

Slowness, Inclusion, and the Secular Sabbath

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In a world that requires us to speed up and do more, Ashley Taylor asks us to consider slowing down. In systems of higher education that demand ever-increasing forms of dubious productivity, Taylor asks us to craft our work more meaningfully and deliberately. In a society that leaves some behind because they cannot keep up with the frenetic pace, Taylor asks us to think about the fruitful pauses that inclusion can produce. Taylor asks, “If slowing down can generate deeper meaning, more careful questioning, and richer engagement with knowledge production, can being slow [because of disability] do this as well?”¹ The answer in her paper seems to clearly be, yes, it can. Making room for disability in our classrooms slows us down in fruitful ways, allowing us see ourselves and relationships in a new light.

Taylor looks to writers such as Kathy Hytten, Riyad A. Shahjahan, and Cara Furman to understand the value of slowness. Hytten argues, according to Taylor, that the frenetic pace of scholarship in higher education produces an “ontological insecurity,” causing academics to lose their grasp of the meaning of their work. Hytten argues for a different way of occupying time, working within communities to be more deliberative in the creation of meaning. Shahjahan, for his part, points to speed as a social and political problem: the increasing pace of societal activities renders suspect and “disabled” those who, for whatever reason, cannot keep up with the demands of a fast-paced society. Shahjahan asks us to be at peace with “not being productive,” and even to make room for idleness and laziness. Slowness is a political statement, then, a plea for

inclusion. Cara Furman, according to Taylor, focuses on the pace of teaching, and how speed and busyness corrupt the process of seeing and knowing the students who sit in our classrooms. She calls for “Stopping Time,” moments to listen and to understand how students are making sense of things.

Taylor’s contribution lies in describing some of the productive possibilities of including those with disabilities in mixed classrooms and connecting these possibilities to the slowness literature. She describes her own teaching efforts in an inclusive class that mixes students labelled with a disability with those who aren’t so labeled. Using her journal, she highlights some of benefits she sees in the type of slowness that this class produces. She notes, for example, that we often use words we do not understand in our frenetic classrooms, and slowing down gives us the time to define and conceptualize more clearly. She describes how non-labeled students have to think carefully about their own notions of productivity, reflecting on how these notions can sometimes play a role in excluding labelled students. She describes a different flow of conversation that, while perhaps less efficient in the traditional sense, allows new possibilities to emerge. The differences in the classroom introduce speed bumps, allowing the travelers in Taylor’s class to be more reflective and observant of the world passing by.

I agree with Taylor both about the benefits of slowness and about the benefits of the type of slowness produced by inclusion. I want to build on Taylor’s work by tying it to a different tradition: the religious notion of Sabbath-keeping. Theologian Walter Brueggemann reads Sabbath-keeping as an act of resistance against systems of productiveness and commodification.² His reading of Exodus 5 paints the Egyptian Pharaoh as a demanding taskmaster, a “hard-nosed production manager,” demanding more and more bricks with less and less straw.³ The

taskmaster's desire for wealth would not permit rest within the economic domain. The Sabbath is then instituted among the former Hebrew slaves as a day of rest, counteracting the demands of the production economy, a reminder that people are not reducible to what they contribute to wealth. "The Sabbath," he writes, "is an acknowledgement that ... people in the world are not commodities to be dispatched ... in service of the command economy."⁷⁴ We, like the Hebrew slaves, are caught in a world of "not enough" and of "greater effort required" – a desire for "an ultimate reality of total satiation that is no reality at all."⁷⁵ He continues, "Sabbath-keeping is a way of making a statement of peculiar identity amid a larger public identity, of maintaining and enacting a counter-identity that refuses 'mainstream' identity, which itself entails anti-human practice and the worship of anti-human gods."⁷⁶ As such, Sabbath is an act of resistance against the anxiety that comes with the insatiable demands of the market, the demands to work longer and harder to achieve market success. Moreover, Sabbath-keeping is an act of resistance against the coercive system of the market and the inequality the production and consumption produce: "In a social system [defined by production and consumption] everyone is coerced to perform better – produce more, consume more – be a good shopper! Such valuing, of course, produces 'haves' and 'have-nots,' significant and insignificant, rich and poor, people with access and people denied access."⁷⁷ An emphasis on productivity creates social dynamics of competition and inequality.

