

Slow Down

by Susan Olson

*Slow down, you move too fast
You got to make the morning last
Just kicking down the cobblestones
Looking for fun and feeling groovy.*

Do you remember Simon and Garfunkel's "The 59th Street Bridge Song (Feeling Groovy)?" I first heard it soon after I moved to Georgia in the mid-60's. A transplanted Yankee, I was working hard to adapt to the South, make new friends, and prepare for the birth of my first child. And so I hurried to join clubs, set up a household, find a good doctor—all those "nesting" activities that are an integral part of the morning of life. I don't remember sitting still and reading a book (except possibly Dr. Spock), or reflecting much on what I was doing. The notion of becoming a Jungian analyst was not even a gleam in my eye. Looking for fun and feeling groovy would have been a good idea, but I didn't have much time for it.

Fast-forward forty-plus years. My first-born is now a grown man with work and a family of his own. Recently his oldest daughter was in a high school production of "The Pajama Game," a 1950's musical which I remember enjoying when I was in high school. Of course my husband and I went to see it, and the words of the old songs came right back to me. One of the characters is a "time-study man" whose job it is to urge the factory workers on to faster and faster production of pajamas. As he looks at his watch and eggs them on, they sing:

*Hurry up, hurry up
Can't waste time, can't waste time
When you're racing with the clock
When you're racing with the clock
And the second hand doesn't understand
That your back might break and your fingers ache
And your constitution isn't made of rock,
It's a losing race when you're racing with the
Racing racing racing with the clock!*

Hurry up... slow down. Hurry up... slow down. We live in that tension, as our conflicting needs for activity and relaxation, work and play, clash and collide. These days I often feel that the "hurry up" side is winning out, as our obsession with faster phones, computers, cars, and everything else overcomes our need to stop and smell the roses. Even on vacation we fill up our days with activities: hiking, snorkeling, shopping, you name it. We feel guilty if we're not *doing* something. When is the last time you spent an entire hour, day, or week doing nothing and feeling OK about it? I know that I have an inner "time-study man" who urges me to hurry up and get busy whenever I try to slow down and relax. Whether you call it your bossy superego, your internalized parent, or your inherited work ethic, I'll bet you have one too.

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Recently my husband and I moved to a so-called "active adult community" about 40 miles from Atlanta. Our plan was to find a quiet, peaceful place in which to slow down, take it easy, and enjoy the evening of our lives. But this place is buzzing with activity. Groups, clubs, trips, sports events fill the daily calendar. At a recent pot-luck dinner one neighbor proclaimed, "Pickleball has taken over my life!" Others talked about kayaking, babysitting their grandchildren, quilting, line-dancing, working out. Don't get me wrong: these are worthy pastimes and I'd like to try some of them myself. What concerns me—and I feel it in myself as well—is the sense of urgency that hovers around the edges of this busyness. Hurry up... can't waste time... better not stop, or... Or what? Or we might be forced to face the fact that we are getting older (after all, we have to be "55+" to live here!), that our bodies are slowing down, that many of us are retired, that the end of life is not as far away as it used to be. Filling up our days with activity is one way to avoid feeling anxious about so-called "end of life issues." We act as though we're still racing with the clock, believing that by some miracle we can win the race.

I've learned something important about myself in the past three months—namely, that there is something in my psyche stronger than the inner "time-study man" who has ruled much of my life until now. I'm not sure what to call it, and I don't have an image for it yet. It reveals itself in my body, my energy level, my behavior. Sometimes, especially if I've been pushing myself too hard and am feeling overly tired, it just takes over. At these moments, no matter how hard I try to egg myself on, something deep inside just won't cooperate. And so instead of tackling the next item on my to-do list, all of a sudden I find myself reading a novel, playing a game on my phone, or checking Facebook. Taking a nap, relaxing on the back porch, watching the birds, or enjoying the changing colors of the clouds at sunset are other "activities" that demand my attention at these times. In "The Pajama Game" there is a scene in which the workers stage a "slow-down." They don't exactly go on strike, but they slow production down to a bare minimum. That is what happens in my "slow-down" moments. It's as though something is coming up from the unconscious and saying to the inner time-study man, "Hey, just a minute. You've pushed me too hard for too long. My constitution isn't made of rock. I need to stop racing with the clock, and waste some time for a change!"

