Trouble Ahead

A few days before New Year's Eve, the electronic road sign on Highway 95 flashed the words, DRIVE SOBER OR GET PULLED OVER. My five-year-old, who delights in rhymes, shouted the warning all day long: "Drive sober or get pulled over!" When we first spotted the sign, she had asked, "Daddy, what does sober mean?" "To be sober is to be wise. If you don't drive wisely, you'll get yourself and others into trouble." A few days later, we came upon a road sign that read, THERE MAY BE TROUBLE AHEAD. My daughter became suddenly quiet and still. "Is everything all right?" I asked. She replied from the backseat, "I'm looking out for Trouble."

Unlike my five-year-old, we as a culture are failing to take seriously the signs. Warnings abound, yet we fail to notice them, much less respond appropriately. How are we to get each other's attention? After a tragic accident in Poway, CA, the city offered free signs for its residents' front lawns: SLOW DOWN IN OUR COUNTRY TOWN. On a Sunday morning last October, a digital road sign in Winnipeg proclaimed, SLOW THE F--- DOWN. The *National Post* claimed the sign was "hacked by a digitally savvy mischief-maker." In my mind, though, I secretly hoped that it was the work of *The Association for the Advancement of Sustainability*. Knowing that slowing down is a fundamental step toward sustainability, members of this group—in my fantasy—took illicit means to get their fellow citizens' attention.

Indent ¶

In this chapter, I write with the following assumptions: 1) achieving sustainability is largely a cultural challenge and as such requires cultural transformation; 2) achieving sustainability entails that we as a people slow down our pace, including our rates of consumption and production; and 3) the journey to sustainability must itself be sustainable; that is, it requires an accord of means and ends, of path and destination. After developing the idea of sustainability as a cultural challenge, I explore speed in American culture (broadly construed) and then in our students' university subculture. Along the way, I champion a form of embodiment—bodily attention, activity, and care—that correlates with slowing down. I conclude the chapter by arguing that the virtues and dispositions of sustainability need to be built into our pedagogy—into the designs, methods, and materials of our courses. I illustrate this claim with a case study of the *Slow Learning Movement* and of the course that emerged from it at Brown University, *Religion Gone Wild: Spirituality and the Environment*.

Sustainability: A Cultural Journey

When Lynn White claimed that, "since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious," he was mostly right—if by "religion" he meant the pervading culture of a people (30). Environmental troubles arise as a result of our culture—our politics, economics, and religions; our social practices, habits, and beliefs. Yet environmental hope, too, springs from our culture—from the cultivation of aspects of our culture that are already present.

Our hope, then, is largely reformist in nature. A central part of our reformist task is the investigation and critique of culturally pervasive patterns and habits of making

and keeping time. As a culture, we move too fast to notice or care about the environmental warning signs.[1] Moreover, our speed—in our private and corporate lives—is a fundamental cause of environmental degradation. Exploitative, high-paced speed in our financial and food markets, for example, brings immense damage to communities both human and non-human. In our private lives, high speed breeds anxiousness, dissatisfaction, and the inability to be attentive to social and natural plights and oppression. Our cultural velocity is simply not sustainable. It is essential, then, that we cultivate the capacity to slow down.

Now, sustainability is a vast abstraction with many possible meanings. To fabricate a single definition of sustainability to satisfy everyone in every context would be as unfeasible as it is unnecessary. Still, provisional definitions for specific projects are useful. Some emphasize the science of sustainability and study the biology, chemistry, or geology of ecological communities. Others emphasize the economics of sustainability and study trends in production and consumption. Some emphasize sustainable development, devising strategies to improve the quality of life of impoverished populations without denigrating natural ecosystems; still others examine prosperous nations and seek ways to limit their environmental footprint.

