

## Slowing Down and Simplifying Life

One of the problems with our modern age is that we are driven to do more and more. We are faced with new technologies that make it possible to speed things up driving us to a faster and faster pace in our life. Each week there is a new gadget or software that is presented to us to make our life easier or more productive. Look at how the internet and the use of cell phones have changed our lives. These new technologies do have benefits, but they also speed life up so that we don't have sufficient time to think about and act on what is really important for our salvation. We become like robots moving through a web of activities deprived of time for what is essential to nourish our soul and to cultivate our spiritual growth. In this mad rush we forget that our aim in this life is to seek union with God. We forget that we all face certain death and at that time we will find out if we have passed the test of the course of life with the confidence in our intimate knowledge of God so we will be accepted into His kingdom when that fateful time comes.

In the Orthodox way of life guides you toward an orderly and purposeful life, where you are carefully making choices about every action you take. When you are rushing to get everything done, you easily fall into sinful traps. You are more prone to get angry and forget to help others as you move through a busy day. Your mind becomes cluttered with all the things you must do, as well as concerns about those you did not do with the kind of attention or quality that you would have liked.

There are many causes of an obsession with being busy. One is cell phones. The Blackberry has a nickname of "Crackberry," referring to the highly addictive form of cocaine. Text messaging has descended on us like a plague. You see everywhere people doing one task and at the same time, with their heads down looking intently at the Blackberry or cell phone, entering a new text message. They are distracted by this endeavor and not fully engaged or focused on their primary task at hand. Recently we heard of a Los Angeles Metrolink train crash that killed 25 and injured 135 people, where the engineer in charge of the train was known to be text messaging only moments before the crash.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently cell phones were banned in use during work for all train workers. Cell phone addiction, combined with the internet<sup>2</sup>, leads us to multitasking continuously. There is a new clinical disorder for internet addiction. The internet itself provide us with constant distraction with emails coming in regularly even sounding alarms so we can interrupt what we are doing to read it and check it. We can program alarms for changes in the stock market or news releases on topics we are following. Our life is hard to keep focused with so much information being thrust at us with our wired(wireless) world. We drive and talk and we eat and watch television. We are incapable of concentrating on just one thing. Our gadgets seem to be in control.

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<sup>1</sup> Fox News, Sept 14th, 2008

<sup>2</sup> There is a new clinical disorder for internet addiction. "INTERNET ADDICTION: THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW CLINICAL DISORDER" by Kimberly S. Young, University of Pittsburgh at Bradford, CyberPsychology and Behavior, Vol. 1 No. 3., pages 237-244

We seem helpless to reach for the off button and even when we find it we are resistant to turn it off.

There is a classic movie, "Modern Times", that was filmed in 1936 featuring Charlie Chaplin. In one of the scenes, Chaplin portrays a harried line worker where the company continually speeds up the line. As he adapts to this speed he becomes "crazy" and robot like, not able to stop the fast paced motions required to tighten the bolts on the production line. He ends up in the hospital with a nervous breakdown. Like the character in this film made over 70 years ago, we continue to face a speed up in our lives. Now it is driven by electronic gadgets such as cell phones and computers. Every employer is always asking for more from us, our families demand more time, our children are more programmed and busy with numerous extracurricular activities. We find ourselves becoming robot like, much like Chaplin's character, speeding through our life without clear aim. Unless we take charge of our lives and begin to make our own choices about what we do based on our values, we will not be able to walk the life Christ asks us to follow.

Slowing down and simplifying life is about organizing your life so you can slow down enough allowing you to make conscious value based choices along your pathway through each day. It means learning to exercise your true freedom as a human being, one of the most important gifts from God. God gave you a free will with the power to choose to separate yourself from a frantic lifestyle and chose one that is more aligned with your highest spiritual values. He expects you to do so. But you need to slow down to be able to make these choices.

