

SLOWING DOWN

Background & Context

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

Somewhere, sometime in history—perhaps even today in Idaho or Tokyo—someone is walking, slowly. Their walk is both movement and stasis, for they take but one step for every full breath. In. Out. Step. In. Out. Step.

If you read Carl Honore's book, *In Praise of Slowness*, you might see how 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.”

Check In

The Shabbat, the Sabbath, is a day of rest, a day of letting go the duties and errands of this worldly life. At base, it is the day you step off the train and find yourself arrived in the living world. If you took the Sabbath, how would you take it? Who would you be on this new day?

Activity One: Softening the Belly: A Breathing Exercise

You've seen them—those magazine covers flashing the perfect belly—flat and tight. Indeed, it seems that holding the belly in—tight and braced—has become a way of being for many Americans who seem to believe that a tight, flat belly is a marker of health.

Ironically, that hard, flat tummy may well be an impediment to health in so far as a braced belly inhibits healthy breathing.

Let's get to basics. Each of us was born knowing how to breathe. Watch a baby lying on her back breathing and you will see a model for good breathing. *On the in-breath the baby's lungs expand and her diaphragm drops down causing her soft belly to rise effortlessly; then on the out-breath her diaphragm pushes up, helping her lungs to deflate.*

Unfortunately, by the time most of us left middle school we were no longer breathing in this natural, full way; we had, in effect, forgotten how to breathe! Do a check on yourself right now. Take a deep breath. Most folks will suck their belly in and tighten their abdominal muscles, while lifting and inflating their upper chest. This is what Gay Hendricks (author of Conscious Breathing) calls "upside down breathing." In healthy breathing, by contrast, the chest rises up very little; rather it is the soft belly that inflates outward, as the diaphragm presses down massaging the body organs.

When our breathing is shallow (i.e., upside-down breathing), we deprive our bodies of oxygen because the air we take in comes into contact with fewer capillaries in the air sacks of our lungs. Think of it this way: Each minute only about ½-cup of blood flows through the top of the lungs—where many people confine their breathing. When breathing extends to the middle of the lungs, the incoming air has access to about two cups of blood each minute; when breathing is extended to the bottom of the lungs, 4-5 cups of blood are available for the uptake of life-giving oxygen each minute (i.e., about ten times more oxygen uptake potential compared to top-lung breathing).

How is it that we have forgotten how to breathe? I think that "stress" is the main reason. Stress has now become ubiquitous in America: Many of us wake to an "alarm" clock, we gulp down coffee to get "geared up" for the day; we "fight" traffic to get to work where we spend our time resolving "problems." Because living under stress is the only thing that most of us have ever known as adults, we might mistakenly conclude that our lives are relatively stress free.

A Stress Check

How about you? Stress free? Our bodies are a much more reliable source of information about the stresses that we are holding than our brains because it is in our body that we hold our stress.

You can check your stress level: **simply pause right now and do a quick "body check-in,"** noting where you might be holding tension in your body. Start with your face. Are your eyes soft or a bit strained? Your jaw—is it loose and relaxed (teeth not touching) or slightly tensed (jaw 'set')? How about your neck—floating peacefully on your vertebral column or rigid? And now your chest—open and at ease or somewhat constricted? And, finally, your belly—soft like jelly or a bit tight like fudge? So, how did you do?

Taking Time to Breathe: It is by relearning breathing that we can release stress and regain balance, health, and equanimity. As we soften our bellies, we soften, becoming more open, peaceful, accepting and loving. Gay Hendricks sums it up this way: "It is easy to take

breathing for granted, to assign it to the deep background of life. But what if you made a tiny improvement in something you do 20,000 times a day?"

- 1) Stand up and face away from those around you. Focus on yourself; don't worry about anyone else.
- 2) Spread your legs to about shoulder width to a stance in which you feel comfortable.
- 3) Take in a deep breath to your belly—not excessively large, simply full.
- 4) Let it percolate a second.
- 5) Release it slowly—though not so slowly that it's awkward.
- 6) Continue on with this breathing at whatever rate is comfortable for you.
- 7) Don't worry about anyone else. Close your eyes if you want to. Just zone out, zone in.

Activity Two: Slow Walking

Step 1—The Messages Conveyed by Walking: We begin: imagine you are in your local mall and you see 10 people, walking, single file, very very slowly, eyes cast down..... through the food court area. Now: What STORY, would you come up with, upon observing this? Take a few seconds to really wonder. Is your answer flippant? Born of fear or judgment? Do you sense a wisecrack coming—or has it already come and gone? This might seem weird ... but this is serious, go deeper.

Now here are two questions *for you to ponder*: 1) Why is it that rushing/producing, being on “the go” is so highly valued in our culture? 2) What are the consequences stemming from all this speeding about? Slowly give this some thought. It is worthy of your time.

