Go Slow

By Carl Honore

What is *In Praise of Slow* about?

It’s about how the world got stuck in fast-forward and how more and more people everywhere are slowing down. In other words, it’s about the rise of the Slow Movement. *In Praise of Slow* is published in 30 languages and has been a bestseller in many countries. In October 2009, it was the inaugural selection for the new Huffington Post book club.

What is the Slow Movement?

It is a cultural revolution against the notion that faster is always better. The Slow philosophy is not about doing everything at a snail’s pace. 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.

When was this Slow idea born?

People have been defending the value of slowness for at least 200 years - think of the Romantics, or the Transcendentalists or even the hippies. But the idea of a Slow Movement which seeks to blend fast and slow to help people work, live and play better in the modern world is more recent. Born in Italy in the early 1990s the ****Slow Food movement helped recapture the word slow’ as something positive. But they concentrate on food. More recently Slow has become a universal label to explain the benefits of doing everything at the right speed: sex, work, education, exercise, etc.

Why do we need a Slow Movement now?

It seems to me that we are moving towards an historical turning point. For at least 150 years everything has been getting faster and for the most part speed was doing us more good than harm in that time. But in recent years we’ve entered the phase of diminishing returns. Today we are addicted to speed, to cramming more and more into every minute. Every moment of the day feels like a race against the clock, a dash to a finish line that we never seem to reach. This roadrunner culture is taking a toll on everything from our health, diet and work to our communities, relationships and the environment. That is why the Slow Movement is taking off.

Have we reached the point of trying to accelerate the unacceleratable?
Definitely. You can even do courses in Speed Yoga or Speed Meditation these days. All this technology connects us in ways that can be wonderful but it also tempts us into trying to hurry up relationships too. So on Facebook or MySpace you find people claiming to have 4,356 friends! The very idea of friendship is devalued. And maybe we’re also losing the ability to make friends: in Britain, a major survey found that between 1986 and 2006 the number of teenagers who say they have no best friend in whom to confide rose from under one in eight to nearly one in five. Or consider the phenomenon of Speed Dating, where singles gather at events where they get three minutes (sometimes less) each with 30 members of the opposite sex and have to choose who might be a suitable romantic partner. Actually, I read recently that in the latest version of Speed Dating the participants no longer even meet face to face (that’s too slow, you see). Instead, they get three minutes to appraise each other via email or instant messaging. A magazine in Britain even published an article recently on how to bring about an orgasm in 30 seconds! So even in the bedroom it’s On your marks, get set, go! Our speedaholism is out of control, and we all know it.

What are the tell-tale symptoms of living too fast?

When you feel tired all the time and like you’re just going through the motions, getting through the many things on your To-Do list but not engaging with them deeply or enjoying them very much. You don’t remember things as vividly when you rush through them. You feel like you’re racing through your life instead of actually living it. Illnesses are often the body’s way of saying Enough already, slow down!

What inspired you to write In Praise of Slow?

My life had become an endless race against the clock. I was always in a hurry, scrambling to save a minute here, a few seconds there. My wake-up call came when I found myself toying with the idea of buying a collection of One-Minute Bedtime Stories Snow White in 60 seconds. Suddenly it hit me: my rushaholism has got so out of hand that I’m even willing to speed up those precious moments with my children at the end of the day. There has to be a better way, I thought, because living in fast forward is not really living at all. That’s why I began investigating the possibility of slowing down.

How has the Slow Movement grown since In Praise of Slow was published?

In leaps and bounds. Everywhere people are waking up to the folly of living in fast-forward and discovering that by slowing down judiciously they do everything better and enjoy everything more. When I first began researching my book, the search term slow movement turned up almost nothing. There was Slow Food but that was it. Today you get nearly 500,000 entries on Google under slow movement. And it’s not just yoga teachers and aromatherapists flying the flag of Slow; it’s business too. The corporate world is starting to realize that too much speed and hurry hurts the bottom line. A senior manager at IBM has even launched a slow email movement, urging people to unplug and make the most of email (and life) by using email less. And that’s IBM, not a meditation school. Many companies are waking up to the fact that staff are more productive and creative when they can shift down a gear or two during the workday that’s why you see a boom in chill-out rooms, on-site yoga and massage, and even napping pods in the
workplace. The latest neuroscience shows that when people are in a relaxed, mellow state, the brain slips into a deeper, richer, more nuanced mode of thought. Psychologists actually call this Slow Thinking. Artists have always known that you cannot hurry the act of creation and increasingly businesses are realizing the same thing: that workers need moments to relax, unplug, be silent in order to be creative and productive.