Jesus constantly warns against having anxiety about material things, even food and clothing. God knows and provides everything you need, but most likely you have taken your needs and exaggerated them beyond what are your basic necessities. To follow Jesus, He asks you to abandon your possessions, your priority on things of this created world, and take on a simpler lifestyle focused on God where you are not encumbered with excessive demands to accumulate material things. The key is a balance. Plato and Aristotle taught mankind, hundreds of years before Christ, that the ideal is a golden mean, which implies a path through life that is neither burdened with excess nor with deprivation. By slowing down or simplifying our life we are not talking about being less productive, nor rejecting the whole of this material world, but about being more effective, balanced, and doing what we do with much greater care, which includes the exercise of the moral imperatives that God has laid down for us.

Being responsible to our environment is also part of a slower and simple lifestyle. The Creation story in the Bible tells us that all of Creation belongs to God and that He entrusted it to us making you one of His stewards. We also know that He will hold you accountable when the Judgment Day comes for how you have used the resources you were given and how you enhanced them.

But, God expects even more of us. It is through human actions that nature acquires its sacredness. We are all priests of creation. The material world is not merely something

to be used for our pleasure and happiness, but it is a sacred gift from God that is given to you to promote communion with Him and others. We have to realize that our natural resources are not unlimited. Creation is finite and like all creation it will come to an end. It is expected that you will use all things created carefully for the benefit of God, so all your needs can be met, along with those of all your neighbors. You are not called to simply be a consumer, but you are asked to use everything with care, enhancing its quality and even sanctifying it. You must use no more than is necessary and use what you do take with a sense of sacredness, transforming what is a material item into one that becomes sacred.<sup>3</sup>

Father Chryssaavgis<sup>4</sup> tells us that our experience of the world is a sacrament. If you slow down you can appreciate the Divine Presence in all created things. From an Orthodox perspective, material creation is not considered to be sacred, but a sign of God's will, providence and purpose. The role you play is to bring a sacredness to all of material creation through the way you use what has been created for the will of God and not simply for your mindless pleasure. You are expected to bring the world into a relationship with God, to protect it from the certainty of its finite nature. It is only in this way that God's creation is transformed into something better. In effect you are called to uplift nature and not simply preserve it. This implies a task that is even greater than being a good steward. God asks you to transform what has been given to you, not in a material sense, but in a spiritual one by making everything in your life sacred through your actions.

John Chrysostom writes,

*Look at the world around you. It supplies all your bodily needs. It feasts your eyes with its beauty. And its glory reflects the glory of God, so it feasts your soul also. Look at the plants and the trees. Can you count all the different species? Can you describe all the different shapes of the leaves, the color and fragrances of the flowers? Look, too, at the animals and the insects. Are you not enthralled by their different sizes and shapes, by the different colors and textures of their skin and fur, by the different ways in which they move about and gather food? And the wonder why God has created all this. Has he created the marvelous universe just to supply our needs and to feast our eyes and souls? or is there some other purpose in it all? The answer is that he has created all things--for their own sake. Each creature has its own purpose and destiny, which God in his infinite wisdom and love has planned. Do not try to understand God's plans; the human mind is hardly better than that of an ant in discerning the ways of God. Simply accept all his plans and rejoice in them.*<sup>5</sup>

As you become aware of the awesome responsibility God has give you, you will become more concerned about how you use God's created resources. You will begin to seek ways to make minimal use of all natural resources. You will want to seek out

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<sup>3</sup> Metropolitan John (Zisioulas) of Pergamon

<sup>4</sup> Chryssaavgis, *Shattered Image*

<sup>5</sup> Chrysostom, pg 54, *On Living Simply*

lifestyle choices that enable you to show your appreciation for the created world and your desire to bring it closer to God. As you do so you, too, become closer to God. You recall that your aim is to lay treasures up in heaven rather than to amass material wealth here on earth. It is these heavenly treasures that bring you closer to union with God.

John Chrysostom<sup>6</sup> gives us good advice from the 4th century.

