

CHAPTER I

Toward a Philosophy of Slow

WE HAD JUST ARRIVED IN PALO ALTO, and we weren't prepared for what happened.

My husband and I were walking back to our car when we heard a loud, incessant honking. A middle-aged woman was trying to parallel park, and a young woman in a huge SUV had crowded up behind her, leaning on the horn and refusing to give her room to maneuver.

Suddenly the SUV driver squealed up next to the other car, rolled down her window and started screaming. Then she turned and reached over to grab something. My husband and I froze — we expected gunshots.

Instead, she threw something through her window — it looked like a handful of rocks. “Fucking bitch!” she screamed, jerked the car into gear and sped off.

My husband took down her license number and called 911 on his cellphone. The older woman, her voice trembling, thanked us. We told her we would serve as witnesses if need be.

That evening the Palo Alto police called us and reported that they had investigated the incident and given the SUV driver a warning.

The officer told us that the SUV driver said she had thrown chocolate-covered raisins at the woman.

How bizarre.

My husband and I found the incident surprisingly upsetting. Although no one was physically hurt and we had not been directly involved, we couldn't get it out of our minds. The driver's SUV towered over the older woman's four-door sedan and seemed closer to a lethal weapon than a car. How had it come to this? We had lived in Palo Alto 20 years earlier and had never experienced incidents like this!

We don't know much about the SUV driver. She undoubtedly saw herself as a rising star, a fast-tracker on a meteoric path to success. But when you're in too much of a hurry to let someone park in front of you, when laying on the horn seems a better strategy than simply backing up a few feet, and when anger consumes you to the degree that you pick up anything handy to throw at someone, you're probably a candidate for a "Slow" transfusion.

What really surprised me, though, was the response we got when we told people about the incident. Nearly everyone responded with a road rage story of their own. They told us of drivers gunning their engines menacingly, cars ramming other cars, SUVs driving over traffic circles, motorists wielding handguns. There was one pickup truck driver who ran down and killed a motorcyclist after an argument, and almost everyone knew about the maniac in San Jose who grabbed a woman's dog from her car and threw it into onrushing traffic, killing the dog. Everyone had a tale of terror.

What most intrigued me was a friend's reaction to the chocolate-raisin story. Instead of sympathizing with the older woman, as most people had, she felt sorry for the SUV driver. "What kind of a life is she living to do something like that?" she asked.

Mining the experience for meaning

I've thought a lot about this story, because it's come to symbolize for me so many of our society's urgent problems. What stands out, of course, is what she was angry about. She was in a hurry. She didn't want anyone to slow her down or get in her way. Who hasn't felt close to rage when someone gets in their way? Why are we like this? UCLA psychiatrist Peter Whybrow, author of *American Mania*, says

we are being pushed to our physical and psychological limits because we are under such acute time pressure. We're being driven out of our minds with the stress of speed. Everyone understands this on a basic level and complains about it. No one defends it as healthy or sustainable. But we seem to be helpless to address it.

Next, I doubt that this driver was just having a bad day; she was having a bad life. You don't get that enraged if you're just a little upset. Her anger signifies the growing unhappiness in our society. Happiness has been on the decline for the past 40 years, and depression has shot up. America has the highest rate of homicide in the industrialized world. Our time deprivation is making us unhappy, yet we don't know what to do about it. How did this happen? Apparently Americans are confused about the nature of happiness. What is it? How do we get it? We can't make progress on our problems unless we understand this basic issue.

Next, think about what she was driving. If anything symbolizes our taunting of nature and our indifference to the environment, it's an SUV. These gas guzzlers not only pollute the air, contributing to a situation that sends us to war for oil, they are a big part of global warming, something that was brought to the public's attention in a horrific way in the fall of 2005 by Hurricane Katrina. One of our primary problems is our destruction of the environment. Did the SUV driver know this? Might she have felt subconsciously guilty about her choice of car?

Why do people drive SUVs? The only possible explanation is to keep up with the Joneses — the pursuit of status. In our American search for bigger and bigger, SUVs are a visible symbol of our pathology of status. In the last 40 years, as many other problems have exacerbated, something else has been happening — an increasing gap between the rich and the poor, withering away the middle class. In fact, the biggest indicator of the health of a nation, as measured in terms of longevity, is the distribution of wealth. The bigger the gap, the



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lower the life expectancy. This is not just because the poor people on the bottom are sicker and bring down the average. All of our lives are shortened as we frantically careen through our existence. Status is like an invisible pox that we must understand and address.