**Productivity is one thing, but what about pleasure?**

Pleasure is certainly a big gain from slowing down. Mae West once said that “Anything worth doing is worth doing slowly” and though she was probably talking about sex (did she ever talk about anything else?) it’s an observation that holds true across the board. We are obsessed with the destination and have lost the art of enjoying the journey. Everything has to be instant so we miss out on the joy of anticipation, of looking forward to things. We lose the pleasure of striving to make something happen. I think that anticipation is a key ingredient in pleasure of any kind. When we look forward to something, imagining how it will be, planning how to enjoy it, getting a little nervous maybe - when the thing actually happens the pleasure is more intense.

**Does that mean the Slow Movement is anti-speed?**

No, absolutely not. I love speed. I like my Internet connection to be fast and I play two of the fastest sports around, ice-hockey and squash, in my spare time. I live in London, which is a city of volcanic energy, and I enjoy working to deadlines. Speed has its place in the modern world. Often you have to move quickly, particularly at work. The problem is that speed has become a way of life. We do everything in a rush. We are stuck in fast forward and that is unhealthy.

**What is the Slow take on multitasking?**

That it’s usually a poor use of time. The latest neuro-scientific research suggests what most of us already suspect: that the human brain is not very good at multitasking. Sure there are a few simple or routine tasks we can perform at the same time, but as soon as you have to engage the brain, you really need to focus on one activity at a time. Much of what passes for multitasking is nothing of the sort: it is sequential toggling between activities. And the research suggests that this flitting back and forth is actually very unproductive: tasks can take more than twice as long to complete when performed in this way. That’s why that history essay takes your teenage daughter (with her IMs, cellphone, MySpace page, TV monitor, etc) three hours to write instead of 90 minutes. Hewlett Packard recently warned that the constant barrage of electronic interruptions causes IQ levels in the workplace to fall 10 points double the effect of smoking marijuana. In other words, being always on does not turn you into an uber-productive master of the universe; it turns you into Cheech and Chong or Ozzy Osbourne. Changing attitudes is hard because our culture is marinated in the notion that doing more things at once is somehow deeply modern, efficient and fulfilling. But change is possible. Once people understand the limits of the human brain, it should become easier to kick the multitasking habit. Some companies are starting to encourage staff to focus on one activity at a time and wall themselves off from the barrage of electronic interruptions whenever possible. This will take time because most of us are adrenaline-junkies. We need to wean ourselves off multitasking slowly. That means starting with maybe an hour a day focusing on a challenging intellectual task with the gadgets switched off.
Or setting aside an afternoon when you perform every task in sequence rather than in overlapping fashion and then seeing how much more quickly and accurately you get your work done. I multi-task a lot less now and find that I am a lot more creative and efficient and I enjoy my life more because I’m more deeply engaged with everything I do.

**How do Oriental disciplines like Chi Kung, yoga and meditation fit into the Slow revolution?**

They are completely in harmony with it. They teach us how to be comfortable with slowness. They retrain our bodies and minds and help shift us into a lower gear. This brings obvious physical benefits such as greater flexibility, strength and balance. But it also goes deeper than that. It can cultivate an inner calm that you take with you into the more hectic moments of the day - so that you keep your head while all around you are losing theirs. By slowing us down, these Oriental practices also give more depth and meaning to our lives. One of the key benefits of deaccelerating is that it gives us the time and tranquility to look inside ourselves, to listen to our hearts, to get in touch with our souls, to ask the big questions in life.

**Which parts of the Slow revolution do you find most fascinating?**

That is a hard question because I find them all fascinating! The Slow philosophy is making inroads into every walk of life. There are movements for Slow Homes, Slow Management, Slow Leadership, Slow Libraries, Slow Research, Slow Sex, you name it. Lately I have been paying a lot of attention to the rise of Slow Travel. The fast approach to travel and tourism is taking a heavy toll. The environmental damage caused by our penchant for air travel is well documented, but it is just the start. When we travel in roadrunner mode, we miss the small details that make each place thrilling and unique. We lose the joy of the journey. And at the end of it all, when every box on our To Do list has been checked, we return home even more exhausted than when we left. That is why Slow Travel is gaining ground.

Slow Travel is about savouring the journey (traveling by train or barge or bicycle or foot rather than crammed into an airplane); taking time to engage and learn about the local culture; finding moments to switch off and relax; showing an interest in the effect our visit has on the locals and on the environment. Obviously we don’t live in an ideal world so sometimes we have to travel faster than we want or should. But at least we should seek wherever possible to take a Slow approach to travel. It will deliver more pleasure, stronger memories and more sustainability.

