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Walk, Don't Run

The word *graduation* comes from the Latin *gradus*, -us, m., meaning “a step.” “A step as made, a pace,” to be more precise, so this graduation today we can understand as a ritual that celebrates progress achieved, or the steps you have all taken—*up* to meet defined standards of accomplishment, and *forward* towards fulfillment in your own lives and in the lives of others.

Take one step after another and you find yourself walking. Indeed, the steps you celebrate having achieved today are merely stages in your lives' progress: you took many steps to get to this point, and when you stand up to leave the hall you will be walking again—in what direction, how, and at what *pace* it will be for you to decide.

Now, there's a problem with that issue of *pace*, because as I am certainly not the first to observe, life in this second decade of the Twenty-First Century is lived—in developed and developing economies, at least—at breakneck speed. Why that is the case is a complicated issue, undoubtedly linked in part to advances in technology, to our movement from what one might call “pre-industrial” to “industrial” time (beginning a century and half ago), and then to “cyber-time,” our medium in the digital age.¹

As early as the 1980s the pace of life in the industrialized west had accelerated so much that a countervailing movement began to emerge. Perhaps not surprisingly, its initial focus was on what is needed to sustain human beings in all their activities: food. In 1986 Carlo Petrini led a protest against the opening of a McDonald's restaurant in the Piazza di Spagna in Rome, and from this grew the Slow Food movement. Since then, a similar message has been broadly disseminated and taken up, with people advocating for an alternative to the cult of speed in almost all areas of life: in addition to slow food, we now have slow gardening, slow art, slow counselling, slow education, slow media, slow parenting, slow design, slow science, slow church, and even the rather odd idea of slow startup.

In 2004, a Canadian journalist called Carl Honoré published a book called *In Praise of Slow: How a Worldwide Movement is Challenging the Cult of Speed*, which explored the way in which the Slow philosophy could be applied across all fields of human activity. That book was said by the *Financial Times* to bear the same relation to the Slow Movement as Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* bore to communism. It provided a kind of manifesto, its message being not that speed is inherently bad, but rather that—as

¹ See Linda Buzzell, “Slow Down: How Our Fast-Paced World is Making Us Sick,” AlterNet, 1 July 2009.

Honoré put it—“It’s about seeking to do everything at the right speed. Savoring the hours and minutes rather than just counting them. Doing everything as well as possible, instead of as fast as possible. It’s about quality over quantity in everything from work to food to parenting.”

It was in fact a parenting matter that caused Honoré to pull himself up and begin to reconsider his increasingly bizarre relation to time. Skimming through a newspaper as he stood waiting to board a flight, his eye lit upon an ad for “The One-Minute Bedtime Story,” a collection of fairy tales condensed into sixty-second bites: “Hans Christian Andersen meets the executive summary,” as he put it. This seemed the perfect answer to his young son’s ongoing campaign to prolong bedtime with requests for always one more story. Thanks to the one-minute story, Dad could potentially accommodate his child yet accelerate the bedtime ritual so he could get on with “supper, emails, reading, bills, more work, the news bulletin on television.”

As he found himself wondering whether Amazon could ship him the full set of one-minute bedtime stories, Honoré checked himself: “Have I gone completely insane?” he asked. “My whole life,” he observed, “has turned into an exercise in hurry, in packing more and more into every hour. I am Scrooge with a stopwatch, obsessed with saving every last scrap of time, a minute here, a few seconds there. And I am not alone. Everyone around me—colleagues, friends, family—is caught in the same vortex.”

Honoré’s book, *In Praise of Slow*, explores the full extent of what an American physician, Larry Dossey, calls our “time-sickness,” our “obsessive belief that ‘time is getting away, that there’s not enough of it, and that you must pedal faster and faster to keep up.’” Honoré also quotes Klaus Schwab, founder of the World Economic Forum, in this frank description of our changing times: “We are moving from a world in which the big eat the small to one in which the fast eat the slow,” and Honoré goes on to observe that this warning “resonates beyond the Darwinian world of commerce.” He registers his objection to the growing dominion of speed by reminding us of exactly what was Charles Darwin’s message about the success of living species: “Evolution works on the principle of survival of the fittest, not the fastest.”