And now for a final question: If you find that your life is a bit too fast paced, even frantic at times, are there any good reasons to change? Any reason to slow down? As you sit with this question for a time, you are likely to come up with several good reasons.

Here is one reason that might be on your list: We have to first STOP before we can think and act with wisdom. In this context, think of the Zen story of the man and the horse: A man standing by the side of the road asks a man who is rushing by on a horse, “Where are you going in such a rush?” to which the horseman responds, “I don’t know; ask the horse!” In this story the ‘man on the horse’ represents us—our society—i.e., he is caught in the rush-rush-rush of contemporary life!

Given the collective craziness of these times, PAUSING to slowly listen to another.... PAUSING to engage in slowly conversation about matters of the heart (rather than making small talk).... PAUSING to eat mindfully.... or, in the case of today’s exploration, PAUSING to walk with full presence ... becomes a radical act.

The thesis of this exploration is that we won't know how to act—how to heal the planet—until we, first, slow down. Stop/Look/Listen! In fact, for many, it takes slowing down to see that there is even a need to heal the planet.

Step 2—Laying out the Activity: What you just imagined—the a line of people walking very, very slowly through the local mall—you will soon enact. In today's class, you are going to test something. The experiment is simple—we will simply walk—but not just any old walk. Before going further, stand and enact five different styles of walking. As you do this ask a partner to guess what your different walks reveal or convey?

Indeed, each kind of walk conveys a message—whether you intend it or not, and whether the message received is the same one you sent. With this in mind, we invite you all to a slow walk (a kind of walking meditation) for 15 minutes in a busy public place—e.g., through the local mall, in the main lobby of a hotel, through the first floor of a library, along a downtown street.

In so far as this will be a public event, it would be helpful if we as a group had a clear message we wished to convey. Our action—slow walking—will be a living demonstration, a manifestation, of this message. To make sure that the public gets the message—i.e., gets the right STORY (and not only the story they make up in their head)—we will write the message on a placard and have the person in the lead holding this message (assuming this is done in single-file). So, what message do we want to deliver? Take your time with this: it is important to get a message that we can all “stand for.” The default message would be simple: "Slowing down."

Step 3: PRACTICE! The power in this demonstration is in the drama of the slowness. How slow? One in-breath and one out-breath for the movement of just one foot forward; then a pause—another full in/out breath; then the second in-out breath for the next foot. When doing this, keep your attention on your breath (like you did during our focus on breathing). It is IMPOSSIBLE to do this too slowly!!! Note, too, that the feet are placed only a few inches in front of each other with each step.

- A) Where are we going?
- B) Are we going to do this in single file? Why? Why not?
- C) If in single-file, who will be our placard holder and slow leader? Remember, if you volunteer to lead, you must be slow.
- D) This will be a *silent practice*, so let's rely upon clapping as a non-vocal signal:
 THREE claps: BEGIN (at the start)
 ONE clap: STOP (if we're going too fast, followed by three claps to begin anew)
 FIVE claps: STOP FOR GOOD
 (Instructor: If you have a bell, great: It can be softly rung with each step and/or at the beginning and the end of the walk.)
- E) Practice: Try it now in this non-busy room before we go to the public site.

Step 4: We're There: When you are ready, walk in silence with attention to your breath to the place you have chosen for your walk. Slowly move into formation. Wait for the three claps and then begin.... sloooowly.

Note that we have chosen this issue (slowing down / smelling the roses / relaxing / paying attention) because it is non-controversial—I mean, who is going to argue with “chilling.” However, if you are unwilling to participate, you may be the observer/witness. This is an important role, too. Yet, when you witness, can you not do it moving so slowly that you are hardly moving at all?

Check Out

(In a circle, in a quiet spot out of the hustle and bustle.) How was that for you?

OUT-OF-CLASS FIELD STUDY: SLOWING DOWN

1) Study: Take some time to observe the pace of life around town. Best would be taking a whole day to note to yourself who is rushing, and why, or who is taking their time, and why. Yet, if you are pressed for time—go figure—spend at least 30 minutes in some public location, observe there. What is the pace of life?

2) Reflect: It often takes a while to fully process the significance of an activity. Find a quiet time to pause and then really think about the personal significance and implication of your Friday Lab's "slow walking" practice. How did you feel about it when you first learned what you were to do? How about when you began? Did anything change as the practice lengthened? Did anything happen when it ended with those five claps?

3) Compose: Compose a reflection and response piece to your experiences in both a) observing the pace of life here on campus and b) infusing and participating in a slow pace. What did you feel, and why? Can you say or "wonder" anything about pace in your local culture, the wider culture in your state or country, another culture and another pace someplace else upon this earth? What questions does this raise for you?