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The slow life: Real blue sky thinking

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Some "meteorological meditation" can give you time to think.

By Dean Irvine for CNN

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LONDON, England (CNN) -- Do you have the feeling that life is getting away from you, that there aren't enough hours in the day to get everything done? Don't worry, it's not just you, the pace of city life really is speeding up.

A recent survey by the University of Hertfordshire and British Council found that city dwellers are walking 10 percent faster than in 1994. Singapore topped the list with locals rushing around 30 percent faster than they were in the early 1990's.

Deliberately slowing your walking pace in the city against this rising tide of rushaholics could see you swiftly swatted out of the way by irritable commuters, but just by toning down the nagging sense that you have to do more, and do it faster, can have plenty of long term benefits.

At least that's the belief of journalist and author Carl Honoré, a man whose own slow life epiphany came when he found himself speed reading bedtime stories to his son. His book "In Praise of Slow" champions the benefits of taking more time to consider things.

"We live in a world that is obsessed with speed that is stuck in fast forward. We often lose sight of the damage that this road-runner form of life does to us -- on our health, our diet, our work," he said.

Slowing, not slacking

If it all sounds to you like the musings from a slacker's manifesto, you're not yet in tune with the concept of the slow life. Resist the tug of technology: turn off your mobile, don't send that email just yet and try and forget, just for a few minutes, about the thousand tedious tasks that you feel need to be done.

Slowing down doesn't mean opting out or even downshifting, and reclaiming the term slow from pejorative uses is part of the (slow and steady) battle of people like Carl Honoré.

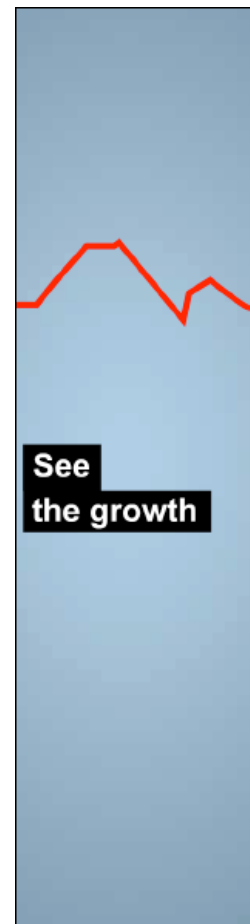
The stigma attached to slowing down equates it with an idleness at odds with the dominant work ethos of always doing more and doing it faster.

As well as the [slow food movement](#), there are slow towns, aiming to improve the quality of life for inhabitants and making them more pleasant places to live. It's more a philosophical statement rather than a directive. Ludlow was the first UK town to achieve slow town status, but admittedly, life in this Shropshire market town has never been anything other than sedate.

"But why slow down when you can multi-task," you might ask? Well, multi-tasking is a flawed skill and there's been plenty of scientific research to prove it.

"Multi-tasking is going to slow you down, increasing the chances of mistakes," David E. Meyer, a cognitive scientist and director of the Brain, Cognition and Action Laboratory at the University of Michigan, told the New York Times. "Disruptions and interruptions are a bad deal from the standpoint of our ability to process information."

That's not to say that people who have trouble walking and chewing gum at the same time are more enlightened, but most people who have juggled a number of tasks at the same time won't need scientific research to confirm that by doing many things at once, you're less likely to do any of them well.



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Have your head in the clouds

One man gently mocking the meaninglessness of modern life and taking things slower is Gavin Pretor-Pinney. As author of *The Cloud Spotter's Guide* and co-founder of *The Idler* magazine he's literally reclaiming 'blue sky thinking' from business buzzword blabber.

His book was a best seller in the UK last year and there is now a web site called *The Cloud Appreciation Society*. While the book is filled with fascinating facts and anecdotes about clouds, it's just as much an exercise in contemplation and rejection of the accepted goals of modern life, something that fits well into the slow life canon.

"The speed at which clouds develop and change is so gradual; it's quite the opposite of the pace of life in the city. By spending a little time contemplating clouds, you're really forced to slow down. It's a kind of meteorological meditation," he says.

"Most people walk around looking at the floor, but the whole act of looking upwards is almost like a yogic exercise; you broaden your perspective and open your vision."

After ten years working as art director for *The Idler* magazine and doing other freelance graphics work to pay the rent he and co-founder Tom Hodgkinson decided to take a sabbatical for six months. As it's only produced twice a year, it only wiped out one issue.

"I did a flat swap with someone in Rome with the intention of doing absolutely nothing. I wrestled with all the psychological aspects of this, wondering if I was just being irresponsible and wasting half a year."

He ended up doing a lot of research for his book and found the whole experience of taking time out incredibly rewarding.

"By giving myself space and taking a break from thinking that I had to achieve something really let ideas take form. I ended up moving from being a designer to a writer and really pursuing my interests," he said.

Clouds have a universal appeal, as does taking a sabbatical from work. For many who can't afford this luxury, the benefits of taking time to appreciate the clouds or just giving yourself time to do something you really enjoy is always worth it.

As Carl Honoré says quite simply: "By slowing down at the right moments we do stuff better."

For Pretor-Pinney there is the irony is that while his cloud life is a fine practical example of *The Idler* ethos, he has found himself as the head of *The Cloud Appreciation Society*, an international association with more than 8,000 members in 45 countries.

"I spend so much time on it now that clouds have almost taken over my life, but it just goes to show that if instead of pursuing the money and you follow what you like doing and do it well, good things and even money will come from it."

Tips to live a slow life

- Drink more tea -- making a cup of tea is the perfect pursuit and displacement activity to idly consider absolutely nothing and everything. Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu called it an essential ingredient in the elixir of life, so it can't be bad.
- Walk more -- what could be better than moving at a pace nature intended and getting some fresh air round your chops. You'll see much more than by taking public transport or driving.
- Realize that time is nothing more than an abstract concept used to measure the distance between to points, it's futile and pointless to even consider 'beating' it, so don't try.
- Watch cricket - don't worry about the rules, it's a game that takes five days to play and at the end there often isn't a winning team. As a spectator sport it's as much about watching the grass grow as appreciating a fine cover drive.
- Take up cabinet making -- you can't rush a good piece of furniture.

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