

A Time to Sow, a Time to Reap, a Time to.....Hey! Can You Speed This Up a Little?

by
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A few weeks prior to the writing this editorial, I listened to several discussions on television related to the topic of "time." These were not scientific, or technical appraisals, but related to changes in our culture's changing perceptions of time. One discussion dealt with the changing nature of jokes, and how Jack Benny used to take dramatic pauses prior to the punch line, how successful that was, and how today's comics have to be much faster with the punch line. The audience won't wait. A second discussion related to education and how students now didn't want to take time to learn the classics, and that teachers were offering shorter and less demanding materials. Changes were even taking place in the University of Chicago's hallowed curriculum of classical readings. A third program noted how fast children were in responding to TV and other electronic games compared to older folks. A fourth discussion dealt with HMO's and the limited time they have permitted for certain services, particularly mental health. The final program, though not in that order of severity, featured commentators discussing that American people want a quick war in Kosovo; didn't want to wait out a long war, and had been led to believe that there

would be a speedy ending. Nor, said one discussant, did they understand that it took time to accomplish our goals in Kosovo.

While all of these examples are not on an equal par as far as the consequences and impact on human life, they illustrate the trend that has been taking place in our society. Some would say that the trend is a product of postmodern cultural processes. All of us, but particularly the young folk, are bombarded by speedy TV commercials in which sequences flash by so quickly that we are trained to attend, "quick time." The automobile commercials feature cars starting out as a sport car dashing on dirt roads, then on highways, becomes a sedan, changing to a van on a country road, and next seen on the tops of mountains. Instant morphing of characters, models changing their costumes and hair before you even know for sure what they had been wearing. Newspapers, even the *New York Times*, now summarizes the news on it's front pages, International and National news pages, and on the net. No need to read the details. Thirty second sound bites, down to 15 second sound bites.

So what's the point? Time is the point. The point is the that "the devil is in the details." But more often, the "right" is in the details, and no one seems to have time to reflect on the details. And without re-

flection we end up making major errors. A *New York Times* headline reads, "How a President, Distracted by Scandal, Entered Balkan War." The article goes on to say, "it is unclear whether the President's decisions on Kosovo would have been different if he had not been distracted by his own political and legal problems." Were the decisions about Kosovo made without proper reflection because the President was involved with the Senate Impeachment hearings? Did Congress reflect on how their actions might have distracted the President at a critical time? Would more time for reflection have led to a different decision? The world is speeding up. But not everything can be accomplished "in a New York Minute."

In Albert Camus' *The Plague*, Dr. Rieux and Tarrou, his friend, take an hour off from their voluntary struggle against the pestilence to reflect about the world around them, and Tarrou says he has discovered through his various experiences that no one on earth is free from the plague.

"And I know, too, that we must keep endless watch on ourselves lest in a careless moment we breath in somebody's face and fasten the infection on him. What's natural is the microbes. All the rest—health, integrity, purity (if you like)—is a product of human will, of a vigilance that must never falter. The

good man, the man who infects hardly anyone, is the man who has the fewest lapses of attention. And it needs tremendous willpower, a never ending tension of the mind to avoid such lapses." (p .229)

Perhaps the plague is a metaphor, for hatred, or racism, or religious bigotry. Having time to become aware of it, talk about it, reflect on it, becomes a vital part of doing something about yourself so that you don't spread it. But what if the new plague is "speed" and what is catching, is a desire for "quick time?" Then a legitimate question we need to ask ourselves and find the answer to is, can our profession deal with this type of plague? Are we in tune with the times? We are not going to prevent the crush of speed anymore then we could hold back a diesel train with our bare hands, but we need a practice for the times. We can't take short cuts, nor can we do with practice which has not improved in thirty years. We have the phrases: systems, empowerment, client centered, multicultural, etc. but evidence of increased success is lacking. Other professions may be doing better.

The medical profession seems to have adapted well. Women after birth have to leave the hospital the next day. There was a movement to have them leave the same day, particularly if they didn't have insurance, but that became publicly embarrassing and the Feds stepped in. More and more surgery that used to keep you in the hospital

for two or more days is now outpatient surgery. But our profession is not technology compatible. We know that the single most significant factor in whether the client feels they have been helped, is their feeling about the nature of the relationship with the helper, not the theories professed, or the techniques used. And relationship takes time. If the younger clients of today and tomorrow are used to speed, what do we offer them that will reflect the social context of their times. They have leaned through postmodern perspectives, to question the old theories, written by men, or by the representatives of the power structure. They are deconstructing faster then we have been able to construct. Children play parallel to each other on their Nintendo machines, competing for higher scores, but not interacting with each other. We are more isolated from human contact, whether on the phone or with automatic pay deposits, no operators, no bank clerks, and at the drive-ins, no people either.

For those who believe that the answer is in better technology, I would like to refer them to one last item that came to my attention this week. A headline in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 16, 1999, reads, "2 Reports Question Utility and Accessibility in Distance Education" I will not impose the details on you, other than to say, everything isn't rosy. But, the article included an ad to be run by the American Federation of Teachers that is a spoof on the notion of distance education

originally done on *Saturday Night Live* by comedian Don Novello, portraying the character Father Guido Sarducci, who discusses the "Five minute University." "In the five-minute university, Spanish is reduced to 'como esta usted' and 'muy bien,' says the ad. Economics is summed up as 'supply and demand.' Theology is simply 'God is everywhere.' Add one more minute and have a graduate degree." The ad goes on to discuss college marketing approaches to video and on-line courses which might infer that there is something wrong in interacting with professors and fellow students "moving past competencies to understanding, perspective and wisdom."

Forget the 50 minute hour. Give me the 5 minute hour! □

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