*Some people see the houses in which they live as their kingdom; and although in their minds they know that death will one day force them to leave, in their hearts they feel they will stay forever. They take pride in the size of their houses and the fine material with which they are built. They take pleasure in decorating their houses with bright colors, and in obtaining the best and most solid furniture to fill the rooms. They imagine that they can find peace and security by owning a house whose walls and roof will last for many generations. We, by contrast, know that we are only temporary guests on earth. We recognize that the houses in which we live serve only as hostels on the road to eternal life. We do not seek peace or security from the material walls around us or the roof above our heads. Rather we want to surround ourselves with a wall of divine grace; and we look upward to heaven as our roof. And the furniture of our lives should be good works, performed in a spirit of love.<sup>7</sup>*

*A person who owns nothing - or, more precisely, who desires to own nothing, and regards nothing as a personal possession - in spirit owns everything. He can look at a beautiful valley, regardless of who the legal owner is, and rejoice in its beauty. He can look at any fine building, and marvel at the artistry in its construction. He can use any tool that someone lends him, and admire the skill with which it is designed. The man who owns much and is concerned only with the things he owns--in spirit owns nothing. He cannot admire the beauty of any part of God's creation unless he is the legal owner. He cannot rejoice in the artistry of any building unless it belongs to him. Beauty and artistry belonging to other people simply evoke jealousy and envy in his breast. And even the things which he does own cause him no lasting pleasure, because as soon as he has acquired one thing, he is calculating how he can acquire another. Those who are poor are the truly rich; those who are rich are the truly poor.<sup>8</sup>*

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<sup>6</sup> John Chrysostom (347-407), Archbishop of Constantinople, was a notable Christian bishop and preacher from the fourth and fifth centuries in Syria and Constantinople. He is famous for eloquence in public speaking and his denunciation of abuse of authority in the Church and in the Roman Empire of the time. After his death he was named Chrysostom, which comes from the Greek Χρυσόστομος, "golden-mouthed."

<sup>7</sup> Chrysostom, *On Living Simply*, pg 11

<sup>8</sup> Chrysostom, *On Living Simply*, pg 37

## How to Slow Down and Simplify Your Life

There are many ways you can slow down and simplify your life. To start the process, you can begin by getting up early (This means you also need to go to bed early). As Ben Franklin said, “*Early to bed and early to rise makes one healthy, wealthy and wise.*”<sup>9</sup> When you get up in the morning your first activity should be prayer. At least thirty minutes is desirable<sup>10</sup>. This includes not only prayers of thanksgiving, but also prayers of repentance and intercessory prayers. You also should include the practice of the Jesus Prayer at this time. After prayer and when you have taken care of all your personal hygiene needs, you should plan time for your other responsibilities such as getting the kids ready for school. You should allow time for a leisure breakfast. Do not grab and run and eat in the car. Help others in your household get off to a peaceful start of the day. You do not want to start the day being pressured by time. Remember, harried people create harried people and calm people create calm people. If you don’t start the day with calmness there is not much chance that the rest of the day will be calm. Take time to enjoy the beauty of God’s creation each morning by observing the sunrise, the morning dew and the singing of the birds. All this depends on making sufficient time for these activities in the morning.

The easiest way to find this time is to examine the you time spend with the different forms of media such a television, internet or now the phone. Most likely, television is the biggest culprit. Give up just one of your programs and you will automatically have an extra hour to start the day off on the right foot. Media usage places a huge burden on all our lives. Recent survey by Nielsen Media Research shows that the average person spends more time than ever in front of the TV, over 133 hours a month.<sup>11</sup> In addition we spend on the average another 26 hours using the internet. Both of these have shown significant increases over the prior year. Now the phone is connected to the internet and we can even spend another 3 hours watching video and TV on the phone. The mobile phone is becoming a significant use of our time as well as being an instrument that diverts and scatters our attention. Other studies show that we spend over 70 hours each week on media related outlets. So this is the prime area to look to reallocate your use of time so you can make time to be with friends, to help others in need, or to make time for your daily prayer, attend worship services and most importantly to get a calm start each day.

At work learn to manage your priorities based on your Christian values and do not over commit. Learn how to say no as well as yes. You are not a limitless machine. You need to find the right balance so that God is not a foreigner to you throughout the day. Make your workplace one that reminds you of your spiritual task. Place icons in your work station as reminders. Create a clean and uncluttered work environment. Most

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<sup>9</sup> Benjamin Franklin in *Poor Richard's Almanack*. This is also part of a monastic life style.