I am also very interested in the idea of Slow Design making products in a sustainable way, with high-calibre materials and real craftsmanship. The consumer culture has been producing cheap, disposable crap for so long. I think the next stage for capitalism will be for us to consume fewer things of higher quality.

**As a globetrotting writer and commentator, do you manage to stay Slow?**

Yes, I do. It’s not easy, and it takes lots of discipline, but it is possible. One can be Slow in any profession (though some are clearly harder than others) because being Slow is essentially a state of mind. My life is still busy but not TOO busy. I have definitely changed - there is for me a very
clear Before and After. Before I was always trying to do more and more things in less and less time. It was all about speed and quantity. Now I approach each thing seeking to do it as well as possible instead of as fast as possible. This has made a big change in the way I feel about time: I no longer feel a slave to it. I feel like I have enough time for things and I don’t very often feel rushed (even though I have an exciting, full life). This is not a paradox. It’s about finding the right equilibrium and not being obsessively neurotic about time. My first step was realizing that I had got stuck in fast-forward, and that too much speed was doing me damage. Then I began making concrete changes. I cut back on the things I was trying to cram into my schedule to allow more time to rest and to devote to the things that are more important to me. So I dropped one sport (tennis) and reduced my TV-watching to a few hours a week, instead of a few hours a day. I also stopped wearing a watch, which seemed to make me less neurotic about time. I take breaks during the work day to relax, eat and do a bit of meditation. And I switch off my technology (email, cellphone, etc) whenever possible, instead of being always connected. I have learned to say “No” to things - work, social offers, etc - to avoid getting over-scheduled. This is especially important in my work. I get lots and lots of offers to write, speak, consult and it is tempting to do them all, but if I did I would become the opposite of what I’m preaching. So I choose the jobs that I think are the most important in order to keep a balance in my life.

How do other people react when someone slows down?

No man is an island and when we start slowing down we have to take account of the impact on people around us. That involves warning friends and colleagues, explaining why your are going to do less, unplug your technology more, and ask for more time for work assignments. I was afraid at first that this was going to alienate people, and initially some were skeptical. But very soon people began to understand that they could no longer reach me 24 hours a day; that I wasn’t going to say Yes to every social and work offer; that I might like a bit more time for a job. What I found is that people around me, after a time of watching me slow down, began to implement similar changes in their own lives.

How do the principles of Slow apply to children and how do you raise your own kids?

I think children need slowness even more than adults do. It’s in those moments of quiet, of unstructured time, of boredom even, that kids learn how to look into themselves, how to think and be creative, how to socialize. We are doing a great disservice to our children by pushing them so hard to learn things earlier and earlier and by keeping them so busy. They need time and space to slow down, to play, to be children. Across the world, parents, politicians, adults in general are so anxious about children nowadays that we have become too interventionist and too impatient; we don’t allow them enough freedom. My wife and I give our children lots of time to play on their own. We resist the temptation to enroll them in too many extracurricular activities. We limit the time they spend sitting in front of computer screens and using technology, so that they run around outdoors and invent their own play. We also don’t try to push them to learn academic things before they are ready. And so far the results have been good. I hope it continues!

Can everyone benefit from the Slow revolution?
Yes, slowing down is not just a luxury for the rich. It is, in essence, a mindset. Most of the things that make up a Slow life are available to most people. People on lower incomes can cook simple meals at home and eat them at the table with the TV switched off; they can choose to use their technology in a more balanced way; they can resist the temptation to speed-read bedtime stories to their children; they can avoid over-packing their social schedules by saying No to some things; they don’t have to over-schedule their children with activities; they don’t have too drive fast; and so on.

But doesn’t slowing down have to mean working less and therefore earning less money?

Not necessarily. I probably work the same number of hours as before; I just work them more slowly. And unless you are living in abject poverty, working/earning less is maybe easier than we think. I was at Malpensa airport in Milan the other day and the man sweeping the floors was talking constantly for at least an hour - on his mobile phone. That costs money. It seems that even for people on lower incomes there can be ways to cut back on consumption and spending. That said, however, I accept that there are some people for example single mothers juggling two jobs - who will find it hard to cut back. But that does not mean the Slow movement is elitist. Every social revolution starts in the middle classes, after all, and then spreads throughout the rest of society.

Does the Slow Movement appeal to some social groups more than to others?

