

Slow Up

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The slow movement — a counter to the fast-paced mass-marketization of our food, homes and lives — is taking off with a push from some fast-talking locals

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Summary:

Do you need to gear down and embrace the slow movement?

Body:

Not long ago, my uncle travelled from Vancouver to visit my family in Calgary. Together, we spent an action-packed weekend with my husband and our two children.

I knew we kept him occupied, but I wasn't prepared for the card that followed shortly afterward in the mail.

"Thanks for a great and memorable visit," read his note, "even if it was at Mach speed."

I, like most Calgarians, like most North Americans for that matter, have a tendency to pack things in. This fact shouldn't come as a surprise because — according to Alberta author Carl Honoré — like it or not, most of us live in a hyperactive culture that is "marinated in speed."

For example, my husband and I balance two careers with raising two young children. We enjoy what we view as a rich and fulfilling lifestyle. That said, our schedule can get, well, a little nutty if we're not cautious.

If you are raising a young family, you're likely familiar with the challenges of juggling soccer, figure skating, piano and play dates (not to mention dog walks if you're a pet owner), as well as what feels like an endless stream of birthday parties throughout the school year.

But even if you're not raising a family, modern Calgary culture still commands a particular pace.

In other words, you, like me, might find it challenging if you choose to rail against the norm in search of your "inner tortoise" — a term coined by Honoré in his international bestseller, *In Praise of Slow: How a Worldwide Movement is Challenging the Cult of*

Speed.

Honoré's position is that we all need to cool our heels; we need to remember to smell the proverbial flowers, enjoy our lives and just say No to the "finish-line" culture that has us at a constant sprint.

If we don't, argues the Edmonton author, our turbo-charged pace with its matching high-speed consumer habits will render our lives less meaningful and drive us into "planetary oblivion."

These are strong words, indeed.

And so it was with some relief that when I interviewed Honoré, the supposed "King of Slow," I was immediately struck by the fact that not only is he the fastest-talking individual I've ever interviewed, but he boasts a surprisingly busy schedule.

Even Honoré — someone whose life's work is largely one loud, albeit eloquent, critique of a post-industrial world which has way too much on its plate — can fall victim to the fast life.

You, like I, might be tempted to label Honoré, who currently calls London, England, home, a hypocrite for apparently living a harried life himself — contrary to what he preaches on his busy international lecture circuit or in his enormously popular book which, to date, has been printed in more than 30 languages.

To these allegations, Honoré responds: "A hypocrite?"

He smiles as he delivers his "who, me?" response and he strikes me as a man fully aware of the contradictions inherent to his work.

"I prefer to think of myself as a martyr," he says. "I suffer so that others can hear the message."

The message, he continues, is that people the planet over are caught in a fight or flight reflex — travelling so quickly through their lives that they're missing out.

We've become human *doings*, he told me in an earlier interview, not human *beings*.

"And it's taking a real toll on every corner of our lives — from the food we eat to how we relate to our neighbourhoods and communities," he laments. "People know their neighbours' cars better than they know their neighbours."

"We don't have time for one another and when we do, we're on our Blackberries. So what if you have 594 friends on Facebook. What does that mean?"

The fact is, Honoré is onto something. He knows it because of the incontestable, unrelenting and ever-growing interest in his ideas. Ideas that were initially inspired by the Slow Food movement.

Slow Food, started in Italy in 1986 by Carlo Petrini as a reaction to fast-food chains infiltrating his country, currently boasts a membership of 85,000 people in more than 100 countries, including a Calgary chapter.

Today, Honoré's own website (slowplanet.com ^[1]) — launched in the spring of 2008 and featuring a photograph of a young man diving off a boat as his blissed-out, bikini-clad girlfriend watches — links people everywhere who have an interest in all things slow.

Slow travel. Slow food. Slow families. Slow sex (Honoré argues women understand this concept better than men). Slow sports. Slow work. Slow design. Slow schooling.