Now Darwin, you may know, suffered for more than half of his life from a mysterious illness, which I won’t claim was “time-sickness” in Dossey’s sense, but which did nevertheless force upon him a deliberate slowing-down—a deceleration of life out of which came his greatest scientific contribution, the writing and publication of *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859). Between 1831 and 1836 Darwin had roamed the world aboard HMS *Beagle*, and it was on September 20th in the year after his return that he suffered “an uncomfortable palpitation of the heart” and was advised to seek complete rest. Over the next two years his condition deteriorated considerably, his symptoms proliferating to include nausea, vomiting, headaches, heart pain and fatigue. Though never satisfactorily diagnosed, Darwin’s illness plagued him for the remaining forty-five years of his life.

Frequent ice-cold showers—his own peculiarly Victorian version of the ice-bucket challenge—was one key element in the treatment recommended by his doctors and followed by Darwin.

Interestingly, it has also been hypothesized that as his fame grew, Darwin used his illness to protect himself from the demands and intrusions of the external world: in the grip of the malady one day and out of it the next he had a variable engagement with the outside world—and could perhaps unconsciously *control* that engagement to give him the time and solitude in which to think. His biographer Paul Johnson has noted that during the ten months during which Darwin was at work on the text of *The Origin of Species* “he had an unusual number of sickness fits, five, or one every two months.” “They were clearly produced by the strain of his work,” observes Johnson, “But he did not allow them to stop his writing.”²

That last point is intriguing because it suggests that Darwin’s sickness—to which he always responded by withdrawing from the daily round of life—was in some way a precondition for his creativity. To step out of the onward rush of family and mundane professional concerns was apparently critical to the quality of his work as a thinker and scientist.

In 1842 Darwin moved with his wife Emma and their children to Down House in the English countryside near Farnborough, and there he lived until his death in 1882. The family had come to regard London as “filthy and noxious,”³ and at Down they found and expanded upon what was a kind of rural paradise: an idyllic world enjoyed and always remembered with great fondness by his children and the extended family. There, it certainly could be said, Darwin found himself as a father and husband. But equally true would be the assertion that it was there he found himself as a scientist.

Withdrawn from the hectic world of London, and in a home in which it is reported that tables, chairs and bathtubs were frequently piled high with biological specimens (a period in which worms were everywhere is recalled with great vividness and surprisingly little horror by one of his granddaughters) Darwin was able to observe nature in an unhurried way and to extrapolate from his observations to develop the theories for which he is now so well known. At Down House he wrote not only *The Origin of Species* (1859), but also *The Variation of Animals and Plants Under Domestication* (1868), and *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871).

In what I said about Darwin’s illness I have implied that he needed to take “time out,” as we’d say today, in order to think and advance his work, and that paradoxically his physical problems sometimes facilitated this. His move to Down House was a further and more conscious attempt to extricate himself from what

² Paul Johnson, *Darwin: Portrait of a Genius* (London: Penguin, 2013) EPUB file, 58.

³ Johnson, 57.

London represented and to find the solitude required for contemplation. But by 1842 when they moved there, the Darwins had a two-year old son (William) and a new-born daughter (Anne); and within thirteen years Emma gave birth to a further eight children, not all of whom survived. Add to that the very substantial number of servants and gardeners required to run a substantial upper-class Victorian home, and it cannot ever have been a very quiet place.

When you visit Down House today you can still see the wooden toboggan made by Darwin so his children could toboggan down the main staircase! Evidently he was the kind of parent whose love for his children must always have been potentially at odds with his desire to be getting on with work. He also read to them a great deal—and not One-Minute Bedtime Stories! Accounts make it clear that even when he was hard at work in his study his children were welcome to be with him: there was a couch in his study for their use.

You might ask, therefore, how it was that he got so much—and such great—work done? One answer, which the now-reformed Carl Honoré might offer to this question, is that it is precisely because he prioritized quality of life over narrowly-defined productivity that Darwin was capable of such brilliant insights as a scientist. There's probably something to that, although I suspect there is more truth to the less romantic view that he learned from his own offspring just as he learned from observing all species in their interactions with each other and with their environment. He was what Agatha Christie's amateur detective, Miss Marple, would call "a noticing person," and everything noticed was grist to his powerful analytical intelligence. Janet Browne has commented that "Darwin bred pigeons, grew pots of seeds in his outhouses, observed bees moving across his flowerbeds, tracked worms in the fields that he saw from his drawing-room window, watched his infant children in the nursery, and pondered the twists and turns of climbing weeds in his hedges, all the while seeking the detailed evidence of adaptation in living beings that he believed to be the keystone of his project."⁴

It is also true that even in the cheerful and child-friendly setting of Down House, the onset of Darwin's illness continued to create opportunities for solitude and contemplation. On such occasions the entire household respected his need to be alone. And as I have said, these periods were more frequent when he was engaged in major intellectual work.

