

Smile, Breathe and Go Slow



‘Hurrying’ has been inherent in my genes. First-born to an anxious father and a perfectionist mother, the trait got accelerated further. Meeting the demands of an ideal religious life, I brushed it still to a higher degree. And over the years, keeping pace with the contemporary culture and technological advancement, living a life of acceleration became second nature to me. I developed an inner psychology of speed, of saving time and maximizing so-called productivity, which kept getting stronger by the day.

I failed to consider the ramifications of speed! Living in a world of speed rendered my life superficial in several ways. I could only focus at a surface level, without having the time to go deep. I was unable to make genuine connections with either people or the world around me. I have been in such a hurry that I often forgot to fully appreciate the food I was eating or the people with whom I was interacting, or places I was visiting. I got so obsessed about losing time that I desperately tried to save every last scrap of it in order to get things accomplished. ***I would rather burn out than rust out!***

And then, the angels would have desired it...one day, while browsing, the phrase caught my eyes, **‘Smile, Breathe and Go Slow’!** AND I PAUSED!

In 2009, neurophysiologist Johanna Meijer set up an unusual experiment in her backyard. In an ivy-tangled corner of her garden, she and her colleagues at Leiden University in the Netherlands placed a running wheel inside an open cage and trained a motion-detecting infrared camera on the scene. Then they put out a dish of food pellets and chocolate crumbs to attract animals to the wheel and waited.

Wild house mice discovered the food in short order, then scampered into the wheel and started to run. The creatures seemed to relish the feeling of running without going anywhere. More importantly, the findings suggested that they preferred running on the wheel even to palatable food of their choice.

We, humans, are no different than these rodents! Most of us are rushing through life, travelling at a maddening speed, because we feel the present is fast and the future will be faster. And that if we don’t catch up, we lose out.

It is against contemporary culture that extols the virtues of speed, productivity, and accumulation of wealth that we find it increasingly difficult to practise what Gandhiji believed: *“There is more to life than increasing its speed.”*

In the relentless pursuit of speed, efficiency, and material progress, millions all over the world today pop pills to seek relief from stress, insomnia, hypertension, migraines, gastrointestinal problems, to name but a few, all brought on by unhealthy speeding. Its really a great concern that even young people in their 30s are dying of cardiac arrests today!

The contemporary work culture of haste has strongly affected our mental and emotional health. The work ethic of high speed and ruthless efficiency probably has had the worst impact in Japan where the locals have a word in Japanese for ‘death by overwork’, which is called *‘karoshi’*. The Japanese Government recently reported the death toll from overwork in Japan in the thousands.

‘The Slow Movement’, which is about promoting slowing down the pace of life, has started in several cities, especially in Western Europe. This movement was started in 1986 by Carlo Petrini who protested against the opening of a McDonald’s restaurant in Piazza di Spagna in Rome. Petrini’s protest sparked the creation of the slow food movement.

Over time, the slow food movement became an important part of the subculture, which impacted several important facets of human life. In 2004, Carl Honore´ wrote his bestselling non-fiction, **‘In Praise of Slowness’**, where he describes the Slow Movement thus:

*“The Slow philosophy is not about doing everything in a snail’s pace. Nor is it a Luddite attempt to drag the whole planet back to some pre-industrial utopia. On the contrary, the movement is made up of people like you and me, people who want to live better in a fast-paced, modern world. This is why the Slow philosophy can be summed up in a single word: **BALANCE**. Be fast when it makes sense to be fast, and be slow when slowness is called for. Seek to live at what musicians call the ‘**tempo giusto**’ – **the right speed.**”*

The Slow Movement is about slowing down to savor what we eat, how we travel, how we consume, how we produce and, most importantly, how we live. The Slow Movement exhorts us to practice stillness, contemplate, relax, spend quality time with family and friends and let our minds and interactions wander without the constraints of time.

REMEMBER, oftentimes, when our society has had major failures, they were not technological failures. They were failures that happened when we made decisions too quickly on autopilot. We didn’t do the creative or critical thinking required to connect the dots or weed out false information, or make sense of complexity. And that kind of thinking can’t be done fast. **Slow time is not wasted time.** And we need to reconsider what it means to save time. Cultures and rituals around the world build in slowness, because slowness helps us reinforce our shared values and connect.

On 10th October 2022, as we celebrate **World Mental Health Day**, with the theme ‘**Make Mental Health & Well-Being for All, A Global Priority**’, let’s take time to decide what kind of a life we want for ourselves — a life of maddening speed, which is aggressive, controlling, superficial, stressed, and impatient, or a life that can be calm, receptive, intuitive, patient, joyful, helping us establish meaningful connections with work, people, culture, and food — pretty much everything.

The choice is clearly ours. In the words of the former Prime Minister of Israel, Golda Meir, we can learn how to “... *govern the clock, and not be governed by it.*”

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