

## Book Review:

### *Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything*

by  
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**FASTER**  
*The Acceleration of Just About Everything.*  
James Gleick.  
New York: Pantheon Books,  
1999.

**S**o you are waiting on an elevator after two seconds, the door still hasn't closed. You are in a hurry, and push the "door close" button, the door closes, it works! Did you do it? Perhaps not, because many of those buttons are phony. Like a placebo, they make you feel better. They have been put in by the elevator company to make you less anxious and to give you the feeling that you have some control. Just look at how much time you saved, perhaps two or three seconds. Not much you might say, but those seconds add up, particularly if you are in the TV business. Remember those fade-outs, between commercials on TV? You haven't noticed them lately because they are not there anymore. The industry saves one or two seconds by melding right into the next scene. Those seconds mean money in many industries, and certainly in the TV business where a five-or-thirty second commercial can

bring in big bucks.

Those are just a few of the fast facts that Gleick presents to us in his book, *Faster*, a bright work that not only reflects the push to speed but gives us some things to think about and insights into what is happening to us because of that push. James Gleick, who also wrote the book *Chaos*, and other science pieces, wonders just how much speed humanity will be able to take. Not that we are near some unknown danger point, but how will speed change the world as we know it, and have we paid attention to the changes that have already taken place? Are we jogging more and reading less? Will more people become Type A, a social invention of the last half of this century?

Technological advances, the web, and MTV programs speed up peoples' views of time and ferment the desire for "quick time" change. An article in the *New York Times* noted, "People are time starved, they're drained, their attention span is short and they're full of stress." You might wonder why, since we seem to be saving all those seconds.

Will I have time to read a book while I am busy multitasking? Maybe, Gleick noted, there is already a book out, with one-minute bedtime stories to tell your child as you put him or her to bed. While that might cut into "quality family time," it

will give us more time to surf the net and learn how to be better parents. He points out, however, that certain things just can't be rushed, noting that "compost" takes time to develop. We might wonder how many managers really became better after reading the *One-Minute Manager*.

Psychologists, who study the impact of time on the mind, seem to be about the only ones in the helping professions who have paid much attention to speed. Their interest stems from their traditional research works, such as reaction times of mice and people. Nothing new in therapy though. Gleick does spend time discussing the contributions of Frederick Taylor and Scientific Management, pointing out his initiation of time studies in the work place. He shares responsibility for starting this speed thing in the first place.

We shouldn't ignore our contributions to things going faster, however. We have always had the 50-minute hour, and that seems like a speed up in use of time to me. We also have seen the use of "time out" as a control device. One of my students told me of a "one minute time-out" for a child who was presenting a problem. There isn't much in the book that deals with helping, so we may never get to the one-minute social worker, but there are important ques-

tions to reflect on. Will society's demand for speed lead to even shorter "short term" therapies? Is it unrealistic to think our clients might expect a fast fix? Some are already trying to find it in chat rooms and with on line "therapists" for a fee, of course. Will the miracle question and solution-oriented therapy reduce the number of sessions paid for by the insurance companies?

Both practitioners and academics say they have no time to read the professional literature. Persons on welfare are given a time by which they must get a job, or they are off welfare. We can fax or e-mail clients and students and vice versa. This can save time but also take time if we were to answer all the questions students and clients might e-mail us. Some might believe shorter staff meetings would save time.

While the book raises important questions, I slowly dragged through the discussions on the development of the exact time-piece, the "master clock" and the world-wide need for some people to have the exact second wherever they are, even if they have to purchase a multi thousand dollar watch, when a five dollar one will do. Of course not everything is speeding up. Speeds on the highways during rush hour are down to about 20 miles an hour, and try to make a phone call to get service for your computer or to question a bill. It takes more time to get through all the button pushing, but it does save the companies money. They can hire fewer people, since many

callers give up after waiting to speak to a live person if they don't get what they want from the buttonniers.

There is smoothness, intelligence, and a sense of wonder in his book, and it reads fast. What isn't fun, of course, is the feeling he has that a lack of time to reflect may lead us into making poor moral judgments, something I commented on awhile back related to important political decisions made by our leaders. (Abels,1999) Unfortunately the book offers little as to what to do about the speedups. People feel overworked, and feel like they are on an assembly line. Many people are feeling sleep deprived. It takes time to change, too much time. I still push that door open button on elevators.

There are some fun parts to the book, particularly the contrasting advice given by countless books on how to save time, and not waste it. There is also a fine suggested list of articles to read about time, work, speed, etc. But who has time to read any of them? While the book suggests the world and everyone in it is in a rush, it may not give you the kind of rush you hope for.

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