Certainly, the locale of the SUV incident was a citadel of status pathology — Palo Alto, one of the richest places in the country. To me, Palo Alto exemplifies the wealth divide in our nation — because on the edge of Palo Alto is East Palo Alto, an area of bleak poverty. The average CEO in 2004 made 431 times the average worker, almost \$12 million, and the average worker not even \$30,000. Since the gap continues to widen so fast, I hesitate to even include numbers. In 2003 the ratio was 301 to 1, so by 2006 it should be at least 500 to 1. This wealth divide, as we'll see, is responsible for many of our societal traumas. We had lived in Palo Alto before, at a time when it was essentially a sleepy little college town. But then came Silicon Valley and the era of the dot-coms, and wealth erupted like lava in Palo Alto. Suddenly there were ritzy little chains driving out the independent stores, expensive cars crowding out parking and cell-phoned suits striding impatiently down University Street. The feel was entirely different.

The road rage incident was just a few blocks from Stanford University, one of the nation's leading institutions. Certainly Stanford has done its job turning out those pinstriped and soulless CEOs. Again, an example of societal contradiction — higher education should be one of the solutions to our ills. But more and more students use education simply as a ticket to a high-paying job. Think of who runs corporations. I doubt there are a handful of people who didn't graduate from college, particularly from high-status MBA programs like Stanford's. It is the highly educated who are damaging our country. They're the ones destroying the environment, paying people minimum wage, sending us to war. University presidents no longer stand as moral beacons or learned elders — they're hired to be glad-handing fundraisers.

Stanford also represents something further. I got my doctorate in education there. I credit those years with teaching me to think. One thing I learned, however, is that education serves the economic

society and not the other way around. We usually turn to education to save our societies, but in America education is besmirched along with the rest of the competitive culture.

As an example, education has not been able to halt the decline of our professions. Being a professor or a doctor or a lawyer or a teacher is just not what it used to be. Satisfaction in our work has plummeted. It's not just the long hours, it's the unpleasantness of the workplace and our declining control over our workload. Who knows a really happy lawyer? What high-school teachers feel they are really getting to do their job? Which health care workers feel they are actually healing people? So we must address our experience of work as well as its increasing pressures.

Let's continue to analyze our chocolate-raisin incident. What part of the country were we in? Silicon Valley, the citadel of technology. Technology has slammed us against the wall. It's one of the reasons we have no time. It's one of the reasons we can't escape from work. It's allowed us to go faster and faster, and it keeps us from ever escaping — we're always connected.

But the core of the matter is the young woman's rudeness and unkindness to another human being. Community and civility are on the decline. Silicon Valley has the lowest "social capital" (time for other people) in the country. People need to feel cared for and valued and appreciated, but how many times have we had someone scream at us like the driver did? As we will see, caring and feeling cared for are at the heart of well-being.

Time scarcity, stress, unhappiness, hostility and decline of social capital, destruction of the environment, status and the wealth divide, technology; somehow these are related. Just as detectives in mystery stories look for patterns to solve a murder, we need to connect the dots of our cultural scurvy. That little road rage incident represents homicide in so many ways — the death of our children's future, the death of the American dream, in fact, the ultimate in dying that occurred in New Orleans in September 2005. Whatever the outcome to the death and destruction stemming from a right-wing Republican administration's obloquy and neglect, the story of Hurricane Katrina

represents, as do all these other issues, one underlying theme: the decline of concern for the common good.

But I want to return to the car. The SUV signifies something else — a phrase that is just now breaking into people’s consciousness — peak oil. We are about to begin the parabolic decline in worldwide oil supply. And of course oil is central to everything we do. Every consumer item involves oil in its manufacture or its shipment, let alone the gas we use to go to the malls. What will happen as oil declines? Certainly we see one example in George Bush’s policies — war in the Middle East. Richard Heinberg, author of *Power Down*, outlines four possible scenarios: In “Last One Standing,” we pursue a path of war and competition for the remaining oil. In “Waiting for a Magic Elixir,” we hope some technological marvel will save us. These bogus paths are not acceptable, even though they are the policies we are currently pursuing. Heinberg instead promotes two others that we must pursue: “Power Down” and “Build Lifeboats.” He describes these as the paths of cooperation, conservation and sharing, as well as community solidarity and preservation.

Our problems are severe to the point of irreversibility. Is there any hope? An important clue is embedded in the road-rage story. Let me tell you where we were parked and see if you can sense the significance of the location. It was a Whole Foods grocery store.

We were parked in front of something we wouldn’t have foreseen 10 years ago. Now, I realize that Whole Foods is a very expensive place. And it’s still a corporation. But it’s supremely successful because it sells healthy, organic food! Who would have suspected?

The story of food is a hopeful one. For several years we’ve been destroying food — pumping it full of preservatives and hormones, pouring insecticides into the soil, spraying plants within an inch of their lives. We’re processing food into something that tastes like cardboard — something that can last longer than cardboard! Who of our grandparents would have expected this to happen to the things we rely on for sustenance?