My approach will focus on the cultural dimension of sustainability—the necessary cultivation of habits, virtues, dispositions, and practices that support environmental sustainability in multifarious and interrelated ways. By emphasizing "cultivation," I draw attention to the *journey* of sustainability—an ongoing process that entails discovery, growth, and nurturing. Moreover, the journey is in every step, for every step is itself a destination sustaining a journey toward a richer future. The movement toward sustainability must itself be sustainable.

Think of sustainability, then, as a cultural journey toward a set of virtues (an evolving cluster of nurtured dispositions or capacities) that dispose members of a culture to see, think, feel, and act in ways that *sustinere*—that uphold "the integrity, stability, and beauty" of the planet's interrelated natural and social communities.[2]

Indent ¶ While *virtue* may sound like a quaint term, it is in fact a radical one, insofar as virtues thread through the bones and sinews of a people, rooting them in their ways and manners. Transform a people's virtues and you have a transformed people. It's a moral tautology. Sustainability as a cultural journey, then, requires the transformation of virtues—of the hearts and minds of the young and old. How is such a transformation to take place? How are we to slow down, perceive the trouble ahead, and respond appropriately? Set up road signs? Sky writing? There are many ways, all participating in the cultivation of virtues and sensibilities that foster sustainable ways of life. Educators have a special role in this cultural journey, for educators have the privilege of working with students, and students, in turn, are instigators of change. They are journeyers.

Over- and Underemployment in American Culture

Students participate in a variety of cultures or subcultures. For sake of convenience, I write of a broad American culture and a university subculture.[3] Students dwell at the intersection of these cultures, and at that intersection they must undertake

their journeys toward sustainability. A characterizing feature of these cultures is their fast pace, their high speed. I have mentioned the intricate connection between means and ends (journeys and destinations) in achieving sustainability. This means-ends relation poses a radical and promising challenge. It requires that we identify not only worthy ends, but also worthy means-ends pairs. The process of *slowing down* comprises one such fundamental means-ends pair. High speed is not sustainable. It denigrates "the integrity, stability, and beauty" of the planet's communities. We cannot afford the cost of high speed, if we calculate that cost in terms of consumption of fossil fuels; the loss of wetlands, crop diversity, topsoil, and fisheries; the high extinction rate of mammals; the clearing of forests; and the inordinate pollution of the air, water, and land. Additionally, our fast-paced culture precludes most of us from making time to attend to our surroundings, to engage unhurriedly with our environments, and to notice thus the deleterious changes to the natural and social worlds. Moreover, our pace precludes most of us from challenging such changes and promoting alternative, sustainable paths. For although it is lethal, our cultural speed is powerfully addictive.

At the personal level, it begins innocently. We sense that our capacity for joy and civic engagement declines as our schedules become increasingly frenzied. We tell ourselves, *I'll slow down later*—after I pass my exams, graduate, land that job, get that promotion, buy that house, put the kids through college, and retire. After I die. The commercial market responds to our addiction to overwork by prescribing time saving devices and measures supposedly engineered to mitigate our frenzy. Yet none of these comes with the warning: "Increased efficiency may be hazardous to your mental, physical, and social health." The danger lies not with any single time-saver, any one shortcut. Rather, the risk is their accrual by a life and a culture obsessed with maximizing performance. As each task takes less time, we multiply the number of tasks for which we feel responsible. Our hectic pace renders us unable to give sufficient care to, or draw meaning from, our work. And while we dash through our lives, we lose sight of good work—work that is both useful and beautiful, that honors both nature and culture, and that contributes to a sustainable *oikonomia*, to local and global housekeeping.[4]

Improved technology and the concept of "time-management" were intended to bring prosperity and leisure. Yet most families and communities have not experienced either, with real dollar wages declining and workweeks lengthening year after year. It is incontrovertible that, since World War II, North Americans have had less leisure time; we put in almost twice the hours at the workplace that we did fifty years ago. We consistently choose money over time, speed over slowing down.

