

The benefits of S-I-O-W

by Richard Fowler

A song is playing right now in Germany. In stark contrast to our fast-paced way of life, this piece of music is expected to have a duration of 639 years!

Entitled “As slow as possible”, fans of this musical adagio on steroids flocked on 5 September 2020 to the



This organ tucked away in St Burchardi Abbey Church, Halberstadt, Germany, is in the process of playing John Cage’s “As slow as possible,” a piece of music that will last for 639 years if played continuously.

small church where it’s being played to witness its first chord change in seven years. Starting 19 years ago, this is the world’s longest and slowest piece of music. If you’re interested in the next chord change, it will sound on 5 February 2022.

In our instant, short-attention, hyper-information world, this song reminds us we can still go slow in such fanaticism. And maybe this is for the better.

This year most of us have experienced the forced blessing of having to slow down: the pandemic made sure of that. The results? More time to think, more time with family, more time to look and listen. More emotional availability for others. And for some, even a time to re-evaluate their lives. I am trying to hold on to the new-found art of slow. It’s an art that I think, if practised more, would be an antidote to an increasingly common problem.

One of the realities of an instant world, made possible by technology, is our immediate consumption of real-world, real-time videos, tweets, and news about events that have happened hours, sometimes even minutes ago. We have a sense of omnipotence, a god-like feeling that comes with knowing immediately what is happening on the other side of the world. I like, and even make an effort, to be well-informed. But this instant information, much of it short, diluted snippets, encourages us to be quick to judge.

Recently, due to the ubiquitous phone camera, we have been transported into the chaos of controversial deaths, arrest, protests, riots, and non-social distancing events in the UK, the US, and Australia. In so many cases we become the public jury, the armchair arbiters, to such events. But often our judgments—our outrage—becomes part of the problem.

And if we are honest with ourselves, we seldom have the facts that tell us the true nature and picture of an incident consumed only through the lens of a phone. The consequence is that the narrative of a situation becomes more influential than the facts (facts are by nature time-honoured). This immediate judgment, often being acted upon in the form of public outrage, tweeter rants, Facebook feuds, and even protests and riots, is putting strain on community cohesion.

In such an instant-viewing world, it is good from time to time to remember to tame our judgment, slowing it down enough for the facts to emerge. As the biblical wisdom puts it: “My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry”.¹

Like the slowest song in the world, holding off changing our tune may help our relationships.

NOTES

¹ James 1:19 (New International Version)