I’m always amazed and delighted by the way the Slow philosophy resonates right across the social spectrum. The virus of hurry has infected every corner of our culture and we are all desperate for a cure. I think the way In Praise of Slow has filtered into the most unusual places speaks volumes. It has been translated into 30 languages and been a bestseller all over the place, from North America to Britain, Spain, Italy and Holland to Argentina, Paraguay, Sweden and Taiwan. I know of many clergy (Protestant, Muslim and Catholic) who have quoted from the book in their sermons around the world. It is touted by yoga teachers, Tantric sex instructors and practitioners of alternative medicine. It was chosen as a book of the year by a number of business magazines and is now on reading lists given out by management consultants, life coaches and other business gurus. It was even placed inside the Big Brother (TV) house in Argentina to give the contestants something more to talk about than cellulite and Britney Spears. I hear from many schools around the world where children aged have been doing projects based on the book. I also hear from book clubs that have read In Praise of Slow.

What is the future of the Slow Movement?

The good news is that the Slow movement is growing fast! And as the world gets faster, the need for a counter-current of slowness will grow too. I feel more optimistic now than I did when In Praise of Slow first came out.

Is there a danger that the Slow Movement will get hijacked by the speed culture and become just another consumer fad?
There is a danger of that, clearly. But I think that the Slow Movement is strong enough now to resist that threat. And besides we need to slow down so badly that it is hard to imagine that people will suddenly give up on deceleration and move on to the next trend.

**Many companies are using the idea of Slow to sell their products now does that worry you?**

I have mixed feelings about this. On one hand, there is a danger that the Slow message will get diluted by companies using the term Slow for products that are not Slow at all. But I can’t see how we can stop this. The more optimistic view is that any ad that trumpets the values of Slow is a good thing. Buying and selling things is a part of the human experience and we live in a world where advertising is part of the cultural wallpaper. Most ads pump out a single message: There isn’t enough time to slow down, so hurry up and buy our product! The fact that so many ads now use a Slow aesthetic or message (think people sitting on beaches or doing yoga in the forest) shows how much the world is yearning for slowness. It also seems to me that every time a company runs an ad campaign based on the idea that slow equals pleasure and quality, the cultural tectonic plates shift a little further below the surface. It makes slowing down more appealing and permissible. Here are three recent examples Slow-inspired ad campaigns: Haagen Dazs discovered that it took 12 minutes from leaving the freezer for its ice cream to reach the perfect point of softness for eating. The company recently ran a campaign in Britain based on the joy of waiting for that perfect moment of ice cream pleasure. The ad campaign that launched the new Volkswagen Beetle in Japan used “Go Slow” (in English) as its slogan. Audi’s latest model is advertised as The slowest car we’ve ever built.

**But what do you say to people who claim that the world will inevitably go on speeding up and that a Slow revolution is pie in the sky?**

I say look at the history books. Take the rise of feminism. In the 60s, when feminists said the world was unjust and the moment for change had come, the mainstream reaction was: No, the world has always been this way. You can’t change it. Go back to the kitchen! But look at the world today. Obviously there is a long way to go to create a world of perfect gender equality, but a woman today could hardly imagine how severely life was limited for her grandmother. I look at my sister and my grandmother and marvel at the change in just two generations. And the green movement has followed a similar arc: it was dismissed as a plaything for hippies and tree-huggers thirty years ago but today is near the top of the political agenda. The message is that the world can change, if we want it to. For a cultural revolution to occur, you need three factors: the need for change; an awareness of the need for change; and people willing to put that change into practice. We now have all three factors in place for the Slow revolution to push on. I think the Slow movement is at the same point as feminism or green-ism was 30 or 40 years ago. We won’t change the world, or make it Slow, by next year. It will take time. The Slow revolution will be slow. But I believe it will happen.

**What will a Slow world look like?**

It will be a world that is healthy, happy and humane. But you have to realistic. I am no utopian. I am a skeptic by nature. I don’t believe we will ever create a world where everyone does
everything at the right speed and no one ever feels rushed. That’s just a fantasy. The world is too complex and interconnected for that. It’s impossible in a world where we have to interact with others. Impatience is also part of being human. I suspect even the Dalai Lama rushes unnecessarily sometimes! Hell, even I forget to slow down from time to time I face a barrage of requests to give speeches, do interviews, etc from all over the world every day and it’s hard not to get caught up in the frenzy. But at least our starting point should be to seek the tempo giusto and to expect others to do so too.

**What do you hope readers will take away from In Praise of Slow?**

I hope that they will pause and reflect on how they lead their lives and how their lives affect the people and the world around them. I guess what I really want is for readers to grasp the very counter-cultural idea that the best way to survive and thrive in the fast-paced modern world is not to speed up but to slow down. And it seems to be working. Every day I open up my inbox and find a few emails from readers around the world who say the book has changed their lives. It’s exciting, and humbling.