The leisure time we do have we spend on TV and Internet entertainment. It seems incongruous to me that members of our high-speed culture watch a daily average of four and one half hours of TV and spend two and one half hours online. We curse the red light that delays us fifteen seconds, yet we insouciantly watch hours of TV—increasingly online—daily. It is as if we exist in two time zones: the frenzied, high-speed zone of our workday lives and the sluggish, insipid zone of our tele-recreation. This is less ironic than it seems; hectic work calls for intense recreation. Marx complained that religion is the opiate of the people, consoling them and easing their pain,

but making them numb to the dysfunctional conditions that foster their need for metaphysical comfort. Today, TV, Internet, and video-game recreation is our people's opiate. It blinds us to our condition. It calms us by desensitizing. We therefore tolerate and indulge our opiated, disembodied state.

There are alternative routes to rest and stillness. A less busy workday might reduce our desire for intense TV and Internet entertainment. Some productive, if paradoxical, counsel goes like this: *Citizens, if you want more time in your life, do things the slow way.* If you have an especially busy week, try to walk to work instead of driving; cook an elaborate meal instead of buying prepared food; make plans with friends instead of staying overtime in the office; spend the weekend with a community group instead of the hopeless task of catching up on work. The idea is that, by slowing down, we will perceive and experience more time. Will we be as efficient and accomplish as much? Probably not, if measured by most standards of efficiency and accomplishment. Will we do what needs to be done with more grace and excellence? Yes, and with pleasure.

There are many ways to begin to slow down. As is often the case, the voluntary ways are less painful than the involuntary. A car accident can slow us down. A stroke can slow us down. So can a lost job. Economic recession teaches many of us to slow down the hard way. It is true that for some, the pink slip paves the way to a welcomed retirement. For others, it promotes an intentional, sometimes radical, desire for simple living. These people might buy books like *Possum Living: How to Live Well without a Job and with Almost No Money*; they might call themselves "freegans;" they might forage food, squat in old buildings, hop trains, and embrace unemployment. Mostly, however, we do not see the recently jobless celebrating new-found freedom. Mostly, they want their old lives back. Again, there is a world of difference between *wanting to* and *having to* slow down. The sixty-hour workweek never looks so good as when our hours drop to zero. While the pain of over-employment runs deep, the pain of under- or unemployment runs perhaps deeper still.

Speed, Disembodiment, and the University Culture

There are different kinds of pain that come from over- and under-working. As an educator, I have noticed how university students must rush through their days. They, too, have little time or opportunity to pay attention to their emotional, bodily, or intellectual states, much less to the conditions of the natural and social world around them. Their lives often vacillate between strenuous, hectic studying and excessive, hazardous partying. These modes of existence exact a heavy toll. Student Counseling Services at universities across America struggle to manage the increasing cases of depression, anxiety, and eating disorders. Additionally, the adults in these students' lives maintain their own form of manic living, and so provide little direction as role models.

But students also suffer from a form of underemployment. Students in residential colleges are sheltered to a large extent from menial or manual work—work that could bring daily opportunities for significant learning and health. I have in mind such tasks as cooking meals, cleaning rooms, or raking leaves. Keeping students from humdrum chores is intended to be a good thing. We wish to protect them from distractions, from

drudgery, from alleged impediments to intellectual growth. In so doing, we treat our students as Disembodied Minds. We arrange everything so they can read, write, and think with great efficiency, unburdened by the tasks of Embodied Living (save, perhaps, walks to class or treadmill workouts at the college gym). In the process, students become sheltered from opportunities for spiritual and emotional maturation. They are denied, for example, the experience of washing dishes as a form of thanksgiving: there are dishes to wash because there is food to eat. Each plate, fork, spoon, and cup is an object to be treated mindfully; each can teach care and attention. For if a student learns to wash a bowl with great care, he or she can develop the capacity to read a sentence with attention.[5]

I think we are all mostly Cartesians—we, the members of university culture. To treat students as anything other than disembodied minds would require rethinking our curriculum and its relation to the practical, bodily matters of human affairs. In the ancient Mediterranean world, philosophy was a practice—a way of life—that greatly resembled what we today might call religion: comprehensive beliefs and practices that pertain to deep questions of human suffering, identity, purpose, and happiness. The practice of ancient philosophy addressed the cultivation of the whole person and her relation to community and society. Moral, aesthetic, economic, and physical dimensions of life were all addressed by this ancient philosophical or traditional form of education. Yet this approach often conflicts with that of the contemporary research university, in which almost any practical activity is held in suspicion.

