vary, but most of us will agree the pace of life today has indeed accelerated and we are different people for it. Busyness is a force to be reckoned with. And reckon with it we must if we are to resist its debilitating grip.

In describing busyness as a force, I am not suggesting that time is something over which we must wrestle control. This is not a proposal for better time management. No, 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. The benefits are innumerable. I, for one, am not considering relocating to a desert commune, as though I must choose between a life of speed, change and hyperactivity, and one of serenity 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; to 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.

## Rediscovering Slow Time

We've already noted the origins of the Sabbath tradition in the creation story. As this tradition develops, the seventh day is set apart from those that precede and follow it. It's a holy day. As such it requires intentionality, a conscious choice to step outside the stream of work into a different space.

This Sabbath space is sanctified space, a 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 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 book *Tyranny of the Moment*, the Swedish social anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen argues for a revaluing of 'slow time'—an experience in which the values of speed and efficiency take a back seat.<sup>9</sup> According to Eriksen, slow time is essential to our survival. Dawdling is a virtue, he claims, when dawdling is an intentional slowness nurturing the 'gaps' necessary to human re-creation.<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 is poorer. Of course, 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. 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 it deserves.

In light of my own struggle with busyness, 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.

## 1. Scheduling verandah time

Because my family and I live on site in an educational institution in the city, we decided to purchase a small house in the country, a place to which we could escape periodically. Our old weatherboard is more than 100 years old and fronted by a verandah. It's a place that needs lots of attention and in time we'll get around to it. More than anything, though, it's our place to be.

Very quickly the front verandah became my favourite place in the house. I have an old

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wooden chair where I sit. There I look out over the elm trees that line the street and the parkland just beyond; I listen to the morning song of the magpies; I nod hello to those who stroll by. It's a place where fast time seems alien and out of place.

To be honest, as much as I love this place, finding time to be there is a constant challenge. Fast time is insistent and demanding. Unless I plan 'verandah time' well ahead in my schedule, it gets crowded out.

Not everyone owns a country house with a verandah. However, in a scheduled world, slow time—whatever form it takes—needs intentionality. Scheduling time to do nothing may sound like an odd pursuit, yet for me it's vital. Sabbath time for the Hebrew people had numerous and detailed laws governing its sanctity. While I may want to dismiss the legalism that coloured my boyhood experience of Sabbath, these laws remind me that my unmonitored bent for busyness will constantly win without the routine discipline of slow time in my life.

## 2. Filtering

I am routinely overwhelmed with the flow of information that infiltrates my days. Its sources and speed are increasing all the time.

I am an avid reader of newspapers, yet as I move quickly from one story to another I struggle to recall the detail of what I've read. I love books, yet I feel swamped by the plethora of material being published in the fields of my interest, professional or otherwise; the act of

reading moves from pleasure to pressure. I am struck by the poignancy of a particular report on the evening news, yet as the newsreader moves on with the next story I have little time or space to feel any lasting response. So it is with my encounters with students, friends and colleagues. Numerous people move across my horizon every day. I am constantly apologizing for my lack of time.

The art of filtering is a necessary one to propagate. Only information genuinely digested becomes knowledge; and digestion takes time. Growing in wisdom has more to do with the internalising and ‘living’ knowledge than with the unfettered accumulation of information. With this in mind, I am becoming a more pro-active filterer.

- I still read the newspaper but give less time to the whole and more time to just a few key articles. Further, I pursue a conversation with someone in the course of the day about the content of the article I’ve chosen.
- I still read books but I’m more selective in what I read and give each one more time and space to feel and respond to. I do this through journaling. This means the number of books I read decreases, but with greater impact.
- 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 evening walk around the neighbourhood does much to bring to the fore issues and stories that are important.

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- I’ve committed myself to scheduling two prolonged encounters each week that take me beyond the task-oriented relationships of work or student-teacher transactions. Setting time aside for more in-depth encounters may sound contrived, yet if I do not ensure such encounters are happening routinely, chances are they don’t.

### 3. Giving sleep its rightful place

While I’ve never had much trouble sleeping, I have often chosen to economize on sleep. I am unsettled by those need a minimum of sleep yet maintain an inordinately high level of productivity. I admiringly wonder if I can do the same. 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; and I see the consequences daily of both adequate and inadequate sleep. As adults we learn to cover and compensate for our weariness. Children are not so gifted. Their 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 carefully to the rhythms of my own body and to acknowledge sleep as God’s daily gift of slow time.

### 4. Choosing slow time in daily life

Through sheer necessity, much of my daily schedule is lived in the 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 don’t want to be without these things, yet I’ve learned that such tools are there to enable and empower me, not enslave me.



Mr Curly loves teapots too (©Leunig)

Life is full of choice. The fact is, even when I'm feeling frantic and overwhelmed I still have choices, no matter how 'out of control' my situation may feel. 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 one day each week.
- I choose to answer emails only twice 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 day for reading and reflecting.
- I choose to sit in a local café one morning a week, away from the phone and the office, for writing.
- I choose not to use a microwave oven.
- I choose not to wear a watch.
- I choose to travel by public transport as much and as often as I can.

By listing such choices I risk sounding self-indulgent and simplistic, but these are not acts of virtue. They are only small, personal choices—ones that enable me to find space each day for some 'holy slowness'. The choices you make will be particular to your life and circumstances. The important thing is that we *make* choices,

that we chose to give slow time its rightful place in the ordinary rhythms of our days.

## Conclusion

I began with Mr Curly's words, 'It is worth doing nothing and having a rest.' This fascinating proposition that doing nothing is a worthy pursuit and that rest is 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. By necessity, fast and slow time coexist. Finding ways to embrace both and to move routinely between them is essential. My argument is 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 society. Rediscovering slow time as an expression of Sabbath is to rediscover the image of God.

<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 in Pasadena, California, 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.