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Saying “Yes” to a Slow Summer and “No” to Sundry (Smartphone) Summons

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[O]ne thing above all—to step to one side, to leave ... spare moments, to grow silent, to become slow—the leisurely art of the goldsmith applied to language: an art which must carry out slow, fine work, [This] is now more desirable than ever before; for this ... is the highest attraction and incitement in an age of “work”: that is to say, of haste, of unseemly and immoderate hurry-scurry, which is intent upon “getting things done” at once, even every book, whether old or new ... [Learn] how to read *well*: i.e., slowly, profoundly, attentively, prudently, with inner thoughts, with the mental doors ajar, with delicate fingers and eyes ... [*L*]earn to read ... well.

A timely statement? Except that the quote above was written by Friedrich Nietzsche in 1886! I may be wrong, but I do not think anyone would dispute that the reality of “haste” and the pressure of ““getting things done”” have intensified exponentially in our age of globalized capital and digital technology. Noted psychiatrist Ned Hallowell chose to title his 2006 book *CrazyBusy* because Hallowell observes that the term “CrazyBusy” has often replaced “Fine” and “Good” to become the standard response to the usual “How are you” exchange in people’s daily interaction. As evidenced by our obsession with and dependence on the internet and

smartphones, instantaneity and multitasking are the signature emphases of our “CrazyBusy” lives. It is rather questionable, however, if this “unseemly and immoderate hurry-scurry” way of living is actually *smart*, especially for those of us who are committed to teaching and learning.

Journalist Nicholas Carr in his book, *The Shallows: How the Internet Is Changing Our Brains* (2010), suggests that digital technology has both enabling and corrupting effects. The ability to access and zip and sift through seemingly unlimited information at any and every moment also compromises—in fact, impairs—our brain’s capacity to remember, to focus, to think carefully, and to feel deeply. For Carr, this digital age has the potential of bringing about a society of not only impulsive and indifferent individuals but only shallow thinkers. As a teacher, I make it a commitment to improve and deepen my students’ thoughts. Is it possible, however, that I myself am allowing my own brain to downgrade and diminish in its thought capacity by my addiction to the internet and the smartphone through their incessant disruptions and distractions?



Of course, our use of technology is inseparably tied to the corporate culture of globalized capitalism. In the competitive ethos of that culture, busying oneself with the fastest and the newest is a status symbol that signifies your importance. Many, from Noam Chomsky to Gayatri Spivak, have criticized the corporate influence on education and the academy. Arguably since the 1960s, universities and the academy have increasingly modeled themselves after corporations by emphasizing marketability, growth, and profit maximization. As a result, professors and academicians, including those of us who specialize in religion and theology, have also increasingly bought into the corporate ethos of competition. We compete with one another to be more “efficient,” more “productive,” more “engaged,” more “connected,” and more “important” by taking on more and more. In short, many of us try to compete by becoming busier, faster, and, yes, more technologically savvy *and dependent*.

Like Nietzsche did almost a century and a half ago, writers of our own time are urging us to slow down. In *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2011), psychologist Daniel Kahneman suggests that we have two thinking systems. Instead of being on the fast track all the time, Kahneman explains and extols the benefits of slow thinking. Even more relevant to us as educators is *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy* (2016) by two professors of English in Canada, Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber. They write:

While slowness has been celebrated in architecture, urban life, and personal relations, it has

not yet found its way into education. If there is one sector of society which should be cultivating deep thought, it is academic teachers. Corporatization has compromised academic life and sped up the clock. The administrative university is concerned above all with efficiency, resulting in a time crunch and making those of us subjected to it feel powerless. Talking about professors' stress is not self-indulgent; *not* talking about it plays into the corporate model. . . . Slow Professors advocate deliberation over acceleration. We need time to think, and so do our students. Time for reflection and open-ended inquiry is not a luxury but is crucial to what we do.

Berg and Seeber also connect corporatization of the university and academy with technology, because both have much to do with "speeding up the clock." We are expected to reply promptly to emails from everyone (including our "customers" whom we also call students), or we need to spend time learning and using various new and ever-changing software installed by a school (as technology has "enabled" faculty members to provide our own administrative support so schools can save money). In fact, at the top of Berg and Seeber's list of suggestions on how to slow down is this: "We need to get offline." According to them, research has suggested that "it takes an *experienced* computer user an average of 15 minutes to return to 'serious mental tasks' after answering email or instant messages," so checking our smartphones and getting online continually contribute to our attention deficit and sense of fragmentation, as well as (if the research bears out) our academic and intellectual deterioration.

It is well known in the academy that the website CareerCast listed university professor in 2013 as "the least stressful occupation." Armed with that listing, *Forbes* came up with an article of its own in the same year, suggesting that "[u]nless [professors] teach summer school, they are off between May and September, and they enjoy long breaks during the school year, including a month over Christmas and New Year's and another chunk of time in the spring. Even when school is in session, they don't spend too many hours in the classroom." (It reminds me of what a newcomer said to me once when I was pastoring a church: "You read one book and work one day a week for one hour.") We know, of course, what many do not and may not ever realize. We do not only work in classrooms, our breaks are often used for course preparation and grading, and our summers are meant to be a time to slow down so we can read and think.

As they say, summer has now unofficially begun after Memorial Day. I do have plenty to do (including some teaching) this summer, but I will try my best to embrace a slow(er?) summer by getting offline more so I can read *well* and think *deeply*. Berg and Seeber are certainly correct that a slow professor who reads well and thinks deeply is a better teacher than one who is, in Hallowell's term, "CrazyBusy," so the decision to slow down actually has "political and educational ramifications." Will you join me as I join Berg and Seeber to become better models for our students and each other?

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