The traditional approach is decidedly *material*. If we practiced such pedagogy today, moral inquiry would explore not only abstract questions about ethics or rights, but also practical issues pertaining to our students' relation to local public schools, prisons, and community service organizations. An aesthetic schooling would include classes not only in art history but also in the work of local artisans and in students' own artistic skills. Economics courses would develop not only theoretical economic models but also strategies to enhance the university's involvement with local businesses and farms, demonstrating local outcomes of national and global policies. And the physical would refer not only to string theory but also to such material activities as dance and meditation, on the one hand, and recycling, sustainable building construction, and composting on the other. This is what I am calling a *material* education in contrast to the contemporary university's *abstract* approach—namely, treating the student as a disembodied mind with little or no connection to a place, a set of passions, and a body. For all its fear of spirituality, the university is the most spiritual place on earth.

Speed and disembodiment travel together. The faster we move through our lives, communities, and land—literally and figuratively—the weaker our connection to our bodies, neighbors (human and non-human), and world. We cannot hold what we cannot slow down to touch. We cannot care for all those proper nouns that make claims on our lives—particular communities, places, or things—if we move so fast that they become common nouns, abstract and generic. Speed and disembodiment, then, work together against sustainability. How can we help our students to slow down and make contact—contact with their bodies, with their biotic communities, with their homes?

Role models can help. Offering students exemplars is a material, practical, and loving gesture. We can expose students to the hopeful lifestyles of individuals engaged in good work, simplicity, the arts, the earth, and meaningful sociability. Helen and Scott Nearing, for example, have much to offer. The final chapter in their *Maple Sugar Book* is titled, "A Life as well as a Living." In it, the Nearings reflect on the relation between the art of sugaring and the art of living:

> We wanted to make a living in about half of our working time—say four or five hours a day—so that we would be freed from the livelihood problem and enabled to devote the other half of our time to study, teaching, writing, music, travel. (238)

This is a deeply humane vision. It presents a profound challenge to our personal lives and also to the global market economy. By making do with less—by escaping the quagmire of consumer culture—the Nearings lived without debt, worked less, and enjoyed more. Indeed, they possessed more. They held time—time for quiet contemplation, social engagement, education, art, and travel. They adopted what they called the daily four-four-four formula: "four hours for bread labor, four hours for vocation (i.e., reading and writing), and four hours for social intercourse." This principle incites my fear, hope, and longing. It threatens my identity as one whose self-worth has been determined by productivity in my career. It offers freedom from that prodigious burden, "I am what I produce."

This lifestyle also poses a radical challenge to our fast, extractive global economy. If we slowed down and worked less, we would buy and borrow less, which, in effect, would put a break on those global engines that would have us produce, consume, and pollute more. It would arrest, by gentle neglect, rapacious practices that threaten social and natural habitats around the globe.

I understand the Nearings' principle may sound unrealistic. Could all individuals or families opt out of consumerism, debt, and rampant careerism? Would we want to? And could global economies survive such simplicity? Yet, on the other hand, how realistic is the prevailing belief that our current way of life is sustainable, with its overconsumption and overproduction, with its laborious toll on life and love, on natural and social communities? We need alternatives. We cannot, of course, all head to Vermont with the Nearings and practice sugaring. Yet standing still for a moment and attending to alternative patterns of life can help us take steps to promote joy and health for our selves and planet.