To clarify, when Honoré refers to “slow,” he's not suggesting people hang up their hats and flip on the television. Rather, slow is about quality over quantity and recognizing the importance of the things we do and consume.

Living “slow,” he explains, means not living a hyperactive life. “Your life is still engaged and active,” he says, “but there's a rich range of speed and energy.”

For example, Honoré says, when it comes to family life, too much stimulation gives individuals little time or space to tackle life's more important questions.

Honoré insists, here, that while he may at times have a fully booked schedule, this isn't his permanent state: he goes to great lengths to just hang out with his two children and he makes a point of not over-scheduling their time.

He advises families to scale back, commit only to the most important activities in their lives and learn to say, as difficult as it is, No.

“Do fewer things and you'll find you do them better and enjoy them more. So will your children,” he says. “Plus, you'll have time to rest and to, importantly, think about the things you've done.”

One of the latest kids on the slow block is slow architecture. Which brings us to another prominent Albertan who finds himself at the epicentre of what Honoré has labelled a worldwide culture-quake.

Last year, housebrand's John Brown of Calgary, a regular contributor to Honoré's blog, launched his own website called theslowhome.com ^[2].

The registered architect is the founder of what he calls the Slow Home Movement and, in the last year, has found himself giving interviews on the topic to media outlets everywhere: *Italian Men's Vogue*, the *New York Times*, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, the Greek edition of *Elle Decor* and a prominent Mexico City daily paper, to name a few.

“I believe that we're on the brink, not just in Calgary but at a very broad level, of a renaissance in urban living,” says Brown. “I think that what we're seeing is related to climate change, peak oil [the idea that we have soon will reach the peak of oil supply] and the global credit crisis. All of these factors are causing fundamental shifts in the way we live and think about our houses.

“The present isn't sustainable any more,” he continues. “I personally think that's okay, because I don't think the present is all that great. I'm talking about the ‘fast home’ argument, where we drive too far to go to work, where our houses are too big and where, frankly, they're not built that well.”

Brown says a “great urban future” awaits us “if we manage things properly, if we seize the opportunity that lies before us. [A future] that is sustainable, one that has a high level of community, and one that is, yes, beautiful. By and large, what we have now is not that great for the vast majority of people.”

Like his contemporary, Honoré, Brown was inspired by the tenets of the Slow Food movement. He saw there was a similarity between the way people in North America consume food and how they live.

Brown equates “fast homes” to fast food — cookie-cutter, mass-produced items created without thought for the locally available materials or needs. The idea of the consumer is key here, as both fast food and fast homes are about product rather than culture, whereas their slow counterparts reflect local culture and individual needs.

When Brown read Honoré’s *In Praise of Slow*, he thought: “Yeah! That’s what architects have been feeling about the residential industry. It has become commodified with cookie-cutter houses. The cookie-cutter house, like a Big Mac and fries, might satisfy us briefly, but there’s little depth involved, little engagement with the world.”

Fully achieving a slow home, at least in terms of what Brown aspires to as the guru of slow architecture, means asking the following questions: Where does your house come from? Where do the materials come from? How was it made? How do you live in it? And how can you best live in it?

Slow homes are a process; they’re not products to be consumed, he says. A slow home might be expensive or it might be modest.

It might be traditional or it might be modern. The key is that it fits the community, location and people who live in it properly, this in turn, facilitates a rich and grounding experience.

For example, a slow house is tailored to the way you want to live. If you want to garden, it is a house that permits you to garden. If you like to cook, make cooking a joyous event with a well-functioning kitchen design.

A true slow home is “particularized,” Brown says, which is actually cost-effective for both the house-dwellers and more sustainable for the environment.

“If we buy a house based on quantity rather than quality, we end up with a house that is too big and we have to spend more money to furnish spaces that no one is going to use,” says Brown. “We’re paying extra for this, but there’s an ecological cost to it, too.” Given the current state of the planet, he adds, how can we justify this ecological footprint?