<sup>10</sup> Follow the direction of your spiritual father

<sup>11</sup> To obtain a full copy of Nielsen’s Three Screen Report, go to [http://www.nielsen.com/pdf/3\\_Screen\\_Report\\_May08\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.nielsen.com/pdf/3_Screen_Report_May08_FINAL.pdf). These figures will be updated quarterly and available to the public at [www.nielsen.com](http://www.nielsen.com).

importantly learn to focus your mind to concentrate on all your activities. As you learn to focus on what is really important to your employer as well as your spiritual well being, the quality of your work will increase and you will find joy and happiness in doing your tasks no matter how simple or complex they may be.

It is not wise to bring your work home. Work should be like a jacket that you wear when you go outside, but you take it off when you come back in and hang it in the closet. Do the same with your work. Put the briefcase and cell phone in the closet. Don't run to the computer to check email or surf the internet. While at home you want to focus on your family. Listen to your spouse and your children. Try to see into their world and enjoy their joys and empathize with their trials and tribulations of the day. Become a valued support for their struggles. This return home should be capped with a meal together. Don't let meal time become an ad hoc event where members of the family take their food and run to their own enclave to eat. Don't let other commitments interfere with your mealtime schedule. Mealtime is the best time for sharing in fellowship. Just like we all come together as a Christian community for the Divine Liturgy for a sacred meal, you too need to come together as a family in union with those who you love to share in the most basic need we have, food to nourish our bodies, to transform it into a sacred activity through our love for each other. At each meal offer a prayer of thanks for the food that is about to be eaten, for the joy you experience as a family, for forgiveness for the sins that have been committed that day, and for a blessing that the food will nourish us both physically and spiritually.

Hurriedness leads to unnecessary stress and wasted energy. When you are hurried you will not find satisfaction. One way to overcome hurriedness is to drive slower. This does not mean to drive slower than the speed limit, but to have patience and not to get frustrated when the person in front of you slows down, or when someone cuts in front of you. Don't let the inevitable traffic jam or unwanted red traffic light cause you any disturbance. Don't rush through the yellow light to make it through while the opposing traffic is just about to start up. Don't try and weave in and out of traffic to get ahead to save a few seconds. Learn to be courteous when driving and to give others the right of way and to say small prayers for those who are harried and hurried. Teach yourself patience. Our need to get there fast comes from our failure to allow enough time or our compulsion to speed, giving us an unrealistic sense of urgency that carries with us when we get out of the car. Apply this idea to other activities in your life.

Another time to practice overcoming this disease of hurriedness is when you are waiting in line. Have patience when you are waiting in line at the bank, for a drivers license renewal or at the checkout line at the grocery store. Don't fret that you picked the wrong line. Smile and watch the people around you. Pray that the Lord will have mercy on them. If you are hurried you will be bothered and harried. You will appear tense, think negative thoughts, and even say negative things to those around you. Who hasn't heaped a pile of blame on the postal clerk at holiday time? If you relax by repeating the Jesus Prayer silently to yourself, you will be gracious, carry a smile with you, and be able to share your love with others in line who may also feel harried and act like they

are in a hurry. You can bring comfort and calmness to them by expressing your love through your patience.

There is no magic formula to slowing down and simplifying your life. The possibilities are endless. Start by clarifying your priority values. Then make a list of all your activities. Record them over a week's time. Take time to reflect on what you have recorded and which ones fit with your priorities. Think about what you can eliminate to put a different priority in place in your life. Begin to consciously reengineer your pattern of life. Experiment with ways to slow down and simplify and you will find yourself coming closer to God in your daily activities. Through your prayers seek God's help in this task.

Final thoughts from saint John Chrysostom.

*The test of a good society is that the great majority are engaged in the basic arts, and only a few in the arts of luxury. When large numbers are engaged in producing luxuries for the rich, that society has become corrupt.<sup>12</sup>*

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<sup>12</sup> Chrysostom, p 36, *On Living Simply*