

Slowing Down

By Christopher Uhl

There is a secret bond between slowness and memory; between speed and forgetting” Milan Kundera

Beware Reader: There is something strange going on! You see there are people in the U.S. and Canada who have taken to walking very slowly in public places such as city sidewalks and shopping malls. This slow walking was inspired by a scene in the documentary film, *Baraka*, depicting a monk walking ever-so-slowly along the sidewalk of a busy city street.

Though slow walking seems harmless enough, in some quarters it is regarded as radical—an act of defiance! For example, slow walkers have been interrogated by police in downtown State College and escorted from shopping malls in other places. Walking slowly is suspicious behavior; it is ‘disturbing the peace.’ I mean, really, how dare these people walk slowly when you and I have a million things to do today? Who do they think they are, anyway?

Walking slowly is an intriguing brand of activism. I am struck that these slow walkers choose to go to malls, not to shop, but simply to walk ever so slowly. They remind me of something that I think we all know deep down: namely that after basic needs for food, clothing and shelter are met, happiness is most closely related with things like the quality of personal relationships, the opportunity for creative expression as well as the practice of being *present* right here, right now. In short, through their public demonstration, slow walkers remind us that genuine happiness often has precious little to do with most of the ‘stuff’ we pop into our shopping carts.

Reading Carl Honore’s book, *In Praise of Slowness*, I learned that slow walking fits into a larger movement that centers on ‘slowing down’ in general—slow food, slow education, slow sex, slow doctoring, slow conversation, slow child-rearing. The message of the movement is that slow is beautiful and that slowing down can awaken us to what really matters in life.

This message is timely for North Americans. Between 1973 and 2000 the average U.S. citizen added, approximately, 200 hours to his/her annual work schedule. Think of it as working an additional five weeks each year. This helps to explain why dual-income couples carve out only about 15 minutes a day to talk to each other and why the pace of our weekends has become as frantic as that of weekdays.

Recall that it wasn’t so very long ago that Americans set aside one day each week—the Sabbath—as a “day of rest.” Today, as Rabbi Michael Lerner points out, “You don’t have to think of yourself as religious or a believer in God to get the benefits of the Bible’s most brilliant spiritual practice”—Shabbat or the Sabbath. This practice consists of taking a full day each week to celebrate the wonder of being. This means removing yourself completely from worldly concerns. Lerner offers a list of things to avoid:

- *Don’t use or even touch money.*
- *Don’t work or even think about work.*
- *Don’t cook or clean or sew or iron or do housework.*
- *Don’t write or use the computer, e-mail, the telephone, or other electronic devices.*

- *Don't fix things up or tear things down. Leave the world the way it is. Don't organize things, straighten things up, or take care of errands. Put your "to do" list away for a day.*

What should you do? Dedicate the day to joy, celebration, and the expressions of gratitude. "Focus on pleasure. Good food.... singing, dancing, walking, playing, joking or laughing, looking at the magnificence of creation, studying spiritual texts, communing with one's inner voice, or whatever else really generates pleasure."

And if all this seems too subdued and you have an itch to get in your car—then, heck, just head on out to the mall and, in a spirit of playfulness and good cheer, offer your own public rendition of slow walking. We all need slowness to remember and to rekindle our appreciation of what matters most.... lest we forget.