Sustainability and the Slow Learning Movement

Another way to help students to slow down and make contact is to design and teach our courses in sustainable modes. In addition to imparting information about sustainability, can our courses operate as models of sustainable communities? Can we attempt to practice sustainability in the classroom as we learn and work to achieve it locally and globally? *Yes*. Given their fast paced lives, students, like all of us, are deeply grateful for opportunities to pause, look around and within, and be present to the life that surrounds them. They are grateful to be reminded, to paraphrase Emily

Dickinson, how startling a thing it is to live. They desire to wake up to the world and to work in its care.

Several years ago, when I was a Carnegie Scholar in the Higher Education Scholars Program, I developed a project called *Slow Learning: Deep Engagement for the Sake of Transformative Education.* This project investigated pedagogical approaches that facilitate students' deep engagement with their courses and, in particular, with my course, *Religion Gone Wild: Spirituality and the Environment*. In this course—a study of religion, ethics, and ecology—students considered such fundamental issues as the place of humans in the natural world, environmental justice, and sustainable economic, political, and cultural ways of life. According to its syllabus: "'What is the relevance of this material to me and to my community?' will be an implicit, sometimes explicit, question in the course." But how exactly was I to give my students the opportunity for the material to make deep claims on their lives, to pose transformative questions of them? Out of this question, the *Slow Learning* approach developed.

First, I *slowed down* the pace of the course (literally and metaphorically speaking) in order to create a gracious sense of time and space that was conducive to deep engagement. By "deep engagement," I mean a thoughtful, thorough, reflective engagement with course material—the readings, the field trips, and the students themselves—for the sake of integrative and transformative education. I avoided creating a hectic syllabus comprising a vast number of topics and prodigious reading assignments. In so doing, I literally slowed things down. This in itself was surprisingly challenging for me. Assuming more is more, I had acquired the bad habit of trying to cover in a semester what had taken me years to learn.

Mainly, however, I *slowed down* by employing a variety of approaches and principles that afforded opportunities for deep engagement and therefore transformative education. These approaches and principles included:

- Varying the location of class meetings; paying attention to space.
- Slowing down or alternating the pace of the course (the number of topics and reading assignments on the syllabus, for example).
- Allowing more time for discussion (probably double the time).
- Modeling deep listening for students.
- Leading an occasional contemplative exercise that focuses on a particular course theme or question.
- Allowing spontaneity (being willing, for example, to allow the students to re-write much of the syllabus and even the exams).
- Trusting the students, for they are courageous and competent. For the most part, they already know how to listen and engage thoughtfully and deeply—and they can *lead* the class (including its professor) to new vistas.
- Having students keep a dynamic journal/learning portfolio, where they may express themselves in a variety of ways (for example, through drawings, maps, poems, musings, letters from parents and friends, emails between students).
- Using the journals as sites for students to respond to spontaneous questions such as: *What question does this material/course pose to you? Which piece of*

art at the museum grabbed your attention and why? How do you learn best? Midterms and exams can also be embedded in the journal; an exam, then, might last a couple of weeks or more.

- Concluding the semester with a class retreat, offering suitable time and space to discuss the broader significance of students' journeys in the course.

These are some of the specific pedagogical approaches that belong to what I fondly call the *Slow Learning Movement.*

When I read through the students' written work (especially their journals), I discovered that the students made implicit and explicit connections between *Slow Learning* pedagogy and their learning as multifaceted persons, as practitioners of the art of living. Additionally, they had grasped a relation between the *Slow Learning* student and "the strategic learner," that is, the learner who is engaged not only in course material but also in the process of reflecting on how we learn what we learn. I discovered, then, that there is a natural connection between the principles and approaches in *Slow Learning* and integrative and transformative education.