And how have we responded to the food chain’s degradation? We gobble food on the run. We eat with one hand while driving. We

take 10 minutes for dinner while watching television. Family members are so busy they rarely eat together. We diet constantly and deny ourselves food, but at the same time we've become obese. Our relationship to food is like the young woman's road rage: It's destroying the planet, and it's destroying us. We can see it, and yet we deny it.

But a reaction is underway. Several years ago many of us began turning to healthier food. We started natural-food cooperatives. (Ours is still going strong in Seattle, where I've been a member for 30 years.) People flock to farmers' markets or have organic food delivered to their doorsteps. We've turned to natural ways of healing involving nutrition.

And then, to cap it all off, we now have the Slow Food movement — an idea whose significance may save us from all the destruction we've created.

The Slow Food movement, an Italian effort to preserve traditions of conviviality around food and wine, is much more significant than it might at first appear. It has become a maypole for resisting the destructive forces in modern life. It's the badge of a sea change circling the globe as a way to deal with both our personal and our cultural problems. As patently obvious and uncomplicated as it might seem, much of the solution to our culture's and our planet's ills lies in simply slowing ... things ... down.

When I first heard about the Slow Food movement, I was absolutely fascinated. When use of the word expanded to Slow Cities, I thought — what if this could be a metaphor for a lot of different, yet related, changes? If there's slow food and slow cities, why not slow education? Or slow neighborhoods? Slow health? Slow travel? I began to think about what "slow" could mean. As I talked about it to people, some would frown — "slow" sounded like dull and pokey to them. They needed the rush of speed and excitement! But as they thought about it further, they could sense that underlying so many of our problems is the velocity of our lives. Maybe there is



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something to simply slowing down. So when I looked back on the road-rage incident, the fact that it happened in front of Whole Foods seemed significant. Perhaps the seed of an answer was there.

The Slow Food movement emerged in Italy in the late 1980s in reaction to McDonald's moving into Rome. Its instigators knew immediately that introducing fast food to Italy could destroy its tourist base. Who would come to the Piazza San Pietro if it turned into some dull suburban strip mall — or even a sellout villa like Palo Alto? The Italians could see that fast food was really a symbol of a way of life that embodied blandness and sterility and the destruction of the well-being of people and the planet. Fast food was a bacterium chomping away the United States. What I found exciting was that the Slow Food movement wasn't just trying to change life on the personal level by encouraging people to take their time eating good food in good company. The movement understood that personal change can only go so far. Sooner or later, if corporate farming continues to have its way, there won't be any good — or healthy— food left! So the movement (see www.slowfood.com) has gone on to focus on the health of the environment and biodiversity of food. Further, it encourages small farmers, small restaurants and shopkeepers and helps them maintain their heritage.

“Slow,” then, has come to stand for resistance to “Fast,” and “Fast” embodies all the problems embedded in the road rage incident — time-poverty, stress, hostility, inequality, destruction of the environment and, indeed, destruction of our whole civilization as we run out of oil. In the Fast Life you rush through your day, spending most of your time working, shopping and watching TV. In the Slow Life you move at an unhurried, leisurely pace, savoring your day, spending time in reflection and contemplation, making sure you have time to spend with friends and family. The Fast Life is about money, achievements and status. The Slow Life is about joy, leisure and community. The concept of the Slow Life not only offers a way to improve our lives, it offers a method of dealing with myriad problems. Instead of fighting on each front, one by one — environment, justice, peace — the Slow Life addresses them all at once.

And so, I began to see a wonderful solution to all of our problems: the Slow Life. I liked it because it seemed subversive rather than confrontational; it had a sense of humor instead of being dour and gloomy. I also discovered Carl Honore's *In Praise of Slowness: How a Worldwide Movement Is Challenging the Cult of Speed* — a book that provides a compelling introduction to the way this movement is spreading around the world. Honore shows an entirely different way of living:

In this book, Fast and Slow do more than just describe a rate of change. They are shorthand for ways of being, or philosophies of life. Fast is busy, controlling, aggressive, hurried, analytical, stressed, superficial, impatient, active, quantity-over-quality. Slow is the opposite: calm, careful, receptive, still, intuitive, unhurried, patient, reflective, quality-over-quantity. It is about making real and meaningful connections — with people, culture, work, food, everything.

John de Graaf edited *Take Back Your Time* (to which I contributed an essay) that outlines the problems and shows the way new laws can make changes. For true change we need new policies as well as a new belief system. In *Slow Is Beautiful*, I'll be building on these two books and showing how you can begin to change your life and to change society.