A key connection to Taylor's work comes as Brueggemann posits the Sabbath as a symbol of inclusiveness. He points to biblical passages where Sabbath keeping is a criterion – sometimes the only criterion – of group identity and membership. The community is to be open to foreigners and eunuchs, for example, but the condition is that they keep the Sabbath. Why would that be so? Brueggemann writes, "This is because Sabbath represents a radical disengagement from the producer-consumer rat race

of the empire. The community welcomes members of any race or nation, any gender or social condition, so long as the person is defined by justice, mercy, and compassion, not competition, achievement, production, and acquisition.”⁸ Sabbath keeping, then, is a way to recognize human dignity beyond market competition, and recognition of this dignity becomes the criterion for community inclusion.

I bring this up not because I think we should impose Sabbath keeping; rather, Brueggemann’s work highlights the link between rest and slowness, inclusiveness and equality. Taylor’s argument is that inclusion can create a type of productive slowness in education, where norms of speed, productivity, pacing, and deadlines can all be challenged. We might also want to approach the issue from the other end, as Brueggemann does, and think about how slowness creates the groundwork for inclusion. One way this happens we have already seen. A society focused on speed and productivity tends to marginalize those who cannot “keep up.” Slowness reaffirms the value and dignity of such individuals.

This seems true, as far as it goes. But how else might this happen? First, I think slowness allows for a peace of mind, an environment less filled with anxiety, stress, and even dread. An environment of this sort has an effect on human relationships. Racing the clock, one has little time to look around, to notice the world, to form meaningful relationships. Oscar Wilde wrote in his essay, “The Decay of Lying,” that “to look at a thing is very different from seeing a thing. One does not see anything until one sees its beauty. Then, and then only, does it come into existence.”⁹ Slowness allows us to move beyond seeing to looking, and looking leads to appreciation, and appreciation leads to inclusion. Second, an emphasis on productivity leads to status inequality and competition, working against human relationships. People, after all, have different gifts and talents, and will produce at different levels. In a society that values productivity,

therefore, individuals themselves will be valued differently. When we give up on the drive of productivity, we achieve a new way of understanding one another, not on terms what they produce, but in terms of who they are. Third, slowness creates its own set of virtues, which tend to connect people. Here, I am thinking of virtues that are more reflective than active, virtues like remembrance and gratitude. These are the sort of virtues that only arise when one has time to think, to consider the place of one's life in the world and how one has loved and been loved. They demand slowness. Taylor, in the end, is on to something important: inclusion can create a productive slowness. At the same time, we might want to consider the converse: the slowness that can create inclusion.

One last question concerns where notions of human striving and effort fit into this picture. Surely, while we value slowness, we should also value effortful human activity – human beings being driven by what William James calls the “strenuous mood.”¹⁰ This is where the ancient Sabbath traditions might inform modern thinking about slowness. In those traditions, rest and slowness exist in a rhythm with work, productivity, and the strenuous mood. Perhaps, in the end, this rhythm is the best of both worlds: human striving, but held in check by moments of reflectiveness, opening space to question the meaning of what we are striving for. It seems to me that Taylor's class exemplifies this rhythm, a rhythm between slowness and effort, between reflection and the strenuous mood.

1 Ashley Taylor, “Slow(ed): Lessons on Slowness within Projects of Inclusivity,” *Philosophy of Education* (2019).

2 Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017).

3 Ibid., 3.

4 Ibid., 6.

5 Ibid., 13.

6 Ibid., 21.

7 Ibid., 40.

8 Ibid., 54-55.

9 Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying," <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/wilde/decay.html>.

10 William James, *The Writings of William James*, ed. J. McDermott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 627.