Throughout his long life, Jung counseled us to listen to what our symptoms are trying to tell us about the state of our souls. He also reminded us that every symptom, no matter how unwelcome and bizarre, contains within itself the seeds of its own healing. So instead of trying to push past my resistance to the "hurry-up" mindset, it may be wiser to listen to what my resistance is trying to tell me. I am not ready to retire, but yes, I am getting older. My body is slowing down and my energy level is not what it used to be. And this is not a bad thing. When I can let go to it, it is actually a relief to let myself off the hook and relax. Maybe slowing down is an honorable estate as we grow older, a state to welcome, embrace, and even enjoy.

In the evening of his life, Jung spent as much time as he could in his lakeside retreat at Bollingen. (In her articles for this newsletter, Pamela Cooper-White recounts her recent visit to this sacred space. I have visited it too, and I am happy to learn that the Jung family is maintaining it in its original rustic condition.) Jung describes the structure as his "confession of faith in stone." Begun in 1923, the year of his mother's death, and com-

pleted in 1955, the year of his wife's death, the house was constructed carefully and intentionally. Each of its five sections held its own symbolic meaning for Jung, from the initial "maternal hearth" to the final "extension of consciousness achieved in old age." The gradual, painstaking construction of the house could not have happened in a hurry. And when Jung was in residence, he was not in a hurry either. I imagine him taking off his Swiss watch and living according to the rhythm of sunrise and sunset, the cycle of the seasons. At night he could see the moon rise and set, watch the slow progress of the constellations wheeling in their courses. This is how he describes his time at Bollingen:

"At Bollingen I am in the midst of my true life, I am most deeply myself... At times I feel as if I am spread out over the landscape and inside things, and am myself living in every tree, in the plashing of the waves, in the clouds and the animals that come and go, in the procession of the seasons... I have done without electricity, and tend the fireplace and stove myself. Evenings, I light the old lamps. There is no running water, and I pump the water from the well. I chop the wood and cook the food. These simple acts make [me] simple; and how difficult it is to be simple!"

I know no better description of a slow, intentional, peaceful way of life. The psyche requires this simplicity and this natural pace, especially in the evening of life, in order to reminisce, to reflect, to open to reverie. When I sit on my back porch watching the clouds change from white to pink in the light of the setting sun, I like to think that I feel a little of what Jung must have felt at Bollingen. I feel connected to him, to the land and the trees and the sky, and to what Irish poet W. B. Yeats called "the deep heart's core."

Back for a minute to Simon and Garfunkel and the spirit of the '60's. I have always wondered about the full title of their song. What does the 59th Street Bridge have to do with slowing down and feeling groovy? Thanks to Wikipedia (a fast app that I enjoy in my slow time), I finally hit upon a possible answer. Urban legend has it that back in the 60's, the foot of the 59th Street (or Queensboro) Bridge was the site at which the NYPD burned confiscated... let's say illegal plant matter. So perhaps the song was intended to remind commuters racing to their fast-paced jobs to slow down and breathe in a whiff of the intoxicating fumes. Fifty years later our clocks are racing faster than ever and we still need to be reminded to stop and breathe in the fragrant aroma—not necessarily of a mind-altering substance, but of fresh air, open space, and slow time. No matter how old we are, or how fast our clocks have been racing, it is never too late to practice slowing down and feeling groovy.

NOTES:

¹ *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, pp. 250 - 252.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 252 - 253.

³ W. B. Yeats, "*The Lake Isle of Innisfree*."