Much of the premise behind the Slow Food movement, as with Brown’s slow architecture and Honoré’s near messiah-like message about slow living, is linked to sustainability.

Slow Food’s ambitious mandate, found on the movement’s website slowfood.com ^[3], reads: “Slow Food is a non-profit, eco-gastronomic member-supported organization that was [officially] founded in 1989 to counteract fast food and fast life, the disappearance of local food traditions and people’s dwindling interest in the food they eat, where it comes from, how it tastes, and how our food choices affect the rest of the world.”

In Calgary, Gail Norton is one of a few leading the Slow Food charge as the co-owner of the Cook Book Company Cooks [4] and publisher of the food magazine, City Palate [5].

“I’ve seen food quality and rituals around food diminish since I was a child,” says Norton, who highly recommends Michael Pollan’s 2008 book on the topic, *In Defense of Food: An Eater’s Manifesto*.

“I think the slow movement is more relevant than ever. The world is getting faster and faster and it doesn’t ever seem to appear to be slowing down,” she says — ironically while taking my call on her cell while she is driving. (She also confesses to petting her dog during our conversation — though Norton insists she’s only doing this while stationary at a traffic light.)

“Slow Food isn’t about slow cooking,” Norton continues, “it’s about taking the time to think about things instead of always doing them mindlessly. It’s about having conversations about where our food comes from, buying or growing it and then preparing it — ideally with friends and family. “Fast food refers to industry, where the makers are completely anonymous and there is not necessarily an imperative for quality. It might taste good, but that’s because it’s appealing to our salty and sweet sense.”

Slow Food, she adds, is about sitting down with our friends and family instead of racing off to another scheduled activity. “It teaches us how to socialize and it teaches kids manners. They learn how to talk. Importantly, they learn how to hang out,” she says.

If the slow movement has heard any criticism, it’s that slow living is the stuff of privileged folks who have, first and foremost, the luxury of time to think about these issues, not to mention the luxury of money to make them happen.

After all, who has time to slow down when some of us barely earn enough to make the rent?

Slow travel? Who do you know who can afford to, as one couple I know recently did, rent a flat in Paris for a week and sleep in every morning until noon before heading out and leisurely taking in a few select sights rather than blitzing the city’s tourist points of interest?

Norton will argue that eating slow doesn’t necessarily mean people have to break the bank in order to pay for it.

“I often hear that Slow Food is just for the rich, but I don’t buy it,” she says. “When I go to the market in Calgary, there’s all sorts of things that don’t require big bucks. I don’t think Slow Food has to be fancy. But I do think it should be heartfelt — which is something we’re all capable of.”

As Honoré and I wrap up our interview, I query whether he thinks that slow politics risk, like the environmental movement, being hijacked by corporate interests.

“It’s probably inevitable. Anything that has a mass appeal is at risk. People will likely use it in the wrong spirit, taking up the label. But part of the lifeblood of any movement is disagreement and discord,” he says, adding that he believes most people, from design

students in Hong Kong to politicians in Argentina, seem to be sincere about their interest in the phenomenon.

They're interested, he says, in the idea that instead of trying to do everything as fast as possible, we should do it as well as possible, at whichever speed is necessary. Again, the trick is to pace ourselves, not to exhaust ourselves.

At the time of the interview, Honoré was preparing to fly to Las Vegas to share his expertise on slow. "Going to Vegas, the home of fast, to tell people to slow down has a delicious irony," he muses. "Whether or not they'll slow down long enough to listen remains to be seen."

Meanwhile, Calgary as a city continues to boom. For some, including myself — but against great odds given the inclination of our fast growing and arguably "speedaholic" metropolis — the pursuit of slow begins to gain momentum.

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Links:

- [1] <http://www.slowplanet.com>
- [2] <http://www.avenuecalgary.com/www.theslowhome.com>
- [3] <http://www.slowfood.com>
- [4] <http://www.cookbookcooks.com/>
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