

# The Morality of Slow

Summertime, creativity and the meaning of intensity

BY GREG BLAKE MILLER

I was midway through a Saturday morning walk when I became transfixed by an icon on the pavement. It stopped my stride, suspended time, pulled me in with its strange perfection: It was a bicycle rider, rendered in three strokes and a dot; the entire bike was captured in two ovals. To an oncoming speedster, the ovals look pretty much like circles, which is how the real world rolls. You have to slow down to see that they're not really round, and that the even realer world is a little bit off.

We love speed. Speed gets things done. It produces swift dividends and protects us from the mental spaces where everything stops making the old kind of sense and starts making a new and more disturbing kind of sense. Look at a tree in passing, you see a tree; stop for a moment, you notice there's a walking stick motionless on the branch; stare at the bug and you start to feel kinship with the damn thing, conceived like you in a burst of sex and, like you, destined to replenish the soil with carbon. Plus, it has eyes. The next thing you know, you're rescuing kitchen earwigs and putting them out on the lawn. Society cannot and will not tolerate such behavior.

Childhood, though, has traditionally recognized the virtues of slow. Slow even has its very own season. During the school year, you've only got a few choices—that's A, B, C and D on your Scantron sheet—and you'd better choose quickly. But in the summer, moments gain elbow room, and choices multiply. That's the worst and best of the season: You can blow it all on the PS3, or you can look down the list, find Answer Z,

and stare at it long enough to see there's a whole universe in there. Slow summer can bring you to ruin, but it's also when greatness happens.

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So, as our recession-battered nation cries out for magic bullets, I'll argue for the one that flies in slow motion. The ideals of childhood summer have a thing or two to teach us, young and old alike: Contrary to popular lore—not to mention efficiency experts snooping around your office—deceleration does not signal the collapse of the Protestant work ethic. The morality of slow, in fact, is all about discipline. It's about activating the mind and bringing all the power of your interior world to bear on the one outside. “Look,” the filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky—a master of the long take—once told a friend, “if you extend the normal length of a shot, first you get bored. If you extend it further, you become interested. And if you extend it even more, a new quality, a new intensity of attention is born.”

Intensity demands a new relationship to time and space. The word itself comes from the Latin *intendere*—to stretch, to strain: You stretch your mind over the moment, making it somehow last longer so that you can see it in unexpected ways. Innovation begins with minds pulled taut over moments. “Time is this rubbery thing,” the neurologist David Eagleman recently told *The New Yorker*. “It stretches out when you really turn your brain resources on.” When we fail to stretch time—when our moments lack intensity—we fall into despair. “Boredom,” writes Thomas Mann in *The Magic Mountain*, “is actually an abnormal compression

of time caused by monotony.” The sameness of efficient everyday life “can shrink large spaces of time until the heart falters, terrified to death.”

We cultivate intensity by making choices when the choices are not laid out before us. My 10-year-old son, who just finished the fourth grade, was taught last year to read the comprehension questions and possible answers first, then scan the accompanying text for “the best choice.” It's a solid test strategy, but as a mental process, it's vapid and slack—a kind of “focus” that doesn't intensify attention but merely shrinks it to manageable, measurable dimensions. The life of the Scantron postures as the life of the mind. Tests are swiftly completed and corrected; results are rapidly tabulated. Schools acquire hard data, so that accountability can be expressed in the language of accountants.

But intensity is impossible to measure. It plays strange games with time perception and burdens students and teachers alike with unconventional observations. There's no accounting for it.

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We will not measure our way out of crisis; we will create our way out. But how do you fire a swift, straight creativity missile into the heart of the American experience? *Quick, Zuckerberg, make me something new!* Even for a guy who talks faster than I think, it doesn't work that way. As it happens, staring at things and reminiscing about them—not at the top of anyone's list of useful activities—are the foundation of the creative process. How do you train for this? In *Humboldt's Gift*, Saul Bellow describes the following exercise: “Often I sat at the

end of the day remembering everything that had happened, in minute detail, all that had been seen and done and said. I was able to go backward through the day, viewing myself from the back or side.” In the stillness of day's end, Bellow's protagonist could stretch himself so tightly over slipped-by time that he could describe “the brass milling on the three silver-plated quarters” with which he'd bought a gardenia for his girl. “If this was what transcendence took, it was a cinch, I could do it forever, back to the beginning of time.”

Bellow cogitates on quarters; I, a little more humbly, linger over the bike lane until an Escalade almost turns me into just another piece of road art. Tomorrow I'll stare at the ripped stitching on an old baseball. Next week I will contemplate the age of a basalt boulder. These are the strange little timeless moments that keep the world alive to us—and full of possibility.

“How small the cosmos (a kangaroo's pouch would hold it),” Vladimir Nabokov writes in *Invitation of a Memory*, “how paltry and puny in comparison to human consciousness, to a single individual recollection, and its expression in words!” Then he invites us to a childhood summer in the country, when a strong mind could stretch time halfway to forever: “The day would take hours to fade, and everything—sky, tall flowers, still water—would be kept in a state of infinite vespereal suspense, deepened rather than resolved by the doleful moo of a cow in a distant meadow.”

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