What is particularly interesting to me about Down House, though, is that as Darwin settled there, he made it increasingly an extension of his mind. His home became his laboratory: in 1855 the lawn was marked out and he began to survey the number of plants that sprung up, this in an attempt to investigate biodiversity and to test his theory of "survival of the fittest" in the plant world.⁵ In another part of the lawn, he and his son Horace conducted an experiment using a round slab of stone and two

⁴ Janet Browne, *Charles Darwin: The Power of Place* (New York: Knopf, 2002), Kindle file, ch.1.

⁵ Tori Reeve, *Down House: The Home of Charles Darwin* (London: English Heritage, 2009), 20.

metal rods, the purpose of which was to measure the action of worms beneath the stone.⁶ You can still visit Darwin's beehives, his fungus lawn, his greenhouse, and the other sites in which his empirical, observational work was done.

But I said Down House became an extension of his mind, which must mean more than simply that his home became his laboratory. And that brings me to one of the most interesting aspects of the house, and the reason for this rather long digression.

In 1846, less than four years after the family's arrival at Down, Darwin took over a parcel of land at the edge of his lawn (the "great meadow") and planted it heavily with trees and bushes. He then began construction of an elaborate gravel path, extending a quarter of a mile through the growth, beginning at the bottom of the kitchen garden, running alongside his neighbour's meadow, and then circling back towards itself through the trees. He called this "The Sandwalk," but as time passed it was referred to more often as his "thinking path."

Darwin's day was a study in carefully observed routines, and walking was a key part of the daily pattern. But at noon he would take (or, rather, would be given by his gardener and butler) a cold outdoor medicinal shower, following which he would make five circuits of the Sandwalk, keeping track of his progress by piling stones near the entrance. Although his children were sometimes there for company—and they took great pleasure in kicking away the stones to confuse their father—Darwin used the walk to think and to observe: as the plantings matured, there was more and more for him to notice and to learn from in the hedgerows and the undergrowth. Browne has gone so far as to say that the thinking path, the Sandwalk, "became the private source of . . . [Darwin's] conviction that his theory was true—true, if only he could show it."⁷

I don't imagine I need to spend too much time unpacking the relationship between Darwin's "thinking path" and what I earlier had to say about the Slow movement. The key point to be made about the Sandwalk is that what he constructed there was truly an extension of Darwin's mind: it was the physical symbol or expression of his need to withdraw from life to think, *and it was also one of the means by which he fulfilled that need.*

If Browne is correct and it also fed his conviction that the theory of Natural Selection was true—that is to say, it also contributed in a material way to the development of one of the most significant scientific and intellectual breakthroughs in human history—could you have any more convincing evidence of the value of stepping out of the daily headlong rush, of the profound usefulness of the circular ramble as an exercise for both body and mind?

⁶ Reeve, 21.

⁷ Browne, ch. 1.

Do you have to produce a paradigm-shattering scientific hypothesis in order to justify the time you spend out of the rat race? I think not, even though on a day like this we would probably all dream of doing so. But do remember other aspects of Darwin's Sandwalk time that, though modest and available to us all, enlarged upon his significance and impact as a human being: his respectful attention to the natural world as something kin to him but greater and other than himself, for example; and of course his enjoyment of his children, for whom the Sandwalk represented and provided an alternative world for play and the imagination. In that world he and they were equally at home. And although the walk was felt by all to be a unique, separate and special place, time spent there had a kind of positive carryover effect on the quality of life at Down House more generally.

Last summer when I visited Down House I did so in the wonderful company of my twenty-six year old son, an avid student of Darwin; and perhaps for that reason I was predisposed to feel the legacy of human bonds in the house as powerfully as its intellectual history. Would I respond in the same way were I to return alone, without Colin? I believe I would, because everywhere you look in Down House you see the evidence that for Darwin the human enterprise in all its manifestations—from obsessive scientific observation to generous love and familial feeling—was to be understood and enjoyed *whole, slowly, with care and appreciation*.

So: if we allow that this graduation is a family gathering of sorts, perhaps you will allow me to close by saying how much pride we all feel in what you have achieved in your studies, by reiterating the point that you will always have a place in this house of ours, and by offering what may be one of the most universal parental admonitions, one no doubt familiar to you all: *walk, don't run!*

Or at least—don't run all the time. Once in a while take a cold medicinal shower and go for a walk.

And may you conceive great things.