The last sentence is very important. I have always believed that any solution must be concerned with several levels of change: the personal, the institutional, and the policy level. Personal change alone isn't enough, but it's where the solution germinates. We won't have new laws unless the legislatures know there's a strong movement pushing for them. To build that movement we must first transform people's individual lives and provide ways to come together to work for greater change. In particular, I'll be addressing this last issue: We not only need to change people's personal lives and develop new policies, we must create a methodology of change! It's obvious we need some new strategies. We're way behind. I just read that 24 polar bears were found dead because they got trapped on ice floes as global warming broke apart an Arctic glacier. I can barely stand to hear such stories. We need to hear them, but we need something more than

stories of doom to motivate us. Taking a cue from the Slow Food movement, any solutions to our problems must be concerned with pleasure as well as principle. The good life is ethics and enjoyment. We want not only to serve life, but to savor life. As it stands, we do not have time to do either.



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The Slow Life movement offers a template for ways to analyze and confront the problems of our times. It is a critic of corporate lust for money and power, but it relies on a method of change that focuses on pleasure and

community by bringing people together to work for both enjoyment and social change.

Putting the Puzzle Together

Where do we begin? First, we need to look closely at the causes of the problems. In subsequent chapters I'll explore the most recent research on happiness, status, the workplace, and the consumer society.

Additionally, we have to address people's withering sense of spirit. People are beaten down, overworked, stressed, and depressed. They are not people who have the energy or the vision to work for a new future. I'll explore what we need — the notion of *joie de vivre*: the state of feeling vital and alive. Of being caught up by exuberance, enthusiasm and excitement — high spirits and high energy. Of recapturing those youthful moments when life seemed wonderful and all you felt was yes, yes, yes!

Then I'll explore the idea of leisure. It's about so much more than one might expect. Yes, it involves time away from work, but it is also a philosophy of time. Leisure offers a contemplative approach to life that brings greater depth and greater wisdom. Reading about debates over leisure through the ages, I've been enthralled and inspired.

And then I'll talk about the idea of community, the core of happiness. Community is a face-to-face caring — a just, egalitarian connection with others. It's a state in which we feel accepted for our true selves and connected to others.

All of these are linked, of course. To have more community, we need more leisure; to make the changes to have more leisure, we need the energy of *joie de vivre*. But we won't have *joie* without community. It's a circular association. In fact, the circle is a very nice symbol of what we're talking about because it counterpoints our usual symbol of life in corporate consumer society — the ladder.

Finally, I'll show how these elements are at the heart of the Slow Life and how thinking about the Slow Life brings us a new vision of the good life. The Slow Life is when we reclaim our time for the things that matter. It's an unhurried pace in which we learn to savor life. It's a belief system that says that the well-being of people and the planet must come before profit. It's a subversive counterculture meant to undermine the corporate consumer society. Finally, it involves a visionary method of social change and education.

That's when the phrase "slow is beautiful" — a play off E.F. Schumacher's classic 1973 handbook, *Small Is Beautiful* — occurred to me. To make the Slow Life resonate, we need a new vision connecting slowness with beauty and wonder and all the good things in life. Change doesn't come unless people are first inspired. The consumer society stands for competition — destruction and division. That's what the word *consume* means — to devour, as in "the house was devoured by fire." I've long thought that to countermand the consumer society we needed a culture of connectedness — where we're connected with our true selves (integrity), each other (community), and life (nature and the universe). Having thought this for a long time, I was happy to discover that one of my favorite writers, Philip Slater (*Wealth Addiction* and *The Pursuit of Loneliness*), called for a Culture of Connection in an article for *Utne* magazine's April-May 2003 issue.

Slater talks about how the radical Right supports a culture of division, a preoccupation with control over nature and over other people. It tries to control people's feelings (through advertising, television and religion) and their personal freedoms (opposition to pregnancy termination and freedom of sexual orientation). The extreme Right wants to control what teachers teach, what newspapers print

and what we see on television. It has an either-or view of the world and supports hierarchies with control from the top. It sees all of life as a war, from the war on drugs to war against Christmas to conflict with other countries.

Slater feels that people on the Left have been sucked into this divisive approach and have fallen prey to tactics of control themselves. In particular, we on the Left have taken a reactive role, putting all of our energies into “fighting” back when the Right does something. Often we have ourselves become militant, attacking people who don’t agree with us and adopting an elitism that dismisses others’ opinions.

Instead, he says, we should be creating a Culture of Connection in which we focus on togetherness and communication, the removal of walls. We are already doing this with efforts like growing organic food, working on peace issues and the Julia Butterfly Hill approach of spending two years in an old-growth redwood and building an organization, Circle of Life, on the basis of her work. (A very slow form of protest!) These are new, exciting strategies capturing peoples’ attention and imagination.

A host of efforts exists to help build this Culture of Connection — such as car-sharing, cohousing, ecovillages, farmers’ markets. They all come together in the Slow Life. Normally we associate change with moving fast. In this case, change evolves through moving Slow.

Can you imagine how that SUV driver in Palo Alto would have acted ... if only she’d been living the Slow Life?