One of the most significant pedagogical acts, I learned, is simply to raise the issue of gracious time and space with the students. Interrogate with them the possibility of an environment characterized by slow time and dynamic, empathic space. By simply posing the challenge, our students will come to the course—to its material, to its discussions, to each other—altered. They will read differently, speak differently, and listen differently. They will learn differently. They will engage deeply. This is what my evidence suggests: *Posing the possibility of gracious time and space creates gracious time and space.* What kind of evidence did I collect? I employed a variety of assessment techniques, both qualitative and quantitative, including instant feedback response slips, pre- and post-course questionnaires (response scales as well as open-ended questions), and a variety of non-intrusive, course-embedded data gathering techniques. The most significant and helpful evidence for my project came from student reports on their learning. Giving credit where it is due, I conclude this section with the voices of a few of the students:

> *"The Slow Learning Movement develops among students a sense of purpose and connectedness by integrating the learning process with the social and natural world, both near and far. Similar to gracious time, the movement involves gracious space, meaning that the class environment is conducive to learning and forming connections with other aspects of life."* —Sabina

> *"The slow learning movement brings the world to life. In a University environment, we are shielded from the rest of the world, yet the slow learning movement allows the outside world to creep back into our consciousness because we have time to slow down and reflect on what we are learning and how it applies to the outside world."* —Dan

> *"This class more than any other class has changed my life. The way I approach everyday life and my relationship with the world around me has drastically changed because of my deep involvement in the course."* —Emma

Joy Ahead

If achieving sustainability requires a cultural transformation through the cultivation of dispositions, virtues, and practices that support environmental sustainability, if slowing down our pace and consumption are among these sustainable practices, and if the journey to sustainability must itself be sustainable, requiring an accord of means and ends, then we will need to rethink the manner and matter of our college and university courses. The very design and pedagogy of these courses must include and derive from sustainable practices. These practices model sustainable virtues that dispose students to engage deeply with the course material and its relation to biotic-social communities. Teaching in a sustainable *mode*—and not just teaching *about* sustainability—would pose a worthy challenge to the Cartesian university culture, for it would require that students be treated as embodied citizens with practical, physical lives.

It is, of course, also valuable to teach *about* sustainability, to give students useful information on the various obstacles and potential solutions that pertain to sustainability. There is no substitute for apposite content. But we also need courses that impart this content in the mode of sustainability. We need courses that not only relay the itinerary of the journey, but also initiate students to the journey of sustainability within the community of the course. The successful course becomes itself an occasion for sustainable living.

There are companies that specialize in customized warning signs. What sign would we create for our students? APPLY YOUR BRAKES FOR YOUR COMMUNITIES' SAKES. Or, TAKE YOUR TIME—YOU WILL ARRIVE. We could place our signs in strategic locations: on the bookshelves, along the walkways, inside the classrooms. To be effective, however, the signs need to be carried in the heart. They must be written on the soul. And as the warnings become part of our lives, their tone changes. From disapproving, external directives, they become inviting, pleasant mantras. The stakes are high and the challenges immense, but the journey is not grim. "Warning: Trouble Ahead." Yes, but together we can make of Trouble an enduring community of good work and joy.[6]

Notes

1. In this chapter, the "we" mostly refers to the U.S. and other post-industrial, affluent societies.
2. This definition is informed by Aldo Leopold's "Land Ethic" and his claim that "a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community" (224-25).
3. "University culture" and "broad American culture" will be used as empirically thin, constructed caricatures for the sake of bringing attention to some actual, social features.
4. For my allusion here to "good work" and to "*oikonomia*," see Wendell Berry's *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community*, pp. 99 and 104.
5. Berea College and Deep Springs College are two examples of institutions that recognize and address the problem of the "Disembodied Mind." Berea College, for example, has a "labor program" that provides all students with "experiences for learning and serving in the community and [that] demonstrates that labor, mental and manual, has dignity as well as utility." And Deep Springs College "operates on the belief that manual labor and political deliberation are integral parts of a comprehensive liberal arts education." "Labor" is one of the College's three mission pillars (the other two being academics and self-governance).
6. I am grateful to Maggie Millner, my Brown University research assistant, for her expert editing and deep engagement with this text.

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